

# Film Review

*The Ground We Won.* [Film]

Produced by Miriam Smith, Directed by Christopher Pryor. (2015). Aotearoa New Zealand: Victory Pictures

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Rugby and farming are so much symbols of national identity in New Zealand that it is good to have the opportunity of an unsentimental film, made by husband and wife Christopher Pryor and Miriam Smith, and self-confessed rugby outsiders, to offer a reflection of what one reviewer has referred to as “an overplayed mythology”. (Gosden, 2015)

**Evan:** I worked a summer season on a dairy farm in Waikete Valley next to Reporoa. That was in the 1950s and there have been huge changes in farming since then. Nevertheless this movie strikes as being absolutely authentic. There is no gloss: the farming background is starkly black-and-white real. It is not *Country Calendar* in its gorgeous technicolour and spectacular scenery, with happy farmers and contented animals. This is raw, unvarnished country

life that townies rarely get to see.

We see the relentless routine round-up of the herd for milking in dismal fog and rain. We are taken into milking sheds and see cows relieved of heavy udders. I missed seeing the raised tail and a large deposit of manure splatter on the concrete which is also usually part of the scene. We see preparations for winter feeding and the planting of fodder crops, and the feeding out. (This means eking out the food saved for winter, such as hay and silage, and apportioning out the growing fodder crops using a moveable electric fence, as shown in the film poster.) We see the mindful care of animals in harsh conditions: the coarse but kindly assistance at a difficult calving; and raising calves taken off their mothers. We see ordinary

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blokes, farmers, having to act as god, making life and death decisions.

Against this background, the Reporoa Rugby Football Club provides its farmer members with an outlet of activity in which all sophistication is lost. The film is uncouth to the extreme with non-stop swearing, binge beer drinking, and crude bonding rituals. The responsibility farmers have for heavy-duty decision-making can be shelved during the rugby match: play to win, within the rules, and play hard, and, with the game over, party hard. The hard game of rugby demands rules, and they must be known and followed; and, as we see with a dad who coaches the junior rugby team, this is firmly inculcated in the next generation.

While it appears that there are no limits to activities during the after-match play time, it seems to me that there are unspoken rules such as no physical cruelty and mates are to give supportive encouragement. Sadly, there seems to be no awareness of the organic damage of excessive alcohol use, of the difficulty facing an addictive personality trying to avoid such abuse, of the pressure this hard play places on family budgets and the potential for damage to relationships within the family.

Just as the film portrays farming in its black-and-white harshness, with no softening of reality, so it presents its protagonists — Peanut, Slug, Broomy, Socks, etc. — in their honest reality, but with no judgement. It simply tells it as it is. In this sense, this is great fly-on-the-wall, warts 'n' all reality. I recommend this movie, but go prepared to have your sensibilities disturbed.

**Isabelle:** At one point whilst watching this movie I almost walked out, but, in the end, I lasted the distance. Why did I almost walk out?

Well, it is an accurate reflection of part of the New Zealand rural male culture which I wish were different. It is enormously male! It's rugby and beer, but not racing. There is almost a complete absence of women in this film: some cheer on the Reporoa team at the final match, one drives the bus, and a group make sandwiches in the club rooms. Then there is the stripper! I do not know if this stripper would actually go to Reporoa or not. I nearly walked out because of the extreme male domination portrayed in this film: it was disturbing because much of it is accurate.

There are some positives. Regardless of the result of the match and the amount of beer drunk the night before, the cows have to be milked each morning, and calves need help to be born whether they are dead or alive. Farmers are dedicated to their work and this film shows this to be true. Some aspects of cattle farming are brutal to watch on screen — as is the male bonding in the changing shed.

Another positive, which is also poignant, were the scenes involving a man with seven-year-old twin boys. As someone who grew up from the age of six without my mother, I could relate to these boys also growing up without a mother. I remember making my own boring jam or cheese sandwiches before I went to school. Both my dad and the dad in this film were, in the main, “good enough” parents, but the lack of any feminine influence in the home is the bother. The dad in the movie was good with his boys and made a point of getting them to wear clean undies. This and other moments in the film included some very funny lines.

This film generates much food for thought. On a personal level, and given my particular family history and circumstances, it was evocative. More broadly, it shows what is sometimes

seen to be the backbone of our country — and yet it is partial. There are many great rural women who, at least in this film, get very little acknowledgement. Each and every All Black has had to start by playing in teams like Reporoa or Rangiora, and these are largely male preserves. Of course, I recognise this, and acknowledge that the producer of the film is a woman; nevertheless, I think that the film could and would have been richer with more women, and a more feminine — even feminist — influence.



## References

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- Smith, M. (Producer), & Pryor, C. (Director). (2015). *The ground we won* [Motion picture]. Aotearoa New Zealand: Victory Pictures.

**Evan Sherrard** is a retired psychotherapist who began his career as a Rural Field Cadet (following the path of Wilson Whineray, a well-known rugby man, and, to date, the longest serving captain of the All Blacks), with lots of hands-on farming experience and a degree in agriculture. He learned the pastoral care of farm animals before changing to training as a clergyman and the pastoral care of people, going on to become a psychotherapist. Although not caught up in rugby, he has a strong empathy with the farmers of Reporoa. He was the foundation teacher of psychotherapy at Auckland Institute of Technology (before it became a university), and a teaching member of both the international transactional analysis and psychodrama associations.

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