

For Poulton and England

The Life and Times of an Edwardian Rugby Hero

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Extract

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Introduction

*First Impression:
Guy Fawkes Day (Tuesday 5th November) 1907*

A noisy, expectant three-figure crowd has gathered on the Close at Rugby School for the 'foreign' match between the 1st XV and a team from University College, Oxford. Amidst the cosmopolitan throng on the touchlines are a fair proportion of current Rugby pupils, a gaggle of masters and their families, several visiting old boys and a number of local townspeople who have been lured by the prospect of seeing what has been hailed in the sporting press as the finest side the school has possessed in decades. Less than three weeks previously it had defeated an Oxford 'A' team, featuring three men who have been or would become blues¹, by a margin of 13-9.

Rugby School has the unique distinction for an educational establishment of having given its name to a leading British Empire, and therefore world, sport. Its former pupils have dominated the ranks of mid-19th Century expansionists of the handling version of football, and

¹ Frank Tarr, Tony Gotley and Tom Allen. The first two also later played for England, as did another member of the team Jerry Portus (a Rhodes Scholar) who, despite winning 2 caps for England and representing Oxford on many occasions, never won a blue because he failed to play in a Varsity Match.

its reputation as a producer of exceptional exponents of the rugby code, such as the recent England captain, Vincent Cartwright, has long been secure. On display amongst the latest crop, in his third year in the XV, is Ronald Poulton, an Oxford professor's son. He is a prolific scorer of breathtaking individual tries, most recently two in the Oxford 'A' game and then five in the house match between School House and Wilson's just last week. In terms of pure rugby talent, as experienced observers have recognised from his arrival at the school, he is in a different league to almost everyone with whom he shares the field this day. Aware of advance reputations, University College has sent a particularly strong side, including not only Tarr from the vanquished Oxford 'A' team, but two doughty Old Rugbeians; Geoffrey Roberts, a fiery loose forward, later to become one of the select band to receive an international cap before a blue, and the England trialist R.O. Squarey. As the players take the field, the air of anticipation which has been building all week erupts in a cacophony of cheering and exhortation. Despite the intense atmosphere it is noticeable that the players on both sides, although keyed up, do not seem remotely nervous. In the middle of the school team Poulton and Charles Watson, joint captains this season at the latter's suggestion, confer briefly and then take their respective positions for the kick off with a last round of encouraging words and gestures for their fellow players.

The game that follows is a suitable advertisement for what is regarded by its administrators and adherents as the greatest sport of all – fearsomely physical, fast, exciting and open, as demonstrated by the points being scored freely at both ends. Time flies. With less than five minutes to its final whistle the visitors appear to have the match under control, at last a single point ahead and once more pressing hard, just twenty yards from their opponents' try-line. From a scrum, however, the Rugby forwards manage to heel the ball; the scrum-half collects and whips it out to his fly-half. Instead of making the expected relieving kick to touch, perhaps by pre-arrangement, the latter immediately begins a back-line move to the left. At inside centre, the school hero Poulton –

instantly identifiable by his fair hair and natural athlete's gait, already the scorer of two scintillating tries this afternoon – receives the ball. Despite the closing attentions of the University College threequarters, he is off like a shot, sprinting in his characteristic manner, head leaning back and the ball carried in both hands in front of him. A roar of excitement erupts from the sidelines as he bolts through a gap between the first pair of defenders and swerves, first left and then right, to leave two more wrong-footed and a third simply rooted to the spot. Lengthening his stride, with behind the remainder of the University College team now strung out in vain pursuit, he still has forty yards to the try-line and only the full back to beat. A momentary feint to go left, followed by an immediate dart to the right, sends the hapless fellow the wrong way. Finally he streaks in to touch the ball down under the posts and then converts his own try. Another victory for the School, this time 25-21, is greeted with triumphant jubilation by the elated spectators, all too happy to be dazzled once again by the latest example of Poulton's uncanny skills that brought it home.

Nearly a decade later, a few months before he died of wounds sustained on the Western Front, Watson could still recall the incident vividly:

'I remember standing in the middle of the field letting out an increasing crescendo of yells as he dodged man after man, being much too blown to follow up myself and too excited to think what I was doing ... that was incomparably the best try I ever saw him score.'

The unassuming Poulton finished the match with a personal tally of three tries, two conversions and a dropped goal. During a further excellent run of results for the School that term² in which he personally notched twelve more tries and seven conversions, this schoolboy rugby

² Comprising victories over the Oxford colleges Corpus Christi (46-3) and Balliol (48-0), Uppingham (20-0), J.C. Cunningham's XV (40-0) and a hard-fought 11-11 draw with Rugby Town.

star, just turned eighteen, received a letter from the Old Rugbeian international Adrian Stoop inviting him to play for the famous Harlequin FC club in London. On the advice of master and life-long friend Claude Evers, himself a two-time Oxford rugby blue, whose daughter later married Olympic 100 metres gold medallist Harold Abrahams of *Chariots of Fire* fame, he politely turned it down (on the grounds he was too young) but confirmed his interest in joining the club once his schooldays were over.

A little over thirteen months later he was playing for England.

Kick-off

Whenever two or more sports fans gather together, sooner or later the conversation will tend to alight upon the topic of ‘the greatest’. This might be a discussion about a specific position in a team sport, an exponent of a particular type of skill, or else the best player of a particular period or even of all time. The difficulties of comparing athletes from different eras can make this an endlessly enjoyable but perhaps futile pastime, as perhaps epitomised by the 1960s anecdote about the boxing old-timer who, when asked whether he thought the world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali (or Cassius Clay as he then still was) could have beaten the legendary Jack Dempsey, who reigned from 1919 to 1926, replied “Probably, but you’ve got to remember Jack’s over seventy now ...”.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the game of rugby union, most Northern Hemisphere fans would find it hard to disagree with the verdict of a 1999 Allied Dunbar Premiership poll which awarded the title ‘World Player of the Millennium’ to the Welsh scrum half Gareth Edwards after he had gained as much as twenty-six percent of the overall vote. In what, above all, is a team game – though one in which every player remains a specialist of sorts – Edwards, who won fifty-three caps for Wales and

ten for the British & Irish Lions between 1967 and 1978, stood out amongst his peers. Not just for the length and speed of his pass and his electrifying breaks, kicking and tackling, but also for his reading of the game and facility for bringing others into the action at exactly the right moment. He was worth his place for the inspiration his colleagues gained from merely having him on the pitch for, if ever Edwards was playing well, then so was the Welsh team. Despite his comparatively diminutive stature, his strength and all-round rugby skills allowed the impression that he could have held his own in several different positions on the field, if not amongst the pack.

This is the tale of another outstanding player, one whose deeds are now dimmed by the fact that he last took the field over ninety years ago, who was regarded by all those who saw him as one of the greatest who ever graced the game. In late Edwardian Britain the dashing threequarter Ronald William Poulton (later sometimes Poulton Palmer) of Oxford University, Harlequins, Liverpool and England was acclaimed as the most exciting and influential player of his generation. Writing in their comprehensive *Centenary History of Oxford University Rugby Football Club* (OURFC, 1969), Ross McWhirter and Sir Andrew Noble assert:

'Poulton was no whale in a pool of minnows. His contemporaries and almost all later writers agree that Poulton stood out alone. Why? First as a rugger player he was a genius and like many geniuses he did not fit easily into a team. F.H. Knott, who played fly-half for Oxford in 1910-11-12, writes '... playing with Ronnie Poulton was always a joy (he was such a grand person) and from my point of view, playing inside him, I would not say he was particularly difficult to combine with, though I remember being somewhat surprised when he brought off a perfect scissors movement (unrehearsed) and one certainly had to be prepared for the unexpected' ...'

In a now-lost BBC television interview recorded in 1964, three years

before he died, another England great, fly-half 'Dave' Davies, winner of twenty-two England caps (11 as captain) between 1913 and 1922, was asked to nominate the greatest rugby player he had ever witnessed. Without hesitation he replied that the greatest player he had ever seen, the greatest player he had ever played with, the greatest captain he had ever played under, and indeed the finest man he had ever met, had been Ronald Poulton. One advantage of old age may be the privilege to speak with some authority in comparing teams and sportsmen whose heydays were decades, rather than merely seasons, apart. Despite all he had set eyes upon in the intervening years, it seems Davies had not changed his view since the end of his own illustrious playing career, for in his 1923 book *Rugby Football* (Webster's) he had written:

'Poulton was my ideal captain. No one of the present generation stands out more against the background of rugby football than Ronald Poulton. One could not help liking him. His easy grace and charm of manner, his versatility on the football field, the characteristic run with the head well back and ball held in outstretched arms are vivid impressions of probably the greatest figure which ever played rugby football.'

Not bad as a tribute to someone who played his last international at the age of twenty-four because of the intervention of the First World War.

Our Victorian ancestors embraced the eternal ability of competitive sport, if not to teach the individual — as Rudyard Kipling put it — to 'treat those twin imposters [*Triumph and Disaster*] just the same', at least to accept the occasional defeat as a part of Life's rich tapestry, and with dignity. Whilst there is a place for the resolute modern attitude, 'he who wins, wins, the rest come nowhere', sometimes consolation has to be sought in the knowledge that we played to the limit of our ability and yet were beaten by a superior on a given day. Ronnie Poulton was one of those rare individuals whose natural aura persuaded others he had no limits and was destined for ever-greater things in whatever field or fields

he chose. On the rugby field he played hard but, whatever the result, never lost sight of the essential truth that what he had been engaged upon was only a game. Left-handed and left-footed, at five feet eleven he was above average height for a rugby threequarter of the time³, with (according to Professor Poulton) ‘legs and especially the thighs being long in proportion’, a factor that may have contributed to his famously smooth running action as he flew down the field, always preparing to elude the next opponent in front of him. Or indeed the one after that, as fly-half Jerry Portus recalled in an article for *The Referee* in his native Australia on 11th August 1915:

‘It is hard at this distance to analyse the charm of him. It was not unconnected with his physical presence. Tall and lithe, broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, fair-headed and blue-eyed he was, and he easily took the eye of the crowd. Once attracted by his looks, the crowd was not disappointed in his play. Sometimes he was beautifully orthodox; he would do the correct thing most efficiently – take a pass on the wing, race swervingly along the side-line, slip round his opposing threequarter, dodge the full back, and trot round behind the posts with the crowd roaring their delight. But at other times he was entirely unorthodox. Playing in the centre, he would abandon an attack developing towards the wing threequarter, and go threading his way between the centres and halves and breaking forwards of the opposing side, until, having lost him in the melee, your eye would catch his fair hair emerging through the defending fringe, side-stepping, feinting, swerving,

³ In comparison the combative ‘pocket Hercules’ forward J.A. (John) King (1883-1916) of Headingley – winner of twelve England caps between 1911 and 1913 – was allegedly five feet seven inches but may have been significantly shorter. According to England international R.F. Oakes, when King first attempted to sign on for the Yorkshire Hussars on 6th August 1914 the recruiting officer refused him on the ground he was an inch under the five feet six requirement, whilst in *Bravest Of Hearts – The Biography of a Battalion – The Liverpool Scottish in the Great War* (2002) by Hal Giblin with David Evans and Dennis Reeves, it is stated that, when he later transferred to the Liverpool Scottish in 1915, King was officially recorded as five feet three.

and ever with the ball characteristically held with both hands, at half-arm's length in front of him, and his head swaying from side to side with his swerve ...'

By nature Ronnie, never a natural or eager early morning riser, had only two switches: 'off' and 'full speed ahead'. Whether this was a product of instinct or sense of duty, to him idleness was a foreign land. His every waking hour seemed to be crammed with endeavour, enquiry, humour, pranks and an insatiable appetite for new goals and achievements. Yet amidst this perpetual activity he also seemed to have time for everyone he met, as his friend Hugh Podmore, later killed in action as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Northamptonshire Regiment in November 1917, recalled:

' ... I loved and admired him as everyone did, but in my absurd self-consciousness was always fearing to claim a share in the real friendship of a boy and a man who numbered among his friends so many better men than I ... he always had that unique power of making one think better of oneself as well as him after even five minutes spent in his company. And there are few men indeed of whom one can truthfully say that.'

Another chum from his Balliol years who testified in similar fashion was Neville Gorton:

'What struck one most was his unbounded spirits and energy, but it was never mere animal spirits. Wherever he went he had the power of spreading an atmosphere of a very definitely spiritual kind. He came into a room of depressed or nervy quarrelsome people and changed the whole atmosphere. It was like opening the window and letting in fresh air and sunlight ...'

Sports journalist and broadcaster Henry ('Teddy') Wakelam, who played alongside Ronnie for the Harlequins and then later captained the club,

wrote this in his 1938 autobiography *Half-Time: 'the mike and me'* (Nelson):

'Poulton, in his Oxford, Harlequin, and England days, was the idol of the crowds. I only have to shut my eyes to see him once again, with his head flung back, and his fair hair waving, threading his way through the opposing defence as though they were mere stationary obstacles in a gymkhana, and though I, being rather of the humbler fry, cannot claim ever to have had a close personal friendship with him, I knew him well enough to realise that his skill at football and most other games was only a small part in the make-up of a wonderful personality.'

The hint of awe, and even perhaps a slight self-induced sense of personal inferiority, expressed in the preceding passages might suggest that there was something grand or aloof in Ronnie's personality, but this was not the case. The Reverend C.S. Donald, then warden of the Rugby School Mission in Notting Dale, wrote after Ronnie's death:

'Wherever he was and however many were present he always quite unconsciously 'occupied the stage'. He got nearer the ideal standard than any other I have met, I think ... How many of those, escaping early from the office to "bury an aunt" at Twickenham or motoring down by road with imprecations on the goods van which blocked the way, knew that the little chap in the sackcloth apron and leather cap hanging behind that same van had a similar purpose in his small head and as fruitful a domestic bereavement as their own? All were going to see Poulton play in the afternoon, but he was also going to play with Poulton in the evening at his boys' club ...'

He was born Ronald William Poulton and, although habitually referred to as 'Ronald' by his parents and siblings in company, was also known as 'Ronnie' to his family, close friends and indeed the general public who followed his sporting fortunes from their pitch-side positions or in the

press. Save where the context demands otherwise, in this volume I shall use the last of these when referring to him: 'Ronnie' somehow seems to evoke a degree of his own sense of fun and élan as well as that of his class and time. Poulton, Poulton Palmer, or even Poulton-Palmer? All these forms of his surname have been used but, despite seeming dashingly appropriate, the double-barrelled version is technically incorrect. Officially Ronnie remained a Poulton until the spring of 1914, when his change of surname was prompted by the contents of the will of his uncle G.W. Palmer, who had died the previous October. In it he had left Ronnie a substantial portion of his estate on condition he adopt the surname Palmer⁴. Although subsequently the majority of the press and others continued to call him 'R.W. Poulton' to the end of his rugby career – and he was also occasionally referred to as 'Poulton Palmer' – he personally avoided both these and was known to style himself 'R.W.P. Palmer' in his own correspondence, despite the fact even these initials were not strictly appropriate. Palmer is the surname inscribed upon his memorial plaque inside St Helens Church, near the family's holiday home on the Isle of Wight, and mentioned in the Balliol College Register published in his lifetime. In his official Army service file and records his name is variously given as 'Poulton', 'Palmer' and 'Poulton Palmer' – the unsubtle point being that, however he was identified during his lifetime, everyone knew who he was. It seems likely that the 'Poulton Palmer' version gained its ascendancy as a means of reducing potential confusion over his change of name.

What follows is no rags-to-riches tale nestling within modern

⁴ By G.W. Palmer's will dated 14th October 1910 (as amended by two later codicils) – duplicate probate grant issued 19th December 1913 – Ronnie's inheritance was conditional upon him taking the surname of Palmer by applying for 'a proper licence to bear the arms of Palmer'. This he did by a process involving an application for a Royal Licence, the issuing of a warrant by the Earl Marshall (the Duke of Norfolk) and then the grant of an 'Exemplification of Arms and Crest' dated 6th April 1914. Interestingly, although the will allowed Ronnie to adopt the surname Palmer 'either alone or with and following after his ... own proper surname', he deliberately chose to adopt the new name 'Ronald William Palmer'. Further – again, given the choice under the will of adopting the arms of Palmer 'either alone or quarterly with his ... own arms', he chose to adopt them alone.

perceptions of political correctness and equal opportunity. It hails from a very different era in which – despite the gradual extension of education and suffrage, though not yet to the female gender – there existed a fascinating mix of an apparently rigid social structure and a prevailing sense of national unity and purpose. The latter, grounded in pride in the British Empire and confidence in its leading role in world affairs, was underpinned by a set of principles and values in which the conviction that God was quite probably an Englishman played a significant underlying role. In those days the words ‘Britain’ and ‘England’ were used interchangeably by the world at large. Thus a reference to England contained in Captain Scott’s poignant journal entry as he and his companions neared their sad end in the Antarctic in March 1912 – ‘Had we lived I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman’ – was neither intended, nor would it have been taken, as a slight upon the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. The distinctive national and cultural characteristics then prevalent within the British Isles were simultaneously more pronounced and less significant than they are today, save perhaps on the sports field. There was also a ‘win-win’ aspect for natives of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Those originating north of the English border, for example, could choose either to bask in the inclusive aspect of a reference to ‘England’s Empire’ or point to Scotland’s particular contributions in the fields of science, exploration, overseas colonisation and administration.

Although this volume covers aspects of both, it is not intended as a comprehensive scholarly or historical review of British society, or indeed the sport of rugby union, in the period leading up to the First World War. I am also conscious that presenting any life essentially in terms of its athletic triumphs carries an attendant risk of giving a misleading impression of an individual’s all-round character. Another danger lies in reciting an exhaustive list of dates and events gleaned from whatever sources can be uncovered. Such a course might demonstrate a certain thoroughness of research but stupefy the reader – furthermore, it would

necessarily reflect the perceptions of those who did the original recording. It is noticeable how a recurring theme in the contemporary accounts of Ronnie is how unlike a typical sporting 'blood' or 'hearty' he was. In part this may have been because he was good at compartmentalising things. Away from the rugby field and the company of fellow players he rarely discussed or spoke of the game. He was of course proud of his skills and achievements but never boasted about them or sought the adulation of others. He was renowned for dealing with everyone – great or small, young or old, rich or poor – as he found them. He appeared honest, straightforward and modest because this is how he was. There was no sense of 'side' to this sporting hero, no sense of false pride. His open, warm-hearted character was quite capable of attracting others to him on its own. The mother of a Balliol contemporary recalled meeting him at a dinner in 1912:

'He sat next to me ... and I at once fell under the spell of his charming and lovable personality, and, although we only met on that one occasion, I had heard so much about him, that I always thought of him as an intimate friend. He was so natural, so transparently sincere, so courteous and gracious, that it was impossible not to be drawn to him, and I felt proud and thankful that my boy possessed such a friendship.'

Inevitably some description of the game of rugby union will follow. The Edwardian period was one in which the English team, still affected by earlier self-inflicted wounds over professionalism, began at a woefully low ebb and gradually flowered into a force that would dominate the home nations championship for the two seasons up to 1914 and then, after four years of war, much of the decade that followed. During the early 20th Century the term 'football' was applied to both rugby and the association game that our American cousins refer to as 'soccer'. To avoid confusion therefore, save where the context dictates, I shall refer to rugby union as 'rugby'; to the Rugby Football Union as 'the RFU', although it was sometimes also known as the 'Rugby Union'; to the

Northern Union version of rugby as ‘rugby league’⁵; and lastly, to association football as ‘soccer’.

Lastly in this section – perhaps a necessary indulgence – I shall now provide a brief explanation of the means of scoring in rugby union, for the benefit of those who may be unfamiliar with the sport, or indeed find its complexities bewildering. There are just four: a penalty goal, a try, a conversion and a drop-goal. During the Edwardian period covered by this volume, both a successful try (grounding the ball securely and with downward pressure over the try-line) and penalty goal (the opposition have committed a foul warranting a penalty attempt, a kick of the ball, placed upon the ground, successfully over the crossbar and between the upright posts) gained a team three points; a conversion (an attempt at a goal, i.e. similar to an attempt at a penalty goal, but which is taken exclusively after a try has been scored) gained two points; and a successful drop-goal (a kick in general play, in which the player concerned, in one movement, first drops the ball to the ground and then kicks it over the crossbar and between the upright posts) gained four points.

It is important to keep in mind that the technical benefits of modern sports media coverage are denied to anyone writing about rugby as played before the First World War. Apart from the limited amount of contemporary film footage that survives, it is therefore necessary to rely upon archives, newspaper reports and the descriptions of those who covered or loved the game. In all these, inevitably, there is a subjective element involved, in my own experience amply borne out by the frequency with which modern newspaper reports conflict with the impression I personally gained as a match spectator or television viewer. However accurate or evocative a contemporaneous account

⁵ The Northern Union game – originally in practice no more than rugby union played for money – originally split from the ‘amateur’ version in 1895 but was not officially termed ‘rugby league’ until 1922.

may be, it also remains ‘of its time’ and, as a result, may fail to convey to modern readers the essence of a sport that was just as physical and exciting to play then as now. This issue presents a problem for anyone wishing to describe an incident that occurred on a pitch a century ago and, in the process, may invite well-intentioned embellishment or touches of poetic licence. I have done my best to resist such temptations, but apologise in advance for any lapses that follow. This is also the reason why, unless it seems essential to the story, I have been sparing in providing detailed accounts of individual matches. Any concentration upon incidents in which Ronnie was felt to have done something particularly noteworthy also risks giving the cumulative and misleading impression that, every time he came into possession of the ball, a magical feat defying the laws of logic, physics and even geometry naturally followed. This was emphatically not the case. It may be a truism to state that participants in top flight Edwardian rugby were all highly-skilled athletes but, as with their modern counterparts, the welcome moments of stunning individual brilliance that suddenly transformed the course of a match were inevitably few and far between. The relationship between perception and art sometimes needs to be examined. We may hail the Jack Aubrey seafaring novels of Patrick O’Brian, or indeed the related Peter Weir-directed movie version of *Master And Commander*, as accurate recreations of life in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic War, what we really mean is that they accurately represent what we would *imagine* life at sea must have been like two centuries ago. Although modern writers who have set novels in the First World War period, such as Sebastian Faulks (*Birdsong*) and Pat Barker (the *Regeneration* trilogy), may lay themselves open to accusations that, deliberately or otherwise, they have given their characters modern attitudes or imported the benefit of hindsight, their works may yet stand – if that is your view – as examples of outstanding literature. By the same token, whilst being stuck for three years or more in the living hell and squalor of the Flanders trenches might technically justify the description of someone as a war poet, it does not by itself make him a great one. No incident in history can ever be described or analysed definitively because

analysts and historians inevitably bring their personal perceptions and subjectivity to the material. Human society remains in a constant state of flux, buffeted by innumerable attitudes, moods and outside events – some of them unrecognised at the time. British Edwardians conducted their everyday lives against the backdrop of the current political, social and diplomatic strains, particularly the perceived growing economic and military threat presented by various European and other world powers. In my approach to the narrative, for the most part, I have chosen to cover the lives of Ronnie's contemporaries as they appeared to him. He can have had little idea, for example, that one of his closest friends and mentors, the Reverend William ('Billy') Temple, would become one of the great liberal Archbishops of Canterbury of the 20th Century. From time to time reference may be made to the age or date of death of an individual, a device which may serve to underscore both their achievements and their sense of responsibility and maturity.

It is also worth remembering that, as the injury-prone England hero Jonny Wilkinson began the latest phase of his illustrious career at Toulon in an effort to re-ascend the peak represented by his contribution to England's 2003 Rugby World Cup triumph, he was already six years and counting beyond the age at which Ronnie played his last international. Mention of Wilkinson prompts another thought. It is that, in a modern age where anti-authority stances are routinely celebrated, and sporting heroes seem to fill our television screens with acts of malicious violence, exaggerated injury-feigning and attempts to kid officials in order to gain momentary advantage, 'Wilko' himself stands out as a comparative paragon of integrity and virtue.

In stark contrast, their Edwardian counterparts tended to be cast firmly in the *Boys Own Paper* or *Ripping Yarns* mould. Ronnie and those like him did not acquire this mindset under protest or threat of the cane. They came to it willingly, courtesy of their family upbringing, schooling and peer pressure. Even at its elite level, amateur sport was rarely regarded as more than a valued and welcome diversion from more

important aspects of everyday life. By no means was rugby the only sport capable of inspiring examples of good sportsmanship but, as 'Astral' wrote in an appreciation in the *Daily News and Leader* published three days after Ronnie's death:

' ... It is almost needless to say that he always played the game. Nobody ever saw Poulton stoop to a piece of ignoble trickery to gain an advantage or lose his temper, although he was such a marked man in the most vigorous of all games, that one might have excused some occasional irritation on his part.'

Fascinating as it might have been to find out, we shall never know how many rugby greats of the amateur past – let us take just George Nepia, Prince Obolensky, Jackie Kyle, Cliff Morgan, Barry John and Mark Ella, all hypothetically transported as twenty-year-olds into the present day for the purpose – would have relished the opportunity to submit to the unrelenting grind of modern professional rugby. The answer probably depends upon whether, in this experiment, the minds of our illustrious guinea pigs were modern or 'of their time'. Supporting evidence for this proposition is not hard to find. Take just two of Ronnie's close university friends who also happened to be outstanding athletes: Kenneth 'Grunt' Macleod of Cambridge and Arnold Jackson of Oxford. Macleod, who was capable of 'even time' – covering one hundred yards in ten seconds – was described by his Cambridge contemporary Gordon Carey as the greatest natural player of ball games he had ever seen. 'I use the word "natural" deliberately, for few could have taken less trouble than he did about training.' Macleod was a true sporting prodigy who first played rugby for Scotland against New Zealand in 1905 at the age of seventeen, and retired from the game just three years later at the request of his father following the death of his elder brother from appendicitis. Jackson, whose training, according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, consisted of 'massage, golf and walking', took up middle-distance running almost by chance and won three consecutive athletics blues. Although not selected for the Great Britain team, he won the 1500 metres gold medal at the 1912

Olympics as a private entrant, having broken a holiday in Norway and travelled to Stockholm by train in order to take part. His victory, in a new Olympic record of 3 minutes 56.8 seconds, was no less remarkable for the fact he had never previously run on a 400 metre track or indeed in an anti-clockwise direction – at Oxford they ran clockwise upon a 300 yard oval. Later, after anchoring the Oxford 4 x 1 mile team to victory at the 1914 Penn relays in Philadelphia, Jackson retired from athletics at the age of twenty-three, without ever having lost a competitive race⁶.

Despite its Corinthian image, cricket retained a slightly more oblique approach to principle. Led by ‘The Champion’ (W.G. Grace), several eminent supposedly amateur players contrived to play all year round, either through their access to a private income or reimbursed expenses. Nevertheless, through a combination of his need to earn a crust, a desire to pursue country sports and his antipathy to ‘being away’, Charles Fry, the man considered by many, including himself, as the greatest sporting all-rounder of them all, never accepted an invitation to tour overseas during the long peak of his cricketing career. In his time he had won a top scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford, played for England at both cricket and soccer and equalled the world long jump record in a trial for the 1893 athletics Varsity Match – in later life he claimed that he would have participated in the first modern Olympics Games in Athens three years later, if only he had known they were taking place.

Ignoring for this purpose the occasional obsessive who concentrated upon sport to the exclusion of everything else, most talented Edwardian amateurs regarded top flight sport as a hobby to be enjoyed until the

⁶ A.N.S. Jackson (later Strode-Jackson) (1891-1972) was quite a character. He went on to win a DSO and three bars during the First World War, was mentioned in despatches six times and became the youngest brigadier-general in the British Army. He was also wounded on three occasions, on one of them severely enough to be left with a permanent limp. After the war he was called to the Bar, married an American and then moved to the USA in 1921. There he directed the first-ever Kentucky Derby festival in 1935 and served on the staff of the governor of Kentucky during the Second World War, before returning to Britain in retirement.

demands of their working careers took priority. This is not to suggest that they took their endeavours lightly. Rugby players strove to keep themselves fit by exercising and they practised their skills. In the build-up to games they responded, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to pleas from their selectors and captains to retire to bed early and moderate their alcohol and tobacco consumption in order to conserve their stamina and wind. A selection for one's country was regarded as a supreme honour, especially since, with shorter careers and fewer international matches on the calendar, winning ten caps then was the equivalent of forty or more in the modern era. We can presume the nerves, adrenalin and collective spirit generated in a pre-First World War Twickenham changing room prior to an international played in front of 30,000 spectators, were little different to those generated in front of 80,000 and the glare of live television and radio coverage today. No modern rugby fan should succumb to the illusion that top class games in those days were genteel affairs in which chaps in knee-length shorts, hob-nail boots and handlebar moustaches jogged around the field metaphorically whispering "After you, Claude" to their colleagues whilst doing their best to avoid both physical contact and the mud. There was plenty of both, for there has never been a time since the 1870s when top-flight rugby matches were less than highly physical. Without doubt a full-time modern player, transported back in time, would have sliced through the ranks of any elite pre-First World War team. However, he might have found this a more daunting proposition after a five hour factory shift on a Saturday morning and a harum-scarum dash straight to the ground by car or train – especially if this followed a working week of five (twelve hour) days, two evenings' study at a technical college, innumerable 'guest of honour' appearances at functions and regular stints of voluntary social work, as was Ronnie's regular routine whilst he turned out for the great Liverpool FC side of 1913/14. Whilst the sporting legends of yesteryear could not match the fitness levels of their modern counterparts⁷, nor enjoy the benefits of modern sports medicine

⁷ In 2007 *The Sunday Times* reported that IRMES, the French biomedical and

and training methods, they were still elite athletes of their time. Nor should it be forgotten that conditions of everyday life for the average Edwardian man or woman were generally harder than those of today and that they were no strangers to activities requiring prolonged and strenuous effort.

In order to go beyond a straightforward account of Ronnie's life, it is necessary to seek some understanding of the influences driving early 20th Century life. Modern views of how life was before 1919 can be distorted by the prism of hindsight and sundry revisionist takes, not least the simplistic perception that First World War Allied troops were 'lions led by donkeys', and our continuing enjoyment of satirical pieces such as *Oh What A Lovely War!* and *Blackadder Goes Forth*. It is all too easy to derive amusement at the expense of a society that, even in the brutal context of a wartime experience, could produce people who spoke naturally and comfortably of "putting on a good show" and regularly described their peers as "topping chaps" or "ripping fellows". To appreciate the context in which such folk lived it is necessary to take their patter and attitudes at face value rather than, as might be the temptation, a surreal edifice ripe for parody and humour. Deep down and for not dissimilar reasons – though perhaps then religion played a greater part on both sides of the argument – our Edwardian ancestors were as horrified by the prospect of war as we are today, even when they sensed that a major conflict was not just likely, but possibly overdue. However, at that time, if the national cause was justified, their innate sense of duty allowed the majority to sublimate any misgivings and volunteer willingly to 'do their bit', whatever the hardships and sacrifices involved. Thus when the government decided that Britain's international treaties and national interest were sufficiently offended that going to war with Germany was justified, there was a general air of

epidemiological institute of sports, had concluded – based upon a study of 3,260 world records since the first modern Olympics – that athletes in 1896 were operating to 75% of their physiological capacity compared to the modern 99%. In passing it also predicted that beyond 2060 there would be no new world records.

patriotism and readiness for the call to arms throughout the British Empire. It was as if a long-serving heavyweight boxing champion had at last signed a contract to fight his boastful leading challenger from overseas. Though the needs of propaganda demanded that Germany be demonised, as it was with great enthusiasm, some made a careful distinction between the Prussian 'nation' and the rest. C.H. Herford, Professor of English at Manchester University, chose to contrast 'the brutally aggressive military caste' with 'the millions of kindly men and women', and in one speech Lloyd George declared "the Prussian Junker is the road-hog of Europe". There was a communal sense that enough was enough – this was it. Would the British nation and its dominions stand up to be counted? There could be only one answer. At home, three days after the declaration of war on 4th August 1914, Lord Kitchener made an appeal for a New Army of 100,000 volunteers to supplement the regular army strength. Within a month nearly five times this number had come forward, many of them organised into special 'pals' battalions or representing groups of workers such as the City of London Stockbrokers, the Gateshead Commercials and Glasgow's Tramways. Amongst these volunteers was the archetypal rugger 'hearty', Edgar Mobbs of Northampton and England who, having been refused a commission on grounds of age, joined instead as a ranker after having personally raised a company for the Northamptonshire Regiment.

Inevitably the sentiments that allowed Edwardians to go so willingly to war were severely tested by the mind-numbing reality of trench warfare in Northern Europe. Within each successive wave of new arrivals at the Front, either gradually or rudely, the early optimism became replaced by a grim determination to 'see it through', however harrowing the prospect. Once a degree of inevitable disillusion had set in, the humour became blacker, but it did not disappear. The sense of duty and responsibility inculcated by tradition and peer pressure remained strong and, to modern eyes, bordered upon the extraordinary. Here is a former pupil of Reading School, 2nd Lieutenant G.F. Ayres of the 3rd Lincolnshire Regiment, writing home from the Front just before the offensive in which he was killed:

*'It will either be good or bad by the time you receive this letter and I expect it means that I shall either be on my way home wounded or I shall remain here forever ... the first I hope. I do so want to see you all again. I am going over the parapet with a shout of 'School' on my lips and then pray God's will be done! If the worst comes to the worst, tell any young friends in the School who can, and there are many, that they must come out and take our places.'*⁸

Elsewhere a former pupil of Dulwich College, Lieutenant Paul Jones of the Tank Corps, wrote to his family early in 1915:

*'Men of the stamp of Julian Grenfell, D.O. Barnett, Rupert Brooke, Roland Philipps, R.G. Garvin and W.J. Henderson have not hesitated to give up for their country all the brilliant gifts of character with which they would have enriched England had it not been for the war. The effect on me is as a trumpet call. All the old Welsh fighting blood comes surging up and makes me say "Short sight or no short sight, I **will** prove my manhood!" If it should be my fate to get popped off – well it is we younger men without dependents whose duty it is to take the risk.'*⁹

The fact that military morale and team spirit survived was due, as much as anything, to the fact that junior officers were enduring similar deprivations as their men and leading from the front. According to the statistics, during the First World War one in every seven British army officers was killed, compared to one in eight other ranks. Among old boys of public schools, and indeed of Oxford and Cambridge universities, the rate was as high as one in five. The conclusion that, by extrapolation, this also meant that four out of five survived can have been of little consolation as, week by week, the newspaper casualty lists bore stark testimony to the unrelenting slaughter. Down the years, with varying degrees of irony,

⁸ Oakes J. and Parsons M. (2001) *Old School Ties*, DSM, p.193.

⁹ Jones P. (1918) *War Letters of a Public-School Boy*, Cassell Ltd, p.199.

the notion has been propounded by George Orwell amongst others that sport equates to war conducted by other means. Certainly some in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras involved in the ‘manly’ sports of rowing, soccer, rugby and cricket seemed to approach all life’s hardships, up to and including war, as glorified sporting challenges. The attitude was perhaps epitomised by Robert (later the 1st Baron) Baden-Powell who, having retired from the Army, secured lasting fame by founding the world-famous Boy Scout movement in 1908. As a soldier, however, the self-styled ‘Bathing-Towel’ had his perfect moment in the spotlight at the two hundred and seventeen day siege of Mafeking during the Boer War (1899-1902). By a heady mixture of inventiveness, grit and sheer pluck, this overgrown schoolboy and amateur music-hall ‘turn’ orchestrated the defence of this nondescript little town, on the border between Cape Colony and Transvaal, rather in the manner of the Colonel Nicholson character played by Alec Guinness in *The Bridge Over The River Kwai* (1957), but with more madcap humour and less Bridge. Nicholson’s opposite number in the movie, Japanese camp commandant Colonel Saito, may have barked at him ‘Do not speak to me of rules. This is war. This is not a game of cricket!’, but the antics of ‘Baking-Powder’ at the height of this relatively minor episode would have driven any real-life Colonel Saito around the twist. Without making light of his ingenuity and military pragmatism, Baden-Powell delighted in playing to the public gallery almost as much as the British nation enjoyed following the siege’s progress via the newspaper reports coming from South Africa. Despite the deprivations involved – and there is clear evidence whites were favoured over blacks as regards the ever-dwindling supplies of shelter and rations – ‘BP’ helped ward off boredom for the nine thousand souls trapped within the perimeter compound by issuing special Mafeking stamps and organising polo matches, dances, beautiful baby competitions, gymkhanas, bicycle races, horticultural shows and music hall concerts, in many of which he personally officiated or performed. When not pretending to climb through his non-existent minefields and barbed wire defences, a charade designed to confuse the besieging forces, he was doing his best to irritate them. At one point, prompted by a report in the *Bulawayo*

Chronicle that listed the endless social activities being mounted by the Mafeking defenders, a Boer commander issued Baden-Powell a challenge to a cricket match. He responded by open letter saying that he should like nothing better, but only 'after the match in which we are at present engaged is over ... just now we are having our innings and have so far scored 200 days, not out, against the bowling of Cronje, Snijman, Botha ... and we are having a very enjoyable game'. To rub further salt into the wound, on Guy Fawkes Day 1899, he mounted a ceremonial fireworks display, having first counselled the surrounding Boers not to be alarmed by this traditional British celebration. In similar fashion Ronald Gurner, who later became headmaster of Whitgift, wrote of the boys he taught at Marlborough College regarding the First World War as 'a glorified football match in which, if peace did not come, they might take their places in the English team'. This can be contrasted with the withering verdict of historian and essayist Philip Guedalla, a contemporary of Ronnie's at Rugby School and Balliol, in concluding an 'In Memoriam' piece on Ronnie two years after his death:

'There was a facetious undergraduate who wrote of him eight years ago [in an 'Oxford Idols' piece for Isis magazine, 30th October 1909]: 'He has played for England against France, Ireland and Scotland: as he is a member of the Officers Training Corps, we trust he will never be required for his country against Germany.' It is of no use to wish that wish now.'

The full irony of this comment lies in the fact that the 'facetious undergraduate' was Guedalla himself. Was this reaction purely the product of disillusionment after four years of slaughter, or rather a sign that the gung-ho frivolity involved in mixing sport and war, metaphorically or otherwise, was regarded by some contemporaries as ridiculous and inappropriate? The one link that might feasibly have been made between rugby and warfare is that the bravery, teamwork and leadership demands of the former might tend to produce the kind of young men who – their contemporary schoolmasters and military authorities might have been hoping – would make good officer material

when and if the awful need should arise. Nevertheless, whatever stirring claims were made by the RFU about the contribution of rugby players in advance of and during the First World War, the unvarnished truth was that sportsmen were no more likely to make good soldiers, sailors or airmen than anyone else. Whilst to be led by a brave officer might be a positive, to be led by one skilled in the art of warfare was better. When the call finally came to go 'over the top', the willingness of the officer class to do its duty had as much to do with upbringing as it had with any supposed prowess on the cricket or football field. Kipling's swipe in *The Islanders* (1902) at the 'flannelled fools at the wicket or the muddled oafs at the goals', borne of the harsh lessons of the Boer War, was designed to remind that – when it came to a 20th Century military campaign – leadership and team spirit on the ground were now welcome add-ons, rather than key technical ingredients.

It was in this context that Ronnie Poulton was born and lived. He was a privileged man at a time when most of his status and background saw it as their natural duty to prepare themselves to step into the shoes of their fathers' generation. At the same time he was also atypical in that he belonged to a set that was sensitive, often religious and possessed of a genuine sense of responsibility for those in less fortunate circumstances. His enthusiasm for building a rapport with the common man, particularly in evidence through his work with boys' clubs, was sometimes ascribed by others to the idealism of youth. Many of his seniors anticipated that he would change his views once he had been exposed to the commercial realities of life as an employer. Nevertheless there can be no doubt that his intentions, like those of his contemporaries who became similarly involved, were sincere and underpinned the way he chose to conduct his life right to its early end.

It is ironic that a complication in gathering together the strands of this particular story, even amongst the numerous 'splendid fellow' tributes afforded to those who died in the First World War, is the extraordinarily high regard in which Ronnie was held by others. By the simple expedient

of being true to himself, he seemed to set an admired example that, others recognised, would require much effort and sacrifice to approach, let alone match. It would therefore be a frustrated researcher who embarked upon a quest to uncover Ronnie's hidden flaws and weaknesses. Few individuals are without blemish yet, for those who knew him, Ronnie came tantalisingly close. The question has been raised as to whether he might have been a direct inspiration for the character of Osborne in R.C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (1928) who at one point admits with affecting modesty to Raleigh, a subaltern newly arrived at the Front, that he used to play rugby for the Harlequins and (once) for England. It is possible but unlikely. For one thing, Ronnie never saw his twenty-sixth birthday and Osborne is described as having been a forty-five-year-old schoolmaster before the War began. Yet there seem to be echoes of Ronnie, or those like him, in several of the play's characters and themes. When it came to sport Sherriff, who drew on his personal wartime experiences with the East Surrey Regiment to write his most famous piece, was primarily interested in rowing and it is unclear whether he ever followed rugby. However, having been born in south-west London at Hampton, Middlesex in 1896 and educated at Kingston Grammar School, he would have been a teenager when Ronnie was a national sporting hero and the Harlequins, under the leadership of Adrian Stoop, were building their glamorous reputation at Twickenham.

In *Journey's End*, set at the Front just before the final German offensive of 1918, the company commander Stanhope, a twenty-one-year-old ex-public schoolboy and brilliant sportsman, has lost both his proverbial innocence and his nerves in the unrelenting grind of trench warfare and is now fortified in his inner battle to keep going by his addiction to the bottle. He still has the capacity to exhibit commendable leadership and courage, but desperately wishes to disguise his general disillusionment from the new subaltern, not least because he was once keen on the latter's sister. Interestingly, as Osborne and Raleigh exchange introductions early in the play, Osborne comments that he knew a master at Rugby School (Ronnie's alma mater) of the same name and the younger man responds that it could be a relation because 'I have lots of uncles and – and things

like that'. It is arguable that Sherriff took Ronnie and his peers — bright, shining examples of British manhood who set off to war full of eagerness to do their duty, secure in the conviction their cause was just — and tried to show how, after four years of carnage in the Flanders mud, many of the survivors had been worn down to the point where such confidence and idealism was replaced by a resigned determination to concentrate upon day-to-day trench survival whilst awaiting their fate, in some cases utilising whatever prop or stimulus was to hand. Sherriff recoiled when some early reviewers hailed *Journey's End* as a forceful anti-war polemic. He described his characters as 'simple, unquestioning men who fought the war because it seemed the only right and proper thing to do' and, vehemently denying the play contained any moral standpoint on the war, asserted that he had merely wished to perpetuate the memory of some of the men he had known.

Once the early casualty lists began filtering home during the autumn of 1914, most volunteers began to appreciate that the likelihood of being killed or maimed would swing between probable and inevitable every time they went into action. How they dealt with this prospect has been a source of much research and analysis down the years and it is clear that many who survived the conflict felt distinctly ambivalent about their good fortune. A case in point was the future Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, who went up to Balliol eight months after Ronnie came down, and was wounded three times whilst serving with the Grenadier Guards. On one occasion, incapacitated in No Man's Land at the Somme in September 1916, he occupied his several hours' wait to be rescued by reading, in its original Greek, a copy of Aeschylus' *Prometheus* which he habitually kept in his tunic pocket. He later described his reaction to survival as a combination of surprise and a sense of never having felt more without purpose or friends. He had lost nearly all the latter he had made at school or university on the battlefields:

'I did not go back to Oxford after the war. It was not just that I was still a cripple. There were plenty of cripples. But I could not face it.'

To me it was a city of ghosts. Of our eight scholars and exhibitioners who came up in 1912, Humphrey Sumner and I alone were alive. It was too much.'

Macmillan was not alone in experiencing such feelings. Nor was 'survivor guilt' exclusively a post-War experience for, well before that, many participants had become resigned to their likely fate. It has been posited that much of Macmillan's subsequent determination and drive to succeed in public life came from his sense of duty to the memory and lost potential of those he had known and, with a combination of humility and honesty, regarded as his superiors: ironically, this drive may also have given him the strength to endure some of the trials that subsequently visited him in his personal life.

Despite this, before the catastrophic events of 1914-1918, there had been a short halcyon period when, to adopt a Macmillan phrase from decades later, it seemed the majority of the population had 'never had it so good'. It was accompanied by a certain foreboding in the air that, just possibly, the current high watermark of Empire and style was coming to an end, encapsulated for many by Kipling's famous lines from *The Long Trail*, even though they had been written as early as 1891:

*'There's a whisper down the field where the year has shot her yield
And the ricks stand grey to the sun,
Singing "Over then, come over, for the bee has quit the clover,
And your English summer's done."'*

Nevertheless a general sense of well-being, inner strength and confidence seemed to prevail. Or did it? There were significant undercurrents running, even during this supposedly perfect Edwardian 'summer'. Quite apart from the obvious threat to Britain's pre-eminent position in the world posed by economic advances of the United States, Germany, France and Russia, at home the raft of progressive social and economic measures introduced by the Liberal government after 1906 had been

bitterly opposed by vested interests and reactionary forces in the national press and the House of Lords in particular. The constitutional crisis of 1909 to 1912 unfolded against a background of concurrent thorny issues such as Home Rule for Ireland, women's suffrage and the growing strength of organised labour (trade union membership had increased from two to four million between 1901 and 1913). Rising inflation and stationary wages combined to cause numerous industrial problems culminating with the first general railway strike of 1911. In July 1914, as close as three weeks before the declaration of war, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, had warned of the ominous state of British society in his speech at the annual Lord Mayor's Mansion House banquet – at the time the 'triple alliance' of miners, railwaymen and transport workers were threatening a mass strike in support of the railwaymen's demands for union recognition and a forty-eight hour week. Against the background of this fraught industrial-political climate it could be argued that elite sport had become about as egalitarian as was possible within the prevailing social structure. Granted there had been the split between the two rugby codes, but in cricket amateurs and professionals (or 'Gentlemen' and 'Players') were now sitting metaphorically, though not of course literally, side by side in the quest for gate revenue. In soccer tens of professional teams up and down the country, many now playing in front of massive crowds, had long broken the domination of ex-public school amateur clubs in both the leagues and the Football Association Cup. In the early 20th Century national and regional pride stood at an all-time high and the British Empire ran red-riot around the map of the world. Successive generations of (for the most part) good-intentioned administrators, whether prompted by the self-styled White Man's Burden or merely as instruments of naked colonial and commercial self-interest, had been setting off to take the 'benefits' of the British version of civilised behaviour and administration to hundreds of millions of people living in far-flung corners of the globe.

That was until the roof fell in somewhat closer to home – on the continent of Europe.