



## Roberts, Ian (b. 1965)

by Linda Rapp

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Australian rugby superstar Ian Roberts was renowned for his amazing combination of hard-hitting physical play and remarkable agility and finesse. At the height of his athletic career he made the courageous decision to come out as a gay man. The handsome former footballer has embarked on a second career in acting.

A native of Chelsea, England, born July 31, 1965, Ian Roberts spent only a few months in his homeland before his family moved to the town of Maroubra in Australia.

His early memories include sneaking into his sister's bedroom at age seven and kissing the photo of Les McKeown in the Bay City Rollers poster pinned to the wall over her bed.

Roberts first fell in love with another boy when he was twelve. "It felt pretty intense even though, at the time, I didn't properly understand why," he stated.

The boys spoke of their feelings for each other during sleep-over visits. "It felt so powerful, the whole experience," Roberts recalled. "Knowing for sure what I was didn't bother me because it felt so right and natural, the love we had and just the way we bonded. It was hard for us, though."

He was fearful that his parents would realize his sexual orientation and also that he would be branded a "pooftah" at school. To compensate for his homosexuality and his epilepsy, Roberts became an athlete and excelled at sports. Ironically, he noted, his high school coach always made him an example of a hard-playing, manly sportsman even while he was having romantic affairs with other athletes on school teams.

Roberts's prowess at rugby led to a professional career, and he soon established himself as a superstar in the sport. He started in 1986 with South Sydney. In 1990 he joined the Manly team.

Roberts played prop, a member of the front line whose job is to stop opposing players. Backs are more often the glamour players and goal-scorers, but Roberts won respect for his vigorous work on defense. A six-foot-four-inch mountain of strength, agility, and determination, Roberts was a force to be reckoned with. He was praised for his "heart"--the willingness to put everything into the game, to hurl himself over and over against opponents and crush them, to risk his own welfare for the good of the team. Roberts consistently demonstrated his heart, combining power and finesse in exceptionally skillful play.

At the same time, Roberts was following his heart to Oxford Street, Sydney's gay center. He had been frequenting mixed clubs there since he was in his late teens. The mixed nature of the clubs allowed the still-closeted Roberts to socialize with other gay men but to appear part of the trendy mainstream. He even bought a delicatessen on Oxford Street and served there during his playing career.

Roberts publicly came out as a gay man in 1995 after posing nude for the first issue of *Blue*, a gay magazine.

He stated that the hardest part of coming out was telling his parents. This occurred when they summoned him home after hearing rumors that he was gay and asked him to deny it. When he did not, they took the news very badly at first but eventually came to be supportive.

Roberts called revealing his sexual orientation to his parents "the hugest weight I've ever had lifted off in my life." After that, he was able to drop the pretenses that he had adopted to conform to the image of a macho athlete. Until then he "would always have a girl on [his] arm" at league functions and even had sexual encounters with women although, he said, he had "never, never been sexually attracted to a female."

Despite his public charade, he called his homosexuality "one of the worst-kept secrets" in the league and said that his fellow athletes were generally unsurprised and supportive in the wake of his announcement.

Public reaction was also largely positive. Roberts had to endure derogatory taunting from some people attending his games, but he reported that strangers came up to him and congratulated him on his honesty in coming out.

Although the decision to make a public statement brought Roberts peace, it was not an easy one. Agents warned him that he could lose endorsements, be unable to continue his charity work with children, and indeed perhaps see his entire career ruined. These dire events did not occur, probably in part because of his well-established reputation as one of the most powerful, hard-working, and respected players in the game and a favorite with fans.

Roberts stated in 1997 that he knew of other rugby players who were gay but closeted. He neither condemned them for their choice nor outed them, but said, "I just want to let younger people know that hiding things is not the way to live your life. You don't have to go through that torture."

Shortly after his dramatic coming out, Roberts became involved in a drama of a different kind. He received a telephone call from Arron Light, one of the children he had met during his charity visits to hospitals. Light had kept in touch sporadically, and so Roberts knew that the teen was "a bit of a wild child" who took drugs and had wound up at a boys' home. At the time of the call, Light was on his own and desperate, living in a derelict house with several other young men.

Roberts took the boy in. He insisted that he stop using drugs, return to school, obey a curfew, and call his parents twice a week.

Some six months later, Roberts was shocked when police informed him that he had been under surveillance because Light had previously been the victim of a pedophile ring. The police explained, however, that they knew that Roberts "had played a critical role in providing support for Arron" and hoped that he would be the one person who could convince him to press charges and testify against the men.

Roberts secured Light's cooperation, but after that the boy's behavior changed for the worse: he dropped out of school again, went back to drugs, stole from Roberts, and returned to a life of prostitution on the streets. Eventually he was arrested in Sydney and insisted that the police call Roberts to come and get him. The police were perfectly willing to agree to such an arrangement, but at that point Roberts declined to take further responsibility for the youth. Shortly thereafter, in late 1997, Light went missing.

Four years later, Roberts was devastated to learn that construction workers had discovered Light's body in a shallow grave. The police surmised that he had been stabbed to death a short while after being released from the station.

Roberts deeply regretted not having taken Light in again. "I was the last person that child cared about, and I was the last person to turn my back on him," he said, although, realistically, there is probably little that he could have done to control the young man, who was eighteen at the time.

When Roberts received the call from the Sydney police, he had just moved to Townsville to become the captain of the North Queensland Cowboys of the Super League as well as co-coordinator of league charities. He was unsure how he would be received in the small northeastern city and was pleased by the positive response of his teammates and the community.

Also in 1997 a book about Roberts's experiences and decision to come out, *Finding Out*, written by Paul Freeman, a friend and the photographer who had taken the pictures that appeared in *Blue*, was published. "What the book tries to explain," said Roberts, "[is] that there are as many different types of homosexual people as there are variations and types of women, as there are heterosexual men . . . a real cross-section."

Roberts retired from rugby in late 1998 after an illustrious career that included nine appearances for New South Wales in the State of Origin games and thirteen in Test Matches with the national team. After leaving the playing field he continued his association with the sport, serving two seasons on the National Rugby League's judiciary committee, which rules on whether athletes have committed acts of foul play.

Roberts then embarked on a second career by applying to the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), whose distinguished graduates include Mel Gibson, Geoffrey Rush, and Cate Blanchette. He emerged from the highly competitive selection process as one of twenty-six people out of over 1,300 applicants to be accepted for the program in 2000.

As a student he appeared in numerous NIDA stage and film productions, including the short feature *All Tomorrow's Parties* (2002). The ten-minute film, shot in one take by NIDA students on a very limited budget, won a place at the Cannes Film Festival.

Roberts made his television debut in 2003 on the Australian series *White Collar Blue*, in which he played the muscle-man for a crime boss.

Roberts was to have had his first appearance in a commercial film in *Eucalyptus*, a Russell Crowe-Nicole Kidman vehicle that wound up being scrubbed. With the demise of the project, he signed on with *Dancing with the Stars*, one of the country's most highly-rated television shows. Somewhat improbably, Roberts and his partner, Natalie Lowe, reached the finals in April 2005.

Paul Malone of the *Courier-Mail* noted that "the scorn of one or two of the show's judges towards Roberts's good-spirited efforts during the series have been ill-concealed," but the audience loved him, and their phone-in votes kept him on the show as the eventual runner-up. Roberts called the experience "a wondrous journey because of the public vote."

Roberts will make his feature-film debut in Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns*, scheduled for release in the summer of 2006. The handsome actor will play Riley, one of villain Lex Luthor's sidekicks.

Roberts has a tattoo on each of his extremely muscular arms. One represents his awareness of and commitment to the need to help others: "24,000 people die every day of starvation." The second is more personal: "A life lived in fear is a life half-lived." By having the courage to come out as a gay professional athlete, Roberts conquered his own fear, went on to great success, and stands as an example to those still plagued by fear.

"All I can do is to be the best person I can be, take responsibility for my own actions. If you do that, you make a statement," he said. "Hopefully one day everybody can appreciate that love is love in whatever form it comes along."

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### **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com).