

British team in 1930. The manager of the team, James Baxter, a toffee-nosed pukka Sahib of the old school denounced the wing-forward of the New Zealand 2-3-2 formation as a "cheat". The accusation, which was not ill founded — as Baxter pointed out, such a forward, playing under a referee who was indulgent, turned into a champion obstructionist — preceded a change in the laws of the game. This required that three men should pack in the front row of the scrum. Controversy racked all of New Zealand Rugby. The country, it was alleged had been sold down the river by the conniving British. A serious decline in forward play became noticeable.

When the 1935 All Blacks toured in Britain, they were outscrumped in many early matches and were made to learn, the hard way, that a forward's first duty was to bind tightly in the scrum, put his nose close to the ground and push like billyoh. The 1937 Springboks, though beaten in the opening test, cleaned out the All Blacks in the three-test series, winning the last match by 17 to 6, five tries to none; and they administered quite terrible hidings to Otago and Southland, provinces which were said to be the home of the best of New Zealand forward play of the time.

The decade of the 1930s was a soul-shattering time for all of New Zealand Rugby. Nor did the Maoris escape. They still played with bounce and verve. But the skills were not quite so pronounced. Their finest players were not quite so distinctive as during the 1920s.

The decline

Maori Rugby from the end of the Second World War achieved distinctions, suffered disabilities, became involved in the strife generated by the associations of New Zealand and South African rugby, was threatened for a time with extinction as an entity of New Zealand Rugby and finally, after traversing dark tunnels and mounting of the rocky roads with many a turning, emerged into the triumph of the expedition to Wales and Spain in 1982.

Let us first deal with the problems which so seriously threatened Maori Rugby as such. The first and worst was the match played at Eden Park on August 25, 1956, against Basie Vivers' Springboks. Very oddly, the New Zealand union arranged a four-match tour for the team in June and early July. The opposing sides, West Coast, West Coast-Buller, Nelson-Marlborough-Golden Bay-Motueka and South Canterbury-Mid-Canterbury and North Otago, were not of the first class and there were ominous signs that the Maoris might not be, too, when they beat West Coast only by 26-20 and South Canterbury combined by 18 to 15. As a curtain-raiser to the match with the Boks,

the Maoris played the new Counties team three days beforehand and won, convincingly enough, by 30 to 3.

But the fixture with the Springboks was torment from end to end. The Maoris were cut to pieces, 37 nil. Their apparently excellent backline of Keith Davies, Jimmy Taitoko, Bill Gray, Dave Menzies, Pat Walsh, Tom Katene and Muru Walters, saw nothing of the ball. The forwards were demolished. "Peewee" Howe, a brilliant flyhalf, whizzed at will past Taitoko, Walsh was no less uneasy in defence and Gray couldn't even catch a cold. It was a devastating experience which had a numbing effect upon Maori Rugby for a long, long time to come.

Two years later, Walsh captained the Maoris on a tour of Australia. On the face of things, the record of nine matches won, two lost and one drawn was satisfactory. In three internationals, Australia won at Brisbane, 15-14, the second test at Sydney was drawn, 3-3, and the Maoris won the final test Melbourne, 13 to 6. Walsh, Maurice Raureti, Gray, Teddy Thompson, Eddie Whatarau, Davis and, in the forwards, Albert Pryor, Howard Paiaaka, Bill Wordley and Munga Emery were all provincial players, or better, of merit; and Ron Bryers, who had been an outstanding member of Sonny West's Maoris who in 1949 had shared the three-test series while winning nine of their 11 matches, was to become an exceptional selector-coach in the Bay of Plenty, was well spoken of as a capable man on the job.

But the expedition was, despite its apparent success and the congenial relationship of the players with their manager, Frank Kilby, a misfortune. Play in many matches was exceptionally robust. Australians were angered when their Wallabies were unable to devour a team of less than full national strength. The tour ended in sourness. It was said by leading Australian administrators that they would not again welcome a Maori team.

This was an unpalatable experience. So soon after the loss to the Springboks, it generated a cooling of relationships at senior administrative level between pakeha and Maori. When, in 1959, a movement swept through the country in protest at the impending exclusion of Maoris, because of their colour, from the All Blacks who were to tour South Africa in 1960, many pakehas blamed the Maoris as the cause of all troubles. More than 20 years passed before a Maori team was again seen in Australia.

The visit of the team captained by Mac McCallion of Counties was fleeting — versus Queensland, drawn 18-18, New South Wales Country under floodlights won 22-3, and New South Wales at Sydney, won 15-12. But it would be impossible to rate too highly the diplomatic successes of its visit in 1979.

Queensland at the time were exceptionally strong, much too much so for most New Zealand provincial sides. To hold the side to a draw was an admirable effort. New South Wales were no sluggards, either.

Most decisively of all, the Maoris were well appreciated by the Australians. On and off the field, they broke down a great icy barrier and undoubtedly boosted the prospects for a major tour for a Maori team — prospects which turned into gold with the arrangements for the visit to Wales.

In between the trough which was the South Africa-Australia experience of the late 1950s and the crest which was the McCallion visit to Australia-South Pacific and the Paul Quinn visit to Wales, Maori Rugby at the highest level subsisted on a diet of Prince of Wales Cup matches followed by games against New Zealand provinces, return visits to Fiji and by Fijians, tours by Tongan and Western Samoan sides and, the great development, the inclusion of Maoris in the All Black teams which toured South Africa in 1970 and 1976.

As related elsewhere, the politics of these times were rough and tough for Maori Rugby. It was commonplace to hear sneering references to "our brown brothers" among leading administrators. Men of the mana of Norman McKenzie, famous as the sole-selector-coach of the great Hawkes Bay teams of the 1920s, had passed on or were no longer interested. Their absence was crucial. From intimate association with Maoris in Rugby, they could clearly see both sides of the story and were sympathetic to the problems of the Maori people. It was a difficult time.

Just as it would be impossible to over-stress the importance of the McCallion team's visit to Australia, so it would be impossible to overstress the value and importance of the visit to Wales. Long had the Maoris wanted a true place in the sun of world Rugby. Their encounters in South Pacific Rugby were often exciting, play was ardent, if not fierce and fine games by fine players were a consequence. But men of the experience of Ben Couch, Waka Nathan and other leaders could see that the Maori's right to a real identity in international Rugby was being withheld. On the strength of achievements dating all the way back to 1888, they deserved more.

The great triumph of 1982 was that, despite all vicissitudes before and during the tour, the Maoris departed to Wales with the support of all men of good will in New Zealand Rugby. They had marched for a long time through a valley of discord and troubles and petty animosities, they had been blamed for misdeeds not of their own making; and at the last, by steady going, had proved themselves as worthy not only of the great men among their forbears but of all that was best in Rugby.