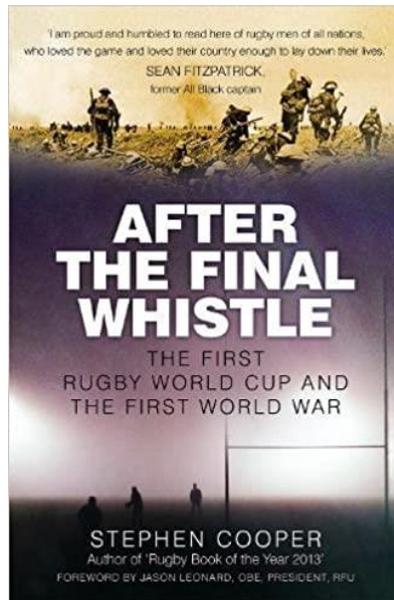
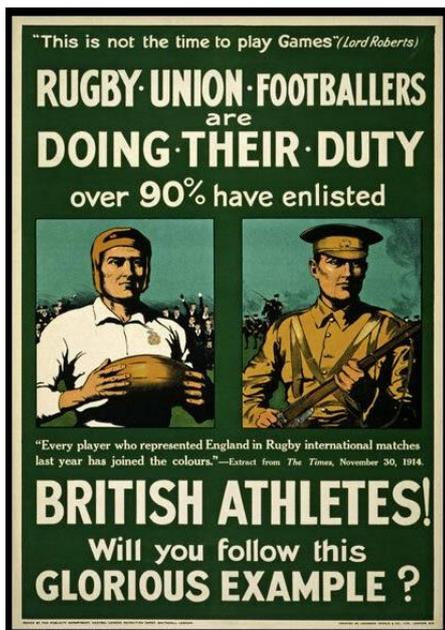


## The In & Out Club Library

6 August 2020



Some kind but anonymous philathletic bibliophile has very kindly given the Library a copy of Stephen Cooper's *After the Final Whistle*, sub-titled 'The First Rugby World Cup and The First World War'. It seems a fortuitously topical book to write about, since – with no Premiership clubs having played this year since March - BT Sport revealed today that it would show every Premiership game live until spectators are allowed back into stadia again, up to the final at Twickenham on 24<sup>th</sup> October. With the outbreak of war in 1914, rugger players were particularly quick to enlist, and rugby clubs generally to offer their help: 'British rugby's first act of war on 5 August, within twelve hours of its declaration, came from Birkenhead Park: it was the first club to offer its ground and pavilion to the military.'



By 8 August ‘a total of 8,193 men [had] enlisted... Many of the most eager were rugby players...’, and by the beginning of September all RFU matches had been cancelled. This was in contrast to professional football clubs, which continued to play in the face of popular criticism and derision, causing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to mention footballers specifically in a recruiting speech. It was not until 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1915 that the Football Association finally suspended the game, after spectators stayed away in disgusted droves, and the takings fell by upwards of 50%.

The book review for 14<sup>th</sup> November last year included Gavin Mortimer's *Fields of Glory: The Extraordinary Lives of 16 Warrior Sportsmen*, in which two Irish rugger players – Robert Johnston and Tom Crean – appeared; both were awarded the Victoria Cross in the Boer War, and Crean went on to fight in WWI. They turn up here, too, in *After the Final Whistle*, but rather than commanding a chapter each, their appearances are very brief; this is a book which deals with teams from all the nations of Britain, the Commonwealth and the US, with a section for France as well.



Shane Record, *Forever England*, 2014, oil on linen, 270 x 300 cm., RFU; detail

Teamship seemed to be relevant both to rugby and to the war. The point is made that in other sports the player is working for himself, whereas in rugger each player acts selflessly for his team, just as a soldier in war acts for his comrades and his country. It is made again in a painting commissioned by the RFU for the centenary of the First World War, in which an archive photo of the last England team to play before the outbreak of war is brought alive in oils on linen; the roses are greyed out on the shirts of the six men who died.



Silver ACME Thunderer whistle, 1908, New Zealand Rugby Museum

Another link informs the *jeu d'esprit* which opens the book, in a chapter entitled 'On rugby fields the whistles blow', where the history is traced of the engraved silver whistle which has blown to start every modern Rugby World Cup (except 2015) since it was presented to the Welsh referee Gil Evans in 1908. Another whistle – a trench whistle, 'taken in 1916 from the body of an officer in the Yorkshire Regiment by a German soldier; it was later returned to the regimental museum by his descendants and still bears the scar of a shrapnel splinter' – starts a centenary memorial match in March 2014, played 'under pre-War Laws'. And on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918, "Cease fire" sounded along the Western Front. This was the final whistle to a game that had lasted four long seasons'; although complete peace did not descend until the treaty with Germany was signed on 28 June of the following year, at Versailles.

Rugby had been recognized and encouraged before the war, and amongst military teams during it – the 'authorities attach much importance to it... as a great help in training and keeping men from getting stale' – and it was equally important afterwards for 'keeping a couple of hundred thousand home-hungry man contented.' Rugger games started again in the spring of 1919, with George V's King's Cup.

