

Opening extract from
**For Poulton and
England - The Life
and Times of an
Edwardian Rugby
Hero**

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Preface

Two factors in particular compelled me to write this book. The first is that, when I first stumbled upon the story of Ronald Poulton Palmer some three decades ago, it soon became apparent that he ticked the essential qualifying boxes to become one of my sporting heroes. He was an extravagantly gifted athlete whose outgoing and charismatic personality attracted and lifted the spirits of all those he met or who saw him play rugby football. He also died young. It is sometimes glibly fashionable to regard an early demise as a suitable career move for a public icon with pretensions to immortality, if only because it leaves less time for any feet of clay or decrepitude to tarnish the image. At the same time there is a poignant dimension to any life cut short, both in terms of ‘what might have been’ and in the sense best encapsulated for me in the scene in Mike Nicholl’s 1970 film of Joseph Heller’s seminal novel *Catch 22* in which the lead character Yossarian, in bed with a ‘lady of the night’, describes Nately, a now-deceased member of his US Army B-25 air crew, as old. The woman responds, “Old? But I thought you said he was young” and Yossarian replies, “Well he was dead, and you don’t get any older than that.”

At that time, with my brothers and some friends, I was editing an amateur small-circulation sports magazine. In a reaction to some of the cynical ‘professional’ fouling, and other symptoms of what passed for sporting culture in the 1970s, I had chosen to launch myself upon a series of articles entitled *The Corinthians*, featuring outstanding sporting heroes who had combined brilliance with a devotion to gentlemanly etiquette and fair play. Whilst scouring early 20th Century histories of cricket,

tennis, golf, soccer and athletics for suitable candidates, I came across a reference to Oxford's record-winning margin of 35-3 in the rugby Varsity Match of 1909, courtesy of five tries from one R.W. Poulton. From that small seed grew the sapling of what turned into something of a lifelong hobby.

The second factor, and the one that provided a foundation upon which to build, was *Ronald Poulton* (Sigwick & Jackson), the biography published by his father, Professor Sir Edward Bagnall Poulton in 1919. Only two books have ever physically reduced me to the point of tears. One was *The Woodlanders* by Thomas Hardy, specifically the last chapter, and the other was Professor Poulton's. Even discounting the fact that it must have formed part of a loving family's grieving process, it stands as one of the finest testaments to a human life that I have read – all the more so because in it the author succeeds in his stated goal to broaden the general public's perception of his son as merely what today we might call a 'sporting jock'.

My 1979 magazine article on Ronald Poulton came into the hands of *Guardian* journalist Frank Keating, who took it to his sports editor, and as a result – around the ninetieth anniversary of Ronnie's birth – an edited version appeared in that newspaper. Shortly afterwards I received a letter from Richard Reiss, a nephew of Ronnie's Oxford friend Stephen Reiss, and we corresponded briefly on his family's connection with the Poulton legend. The following year I happened to read a letter in *The Times* from a gentleman named Harold Yoxall, reflecting upon the infamous England v Wales match at Twickenham of 16th February 1980, in which referee David Burnett of Ireland sent off Welsh flanker Paul Ringer for a late tackle on England fly-half John Horton. In it Mr Yoxall mentioned that he had been watching England matches since 1905, a statement which prompted me to write to him, via the newspaper, to ask whether he might have seen Ronald Poulton in action. After an agonising gap of several days Mr Yoxall responded by confirming that indeed he had. His father had taken him to Queen's Club for the 1909

Varsity Match and also to several pre-First World War internationals at Twickenham. We subsequently met several times and, prefaced by his jovial caveat “you must appreciate that my memory is failing”, talked extensively about his still vivid memories of rugby and other sports of that period. Mr Yoxall, head of the London office of *Vogue* for over forty years and sometime chairman of Condé Nast, was a lively conversationalist who remained a keen golfer over nine holes whilst pointing out that, at the age of eighty-four, he was now “rapidly running out of playing partners”.

The same year I happened to make contact with Ronnie’s nieces Margaret (Peggy) and Pauline Garnett – later, by marriage, Jay and Hunt respectively – with whom I also had short but fascinating discussions about the legacy of his memory within the family. Over two decades later, during which I had done little relevant to the story beyond noting references to Poulton in the media and making occasional visits to his and other Commonwealth War Graves Commission graves in Belgium and France, I found myself with some spare time on my hands and decided to see whether I could find anything new or interesting in the various archives and other sources that had become available. This volume is the result.

Besides thanking my parents, family and friends generally for their encouragement and support, I find myself in particular debt to the following, without whom this volume might not have seen the light of day: Jeremy Thompson of Troubadour Publishing, for his patience and advice; my brother Jon Corsan, for his invaluable graft, suggestions and companionship on innumerable research trips; Anthony Stileman, for his art direction, creativity, photograph management and unfailing enthusiasm; Adam Norton, for the editorial work and advice which at one stage ‘got me back on track’; Robin Edward Poulton, Peter Jay, Martin Jay, Tim Lyle, James Garnett, Virginia Bottomley, Sally Poulton, Richard Symonds and Ann Spokes Symonds – all, in one form or another, descendants of ‘the family’ – for their assistance, advice and

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PREFACE

Lastly, my apologies: to those whose expertise, published works, copyrighted material or recollections I may have inadvertently misrepresented, misquoted or plundered without acknowledgement; to those whom, now or in the future, I may mislead by having stated uncorroborated or erroneous facts; and most particularly, to those whose lives and memories I may have failed to do justice.