In June 2013, Brett Gosper, the chief executive of the International Rugby Board (IRB), the governing body of world rugby union, sent out a tweet that read ‘Ever wondered what the most game changing hand ball was in the history of football?’ It was accompanied by a photograph of the famous plaque at Rugby School that commemorates William Webb Ellis picking up the ball and running with it in 1823 (Gosper, 2013).

It is difficult to imagine how one could get the history of one’s own sport so radically wrong. As many historians, and indeed the RFU’s own World Rugby Museum, have observed, there is no evidence of any type – written, eyewitness, circumstantial or hearsay – to support the claim that William Webb Ellis picked up the ball during a match, let alone was the first to do so. The implication that he was playing a game of soccer – hence the reference to handball – is an anachronism, given that the Football Association (FA) was not founded nor drew up its rules until 1863. And the idea that Webb Ellis’s supposed single act started a new sport is patently absurd (Old Rugbeian Society, 1897; Collins, 1998: 6–7).

But Gosper’s statement highlighted the common conception that the William Webb Ellis story has helped to propagate: that Association football, ‘soccer’, is the continuator of traditional, pre-industrial forms of football and that rugby is a later offshoot from it. Indeed, the IRB implicitly supported this view by naming their world cup trophy the Webb Ellis Trophy.

In reality, soccer is neither the original version of football nor the historic continuity of the original form of the game. The same can also be said about rugby. As this chapter seeks to argue, the histories and historiographies of the two codes of football are far more complex and symbiotic than may appear at first sight.

Folk football

Claims that soccer is the continuation of folk football do not bear critical scrutiny. There is little or no evidence that any of the pre-industrial forms of football forbade players from handling the ball. Indeed, most traditional games of ‘football’ resembled rugby more than soccer, in that they allowed both handling and kicking the ball as well as bodily tackling. Moreover, attempts by historians (for example Goulstone, 2000) to demonstrate the continuity of traditional seasonal
football matches or short-lived ‘football’ clubs that existed in early nineteenth-century Britain with modern soccer fall down when we look at the geography of these matches and clubs.

Many of these early games were played in areas that would later become hotbeds of rugby. In the area around Twickenham in south-west London, Shrove Tuesday football matches were part of a well-established tradition. As well as Twickenham itself, matches were played at Teddington, Bushey Park, Richmond, Hampton Wick, East Molesey and Thames Ditton. The annual encounter at Kingston-upon-Thames was not finally suppressed by the local authorities until 1868, just three years before the Rugby Football Union (RFU) itself was founded. In Leicestershire, football matches were recorded from at least 1790. On Shrove Tuesday 1852 a 15-a-side match was played between the villages of Blaby and Wigston in a field just 15 minutes’ drive from today’s Leicester Tigers’ training ground. The following month the villages of Enderby and Whetstone squared up against each other. Enderby gained such a strong reputation that they played a team from Holmfirth, near Huddersfield, on Good Friday 1852 on the neutral ground of Sheffield’s Hyde Park (Goulstone, 2001: 29–30, 39).

Further north, in historically rugby league-playing East Yorkshire, the towns of Beverley and Hornsea were noted for football, with Hornsea even boasting its own ‘football grene’ from the 1680s. In the 1820s Primitive Methodists gathered to try to stop the annual match between the villages of Hedon and Preston (Malcolmson, 1973: 85). Even as late as the 1890s, one Hull FC rugby player claimed that he learned the modern game by playing traditional football in the local village of Sutton (Hull & East Riding Athlete, 1889: 3). In Yorkshire’s West Riding, games of football were played at Walton, a village north of Leeds, Keighley, Pudsey, and most regularly at Holmfirth, a cradle of rugby league and still today home of one of the game’s leading amateur clubs, Underbank Rangers (Chadwick, 1946: 1).

Across the border in Lancashire, Rochdale in the 1840s hosted a number of matches between short-lived clubs boasting names such as the Body Guards and Fear Noughts, who may have inspired the town’s later rugby club to adopt the moniker of Hornets more than a century before nicknames became popular in rugby (Bell’s Life in London, 1842: 7). In Orrell, a 30-a-side challenge was thrown out to local villages in 1841 and in Ulverston, a power in Lancashire rugby in the 1890s, a 15-a-side game was played in 1839 (Goulstone, 2001: 32). And, in Cumberland, the mass folk football ‘Uppies and Downies’ football survives today in Workington’s Easter game. Its near neighbour Whitehaven would also stage a match in which shipwrights would do battle with quarrymen. All of these locations are or were primarily rugby-playing areas (Yorkshire Post, 1896: 12).

This raises an obvious etymological question. Why were these games called ‘football’ if they weren’t played with the feet? As with many questions of etymology, it is difficult to know for certain. It has been suggested that the name emerged because, in contrast to the sports of the nobility which largely took place on horseback, football games were played on foot. This is not entirely convincing, not least because two of the most prestigious upper-class sports, archery and fencing, quite obviously took place standing up. It has also been suggested more convincingly that ‘football’ referred to the type of ball used, one that could be kicked by the foot as well as handled, rather than the nature of the game.

The historian also needs to take into account the problem of hindsight. The sheer omnipresence of soccer in today’s world can lead us to assume that football denotes a sport that is played exclusively with the feet. Yet feet and hands could be used to varying degrees in early forms of football. Even the FA in its early years allowed the hands to be used by outfield players to catch a ball in the air. And of course, the feet are used extensively in rugby and in all of the different codes of football that evolved from it. It is a game played both with hands and feet – and in the early years of the game it was played more with the feet than the hands.
In fact, soccer’s insistence that only the feet can be used by outfield players clearly differentiates it from earlier versions of football. This was widely recognised by the Victorian football advocates. Writing in 1887, the first serious historian of football, Montague Shearman, who was also the founding secretary of the Amateur Athletic Association and later became a prominent judge, pointed out that ‘there is no trace in the original form of [football] to suggest that nothing but kicking is allowed’ (1887: 260). Far from being a one-eyed partisan of rugby, Shearman was a member of Wanderers FC, the first-ever winners of the FA Cup.

Rather than engage in a search for football’s version of apostolic succession, it is more useful to view football historiography in terms of human evolution. Rather than being the direct ancestor of one code, folk football is related to soccer, rugby and the other football codes in the same way that apes are the common ancestor to chimpanzees, bonobos and humans.

The codes emerge

As is well known, most of the football clubs formed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards played a version of one or other public school code of football. Clubs in the Sheffield area played their own independent form of dribbling-style football, but this was clearly in the Muscular Christian tradition of the elite public schools. Whether it had originated at Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester or any other of the elite public schools, each code had its unique features, but by and large the similarities of the games were greater than their differences. Handling the ball was allowed in various ways in all public school codes of football. Eton’s Field Game football – often pointed to as a precursor of modern soccer – allowed the hands to be used to stop the ball. The same was true at Charterhouse, Westminster and Winchester, where it was also allowed for a player to catch the ball directly from a kick.

The scrum, viewed today as a unique feature of the rugby codes, was a central feature of football at Eton and Winchester. Eton’s ‘bully’ and Winchester’s ‘hot’ both involved large numbers of players forming groups to struggle for possession of the ball. Hacking, which is often thought of as a uniquely violent feature of football at Rugby School, was common at other public schools, where it was called ‘shinning’. ‘Shinning’, wrote an Old Etonian in 1859, ‘is carried out to such an extent at our public schools that it would be greatly increased’ if inter-school football matches took place (Bell’s Life in London, 1859: 5). The Eton Wall Game, in which two sets of continually scrummaging forwards attempt to propel the ball along a wall in a usually vain attempt to score a goal, bore great similarity to the Rugby School game. ‘We think we can trace in this very popular public school game the dim beginnings of Rugby football’, wrote an Old Etonian in 1895 (Country Gentleman, 1895: 1070).

Similarities could also be seen in the shape of the ball. The oval ball used at Rugby was no more nor less distinctive than the cylindrically shaped ball of Harrow or the small round ball of Eton. As with the rules, the balls of the various types of football were not originally as distinctively different as they would become. Indeed, it was not even until 1892 that the RFU actually specified that an oval ball should be used. Of course, it was a matter of public school honour to believe that its form of football was superior to all others and this led to vigorous debates in magazines and newspapers. But in reality the various types of football were far more alike than one might assume from the wide variations in the codes of football that we see today.

But to play matches against other teams required not merely similarity of rules but uniformity. When inter-club matches started to be played they were organised on the basis that the rules of the home team would be played. In 1864 the rugby-playing Leeds club played against the soccer-inclined Sheffield side, unsurprisingly winning at home and losing at Sheffield. Four years later Manchester brushed aside Sheffield by a goal to nil but lost the return match in south
Yorkshire by two goals to nil (Collins, 1998: 10–11). For obvious reasons, such arrangements were highly unsatisfactory and talk about developing a ‘universal’ set of rules became widespread. The issue had already arisen at Cambridge University when in 1848 students arriving from Eton, Harrow, Rugby and other public schools had attempted to draw up a common set of rules by which football could be played at the university regardless of schooling. No copy of the 1848 rules survives but an updated version of 1856 lays down 11 rules, which some have claimed to be the beginnings of modern soccer. But Cambridge’s rules allowed the hands to be used to stop the ball or to catch it, and also allowed ‘any player [to] prevent another from getting to the ball by any means’ apart from holding, pushing or tripping, hardly features of the modern association game (Cambridge University, 2006). But like every other set of rules for football that had been written down before them, the Cambridge rules existed only for its own club and found no support beyond its own students.

By 1863 the issue was no longer merely the concern of university students. The widespread desire to find a single common code of football led 11 London-based clubs to meet in October 1863 to discuss the formation of an association of football clubs that would agree a set of rules that could be played by all footballers, regardless of the schools that they had attended. It was not quite that simple. Pride in the rules that they had played at school caused many of the delegates to reject compromise. It took six meetings for the new football association to agree on a set of rules. And even this agreement was not accepted by everyone.

In fact, at the end of the fourth meeting on 24 November 1863, it seemed that a consensus had been arrived at when the representatives of ten clubs voted for a set of rules that included the following:

9. A player shall be entitled to run with the ball towards his adversaries’ goal if he makes a fair catch, or catches the ball on the first bound; but in the case of a fair catch, he makes his mark, he shall not run.

10. If any player shall run with the ball towards his adversaries’ goal, any player in the opposite side shall be at liberty to charge, hold, trip or hack him, or wrest the ball from him; but no player shall be held and hacked at the same time.

(quoted in Harvey, 2005: 143–9)

Running with the ball in the hands would be allowed and hacking would be legal. In short, the meeting had agreed to play football along the lines played at Rugby School.

The acceptance of Rugby-type rules seems to have concentrated the minds of those opposed to carrying the ball and E. C. Morley, who had just been elected secretary of the FA, proposed a motion to endorse Cambridge University’s rules, which did not allow carrying the ball or hacking. This was passed and a committee was set up with the Cambridge footballers. At the following week’s meeting, attended by only eight clubs, he left out of the meeting’s minutes the previous decision to endorse hacking. C. W. Alcock, who would eventually become the most influential secretary of the FA, proposed a motion to strike out the previously agreed rules allowing hacking and running with the ball. His motion was carried, meaning that the FA had approved two counterposed sets of rules in consecutive meetings (Bell’s Life in London, 1863: 3).

To no one’s great surprise, the clubs favouring rugby rules didn’t bother showing up for the following week’s meeting, which waved through Morley and Alcock’s non-carrying and non-hacking rules. The newly founded FA claimed 18 clubs as members, but it seems that at least six of them, such as Blackheath, subsequently left because they supported rugby rules. And even with its new rules, the FA still allowed the ball to be caught with the hands before it bounced and the catcher to take an unimpeded kick, similar to the ‘mark’ in rugby or Australian rules.
football. Even the Royal Engineers, who played in four of the first seven FA Cup finals, still played their own code of football that allowed running with the ball.

In truth, the formation of the FA made little immediate difference to the way that football of any code was played. Clubs playing rugby rules significantly outnumbered their rivals. Between 1868 and 1873 25 of the 38 major British football clubs played some type of Rugby rules. In the first issue of C. W. Alcock’s *Football Annual*, published in 1868 and the leading annual of the game for the next two decades, 45 of the 88 football clubs listed played according to the Rugby tradition. Thirty others played the FA’s rules and 13 played the Sheffield version. And of course some clubs played both or a combination of both. By January 1871, such was the dominance of the Rugby code of football that *Bell’s Life*, the premier sporting weekly of the time, pointed out that since the formation of the FA, ‘every year has increased the superiority in point of numbers and popularity of the Rugby clubs over those who are subject to the rule of the Association’ (*Bell’s Life in London*, 1871: 5).

Why did rugby initially eclipse other types of football? Although it is tempting to speculate how attractive each code of football was, the rise and decline of the fortunes of the different codes over the next 30 years suggests that there was more to a sport’s popularity than the contents of its rule book. Rugby’s prominence was in large part due to the supreme confidence of its adherents that their version of football was based on the Muscular Christian principles of Thomas Arnold’s educational philosophy and on the tremendous public profile generated for Rugby football by the success of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, published in 1857.

Rugby football was unique in that, alone of all the public school codes of football, it flourished among adult clubs. Eton, Winchester and Harrow codes of football did not become adult sports. The FA rule book was a conglomeration of football rules and preferences which, although it had some of the features of Eton and Harrow football, had no direct link to any public school game. While Etonian and Harrovian footballers were ready to sink their differences over football rules, the Rugbeians stood firm in their absolute belief in the sporting and moral superiority of Rugby football.

But, in 1870, rugby football felt its dominance to be threatened by the FA, which had organised two ‘international’ football matches that year between England and Scotland. Their feathers ruffled by Association footballers claiming to represent English and Scottish football, five Scottish rugby players challenged their English counterparts to a match under rugby rules. To organise an international match, and especially one that would demonstrate the superiority of the rugby code, a governing body was required.

Consequently in December 1870, Blackheath secretary Benjamin Burns and his Richmond counterpart Edwin Ash, published a letter in *Bell’s Life* to arrange a meeting to establish an association of rugby-playing football clubs (Collins, 2009: 20). The sense of common purpose that existed in the Rugby fraternity can be gauged by the fact that, while it took the FA six long meetings to reach a somewhat hollow agreement, the meeting that created the RFU on 26 January 1871 lasted a mere two hours.

**Soccer’s eclipse of rugby**

Although soccer and rugby now had separate governing bodies, there was still considerable crossover between the two codes. Many clubs played both, a combination of the two or their own variations. It was only when the football codes acquired a broader social significance, especially through local rivalries in cup competitions in the late 1870s and early 1880s – most notably the FA Cup – that the full codification and separation of soccer and rugby was consolidated.
By 1880 interest in soccer and rugby had spread to the working classes of the major British industrial cities, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, Cardiff and Glasgow. Here, football began to evolve into a mass commercial entertainment business. Rumours emerged that working-class soccer and rugby players were being paid to play. In soccer, concern over payments to players came to a head in 1884. Over 40 clubs in the north and midlands threatened to form a breakaway ‘British Football Association’ in support of payments to players. Threatened with a potentially disastrous split, the FA decided to accede to their demands and in January 1885 voted to legalise professionalism under strict controls (Russell, 2012).

Soccer’s move to open professionalism had a profound impact on rugby. Faced with the same problems as soccer in the industrial regions of England and Wales, the RFU decided that the FA’s experiment with professionalism was a failure and in 1886 declared rugby a completely amateur sport. All cases of professionalism were severely punished by players and clubs being suspended or expelled. This led to civil war with the working-class clubs in the industrial north of England, resulting in a split in the game in 1895. At precisely the point that ‘soccer mania’ was sweeping Britain, the RFU’s actions had created two distinct codes of rugby: union and league. League followed in soccer’s footsteps and allowed professionalism. Union zealously defended the amateur ethos and cherished its exclusivity. Neither form of rugby could counter the appeal of soccer.

Soccer was transformed by the legalisation of professionalism. The balance of power in the game tilted decisively in favour of clubs composed of working-class professionals and organised on commercial lines. In 1888 the Football League was formed, comprising the top northern and Midlands professional sides. Within half a decade, almost every soccer club in Britain was part of a league competition.

Professionalism and the league system gave soccer the appearance of being a meritocracy, unlike amateur sports where the selection of players and choice of opponents was often based on social status. The introduction of leagues meant that teams could be assessed objectively on the basis of their playing record rather than their social standing. As Jules Rimet, FIFA president and architect of the World Cup, would later write, soccer ‘draws men together and makes them equal’ (1954: 47). The game therefore broke from the amateur tradition of informal unwritten regulation based on social and recreational networks and moved towards a system of formal, written objective regulation. This allowed soccer to be played and administered by those who had no cultural or political affinity with Britain or its Empire. Hence for the European countries that established FIFA in 1904, soccer represented modernity, a sport open to all the talents regardless of social or national background.

Rugby and soccer in the anglophone world

What can rugby’s relationship with soccer tell us about the failure of soccer to become the hegemonic winter sport in the USA, Australia and other anglophone countries? In North America and the so-called ‘White Dominions’ of the British Empire – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa – rugby-based sports such as rugby league, rugby union, American, Australian and Canadian football became the dominant codes of football.

In the case of the USA, Markovits and Hellerman (2001) have argued that soccer was ‘crowded out’ of the US sport space. They make the case that it was baseball that became the professional mass spectator sport of the USA, occupying the space that soccer held in Britain. Furthermore, the elite US universities preferred a rugby-style game because of the social prestige rugby commanded, in contrast to soccer’s plebeian image. Soccer’s ability to play a central role in US sporting culture was further restricted by the emergence of basketball and ice
hockey. Ultimately, they attribute the failure of soccer to become the dominant form of football in the USA to a form of US exceptionalism.

There are undoubtedly significant insights in this approach. It is clear that baseball’s rise to prominence in the latter third of the nineteenth century is analogous to soccer’s emergence during the same period in Britain. But, in general, Markovits and Hellerman’s analysis is largely a description of the contemporary relationship between soccer and the ‘Big Four’ of the US sporting world and is based on a number of ahistorical assumptions.

For example, there is no historical law that specifies that only one commercialised mass spectator sport can emerge in any given sporting culture. In England, cricket in the industrial regions of the north and the midlands was both commercialised and immensely popular among the working classes. This did not prevent the emergence of professional soccer or rugby league. Indeed, the regions where cricket was the game of the masses – such as Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester and Leeds – were also strongholds of professional football and rugby. This was also the case in Australia, where cricket shares much of the same constituency and commercial imperatives as the popular mass football codes of Australian rules and rugby league. There is no historical reason why a summer sport such as baseball could not coexist with winter-based soccer.

Moreover, the fact that basketball and ice hockey became mass spectator sports later in the twentieth century begs the question of why these two sports, but not soccer, were able to command a place in the US sporting space alongside baseball and American football. After all, hockey, despite its popularity in the USA, is inextricably linked with Canadian national identity. Basketball in the interwar years was weak and riven by organisational and commercial disputes. Indeed, the history of soccer and basketball in the 1920s and 1930s is not dissimilar, as can be seen in parallel lives of the professional American Soccer League, established in 1921 before falling victim to the Great Depression in 1933, and the American Basketball League. It is often argued that soccer failed in the interwar years because it was fractious and fractured, but much the same could be said of professional basketball.

But, fundamentally, Markovits and Hellerman’s analysis is based on a misunderstanding of the football codes in the last third of the nineteenth century, the period in which American football established its hegemony in the USA. Contrary to Markovits and Hellerman’s assumption, soccer was not viewed as a lower-class plebeian sport for most of this period. Professionalism was not legalised in English soccer until 1885 and it was not until around 1890, following the formation of the Football League in 1888, that soccer crowds began to qualitatively outstrip those of rugby. Teams of players educated at elite public schools and universities dominated the FA Cup competition until 1884 and the England national team was predominantly composed of similar players until the turn of the century.

However, the relationship between the rugby and soccer codes until the late 1880s, in England and internationally, was the opposite of what it would later become. Rugby was viewed as the more popular of the two variants of football, both in terms of the number of clubs and the size of crowds. Thanks to the cultural importance of Muscular Christianity to the British Empire, rugby had quickly become the dominant code of football in the ‘White Dominions’. Even the distinctive form of football played in the Australian colony of Victoria, which would become known as Australian rules football, was derived from Rugby School football rules. The Southern Rugby Union was formed in Australia in 1874. Matches between Australia and New Zealand sides began in 1884 and tours to and from the British Isles started in 1888. The first British tour to South Africa took place in 1891. The Canadian Rugby Football Union was founded in 1882 and led the move from Rugby rules to a distinctively Canadian code of football.
In contrast, soccer found it difficult to establish itself on a permanent basis in the nineteenth-century anglophone world beyond Britain. This was not because it was viewed as suspiciously proletarian but because the Rugby School-based version of football had a far greater cultural weight for the British upper-middle classes who administered the Empire—and also for those who wished to emulate them in the USA and France. Rugby football carried with it the educational resonance and shared identity of Thomas Arnold’s Rugby School. It provided a key component of one of the most popular books of the mid-Victorian era, Tom Brown’s Schooldays. And it presented itself as the very embodiment of Muscular Christianity, an ideological underpinning of British nationalism across the globe. For the middle classes of the English-speaking world, the rugby code of football was not only fun to play and watch—although whether it provided greater fun than other codes could only be in the eye of the beholder—but it also had a much more explicit ideological and cultural meaning.

So, although, as in Victoria, Canada and later in the north of England, the original rules of the RFU were quickly modified and in many cases abandoned by American football’s leaders, the cultural significance of the sport remained. Soccer’s lack of a direct link with that ideological core gave it much less resonance in the anglophone world. And, paradoxically, it was that lack of an overt British nationalism that allowed the round-ball game to grow rapidly in the non-anglophone world in the first decades of the twentieth century.

So, in the period that American football established itself as the dominant winter sport in the USA, soccer had a weak international profile and cultural network. It was incapable of offering the strong and self-evident ideological framework desired by the rising anglophone middle classes who promoted football of all codes as an educational and moral force. By the time that soccer had developed a strong international network and ideological profile in the early twentieth century, American football already dominated US winter sport. This can be seen by the dates of the establishment of governing bodies for the football codes. Outside of the British Isles, only Denmark and the Netherlands had formed governing bodies for soccer before 1890. In the same period, governing bodies for rugby had been established in the British ‘Home’ nations, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, as well as for the rugby-derived codes in Australia and the USA. And, unlike soccer, international rugby matches were also being played across the hemispheres.

A similar point could be made about soccer’s lack of prominence in the Australian sporting firmament. Echoing Markovits and Hellerman, Roy Hay and others have argued that it was the perception that soccer was a proletarian sport that caused Australian middle-class sporting circles to embrace the more respectable rugby-based variants of football (2006: 168). But, as in the case of the USA, the popularity of Australian rules and rugby had been established in Australia in the 1860s and 1870s, well before soccer came to be associated with the British working classes. Even more so than in the USA, rugby and its variations offered a much more compelling narrative of British nationalism for the colonial middle classes who saw themselves as part of a ‘Greater Britain’ and football as the sporting expression of that nationalism.

Soccer’s inability to gain a foothold in the anglophone world beyond Britain can therefore be traced to rugby’s ideological and cultural prominence in the English-speaking sporting world in the latter third of the nineteenth century.

Towards a comparative history of the football codes

As the foregoing has suggested, the study of the development of soccer in the nineteenth century, particularly in the British Empire and North America, cannot be separated from the development of other football codes. There are two reasons for this. First, from a purely historiographical
perspective, to study any historical phenomenon in isolation and without broader context is to collapse into antiquarianism. Indeed, the endless collection of facts relating to one code of football to prove that it is the ‘true’ form of football common to amateur historians is increasingly found within academic sports study. Such an approach can tell us little about the dynamics of the development of football and nothing about the society in which the sport developed.

Second, contemporary observers did not share the rigid division between football codes that exists today. Rather than being seen as separate and individual sports in themselves, the Association and Rugby codes of football, along with the US, Australian and Canadian codes, were all viewed generically as ‘football’. Each variation had its own partisans of course but for the general public, these were minor variations. For example, in 1881 the US magazine Harper’s Weekly published an article on ‘foot-ball’ rules that claimed that the US ‘modifications are mostly technical, and have little interest to any but foot-ball players’ (Harper’s Weekly, 1881: 4).

Even in England, where the growing civic importance of the FA Cup and rugby’s county cups forced clubs to choose one code or the other in which to specialise, the gap between soccer and rugby was narrow enough for clubs to switch easily from rugby to soccer in the 1870s, such as Preston North End, and for players to cross codes in the late 1880s, such as dual soccer and rugby international John Sutcliffe. To impose today’s relationship between the football codes on that of the mid-nineteenth century is to look at history through the wrong end of the telescope.

But ultimately the failure to understand the historical relationship between soccer, rugby and the other football codes undermines our ability to understand the history of soccer itself. The ‘smooth arc’ narrative of soccer’s development from its folk football origins to the present day that is embraced by most journalists, antiquarians and historians obscures the problems that were faced and the obstacles that were overcome in soccer’s rise to globalism. An equivalent approach would be to write the early history of Christianity as if the Emperor Constantine’s aim was to create the Church of England. Nor can this ‘Whig Theory of Football History’ explain why or how soccer came to eclipse rugby, nor, conversely, why it failed to do so in most of the anglophone world. The need for a unified, comparative historiographical approach to the history of football applies equally to other codes. How can one study rugby union without rugby league, and vice versa? American football without Canadian? Australian rules without Rugby School? Gaelic without rugby or Australian rules? It is only when historians of sport put down the narrow spectacles of football partisanship that the full richness of the history of any and all codes can be fully investigated.

To paraphrase Kipling via C. L. R. James: ‘what should they know of football, who only soccer know?’.

References


Association and rugby football


