

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth Century Britain

**Review Number:**

1432

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 13 June, 2013

**Editor:**

Brett Bebber

**ISBN:**

9780719087042

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

224pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719087042>

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

John Griffiths

This volume, a collection of essays written by academics based in North America, Britain and Europe, is a good example of how far leisure history has travelled since this historical sub-discipline first gathered momentum in the 1970s. Where once leisure history was invariably approached through the framework of 'social control', seen for example in Peter Bailey's seminal monograph, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885* (1), leisure history is now less likely to be welded to such ideological moorings and floats more freely, approached through frameworks such as the 'body?', 'gender?', 'masculinity?' and 'femininity?' or perhaps the ways leisure reflects aspects of national or regional identity. Whilst this shift is partly due to a newer generation of historians working in the field, it is also certainly due to the shift in the attitudes of the British middle class to leisure by the 1920s and 1930s. In the 19th century they had had concerns that leisure was not often a blessing to the working class. By the 20th, they too were also enjoying the leisure boom, both as producers and consumers of commercial leisure, and were perhaps less condemnatory of the use of spare time. As the leisure historian Stephen Jones once noted, in the realm of arts, music and dancing, during the inter-war years, 'all social groups came together in their leisure'. This is not to suggest that social control is an irrelevant concept in the context of the 20th century, for while leisure was provided by the voluntary and commercial sectors, it was increasingly directed

and facilitated by national government in its guise as both policeman and provider. The policing of popular culture continued in the shape of the 1906 Street Betting Act, for example, and popular leisure time pursuits (such as drinking) were also curtailed by the state in the Great War. In the inter-war years the state attempted to halt the encroachment of American popular culture, seen in the context of the Royal Commission and the subsequent Cinematograph Films Act (1927), which insisted on a percentage of British films being shown in the cinemas of the Empire. The emergence of the BBC under state control was also a feature of the inter-war era. The tendency for the state to intervene in order to 'prevent' did not disappear after 1945 either, particularly in the context of the permissive society and its aftermath, with government initiatives to curb football hooliganism in the 1970s and 1980s and to suppress counter-cultural cannabis consumption after 1967. By contrast, a series of more enabling acts in the 20th century encouraged those who wished to participate in the kind of rational leisure of which the Victorian middle class would have approved. The Right of Way Act (1932) and the Access to the Mountains Act (1938) were measures designed to aid rambling and trekking. The introduction of paid holidays for employed workers (1938) facilitated the already popular seaside holiday and also saw (as a counter to the dreaded Blackpool landlady) the rise of the holiday camp (with the dreaded Red Coat), the golden age of which was probably witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s; before package holidays took the working-class to sunnier climes. In this sense, the state effectively 'stood in' for the middle class, who had invariably pushed such initiatives in the previous century. In any given year, however, the holiday for most citizens was a special event, and this volume instead focuses in the main on rather more frequently enjoyed leisure pursuits.

The essays included in this collection certainly reflect the diversification of leisure history. They are organised chronologically from the 1920s to 2000 and focus on very different types of leisure activity, from the public to the private, the legal to the illegal. There are three themes used to group the essays: 'social conflict and leisure regularisation', 'standardisation of leisure' and 'national identity and leisure', outlined by the editor in his opening chapter. These do not form sub-sections of the book, but rather are embraced to some extent by each contributor. In the first chapter Jeffrey Hill notes, in a very entertaining overview of leisure's treatment by historians over the last few decades, that interest in leisure has been paralleled by the rise of both sports history and more recently the heritage industry. Sports history, perhaps like leisure studies, has had to combat the rather conservative tendencies within certain sectors of the academy (the Rhodes Boysons) who believe that the history of sport is not 'credible' history. Significant way-markers on the road to changing opinions here were provided in the work of Tony Mason at the beginning of the 1980s (the history of football) and Richard Holt (*Sport and The British: A Modern History*) at the decade's close. (2) Holt's work showed that, at its best, the history of sport is ultimately the history of wider societal development. Hill also draws attention to the more recent burgeoning of the heritage industry, particularly on television where many citizens learn their history (for better or worse). There is a nice discussion of programmes such as the BBC's *Flog It!* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* In the case of the latter, the criticism has been made that it is celebrity culture meeting genealogy, depicting easy history without the slog. To give television history its due, recent historical series such as Jeremy Paxman's *Empire* and *The Victorians*, and other recent contributions from Jeremy Black, Tristram Hunt and Andrew Marr, can be usefully be brought into the lecture room to provide a clip to illustrate a point. (Even *Who Do You Think Your Are?* includes some academic comment). History as represented on film is also discussed and the tendency to put a good story or an elevation of a myth before historical accuracy in the effort to achieve a box office hit noted. Hill also usefully signposts the areas of 20th-century leisure history that still need to be considered in book and article form; to take two examples, the largely unexplored decade of the 1960s; (we need to interview people who lived through this decade before they pass, despite the maxim that if you remember the 1960s you weren't there), and the way in which British leisure was replicated in the wider/British Empire/influenced world.

Three of the essays in this collection engage with notions of British/English identity and the reaction to and challenges posed by international culture in the realm of leisure. Allison Abra examines the evolution of popular dance in the inter-war decades, noting that many of the popular dance styles arrived from either the Southern States of North America (black dances) or Latin America. In the post-1918 reaction to four years of war, dancing grew in popularity and concern was voiced that many dance-hall patrons were unconcerned

whether they danced correctly or not. Professional dance teachers tried to steer dancers to particular types of dance (for both aesthetic and financial reasons) but it was invariably public taste which dictated which type of dance would be in fashion for a particular season. As attending a dance-hall was, for many, a means to an end (to meet the opposite sex), replicating the dance as prescribed by dance tutors was often ignored. Perhaps one organisation that could be mentioned in the context of forging identity in this period is the Imperial Society of Dance Teachers of whom Victor Silvester (discussed in the essay) was a member.

Anglo-American rivalry is also at the heart of the contribution by Sandra Trudge Dawson, who, in her examination of the revival of the circus as a historically 'English' phenomenon in the inter-war period, notes that it was depicted as such in the face of the encroaching American popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s in the United Kingdom. The leading players in the revival of the circus were Maurice William Disher, drama critic for the *Daily Mail*, the newspaper of choice for the little Englander, and William Bosworth, a circus enthusiast who founded the Circus Fan Association of Great Britain in 1934. Portrayed as a democratic institution by such figures, the circus stood in opposition to the rise of totalitarianism on the European continent by the mid-1930s. The circus was democratic because it was comparatively cheap to attend. All classes apparently attended the venue, although there were cheaper and more expensive seats to keep the classes apart (Very English!) The numbers of circuses in operation rose four-fold between 1921 and 1945, indicating that the British public embraced the circus in the middle decades of the century. Yet the rebirth of the circus was not without its accompanying controversy. Another aspect of English (British?) identity has had the welfare of animals as a chief concern. Circuses had to prove they kept animals in humane conditions; a battle that has ultimately been lost. During the war years, travelling circuses became popular as a result of the 'holidays at home' initiative, instigated by the state. At some point in the year the circus would come to you - no need to take a car to see the circus. Yet here too, the circuses met resistance. They invariably left a mess after they left town, incurring the ire of rate-payers and councils and the notion of itinerancy (a Victorian concern) was still a bugbear for some critics. Were circuses even English in the sense of who they employed? Many entertainers journeyed from Europe to perform, which problematised the image of the circus as quintessentially 'English'. The origins of the circus are, of course, by no means undisputedly found in England either, as Dawson notes.

Kelly Boyd's contribution examines the transference of the Western from its inter-war popularity in the cinema, to the small screen in 1950s Britain. A generation of adults and children were entertained by a raft of programmes that focused on the American frontier. They were seen as a 'safe' vehicle for ethical problems to be raised, since they focused on a land across the ocean and an expanding white frontier that was not British. It is a genre, of course, that declined in the 1970s and 1980s to a point where dramas of this nature have disappeared from our screens, politically incorrect in multi-cultural society. The three essays taken together show how certain aspects of North American culture received moral approbation whilst other aspects were met with outrage or at least concern.

Three further essays in this collection by Brad Beaven, Brett Bebbler and Chad Martin explore the regulation and contestation of leisure. Beaven explores British working-class cinema going in the 1930s, tempering the view that cinema was simply a societal tool used to pacify and indoctrinate the working class in a turbulent decade. Some historians have suggested that films such as *Sing as We Go* were popular and prevented unemployed workers from turning to radical or violent solutions and rather encouraged a passive acceptance of the economic situation of the 1930s with a hope for better times. Exploring the composition of the audience and its behaviour once inside the picture halls, it is evident that the viewers had considerable agency to shape both the kind of films shown and how the message or moral contained within a film was received. While some of the other contributions to this collection note the adoption of American values in the inter-war era, Beaven observes that in a reverse process Hollywood began to make films that focused on the British Empire in the mid to later 1930s. These films were successful, not necessarily because the British still saw themselves as an 'imperial people', but that they just enjoyed swashbuckling adventures, set against a fantastical background.

Bebbler's exploration of football hooliganism, and Martin's of cannabis use and government intolerance of its consumption, sheds light on the state in action. In a decade of social change, the post-war moral

certainties and the image of the family as the bedrock of this morality were apparently threatened. In the context of a weaker economy, the end of Empire and, ironically, only two years or so after England's winning of the World Cup at Wembley in 1966, football became the vehicle for youth to demonstrate their anger at social and economic conditions. For others, a bit of a punch up had always spiced up the sporting afternoon and reflected a longer standing culture of the free-born Englishman's right to partake of rough leisure. Youth culture had, after all, since at least the later 19th century incorporated gang rivalry, and the fierce protection of one's own patch. Increasing disorder on match-days heightened the perception of parental laxity and the breakdown of the family. Interestingly, the divorce rate increased at the beginning of the escalation of football hooliganism. Indeed, this relationship did not escape some politicians at the time. Football had been comparatively untouched by the state since its growth in the later nineteenth century. However, in the face of disturbances, Harold Wilson's Labour government of 1974-6, introduced the Safety at Sports Grounds Act (1975), which introduced new policing measures to deal with trouble-makers and also changed the architecture of stadia, most notably the introduction of the ultimately fatal pens, that were designed to prevent pitch invasions, but which would be at the heart of the Hillsborough disaster 14 years later. Football hooliganism also provoked a discussion at government level of the role of the family. It was a useful card to play on the part of the government, invoking a golden age of football crowds (probably the 1950s) when fathers had taken sons to the game. It handily deflected attention away from the state of the economy as a contributory factor. Increasingly, families were absent at football matches in the face of the colonisation of games by young males, though initiatives were started by Arsenal in the 1960s and Watford Football Club in the 1970s, designed to allow younger children to watch the game without being subjected to obscene language or buffeting by the crowd.

Chad Martin explores the consumption of cannabis and the state's increasing intolerance of the intake of this substance from the early 1970s to the current time. Cannabis has been a political football from the later 1960s onwards. Despite inquiries such as the Wotton Committee (1967) which recommended the relaxation of laws against the taking of the drug that had been on the statute book since the 1920s, ultimately the laws were not altered. Roy Jenkins, who had been sympathetic to reform, was replaced at the crucial moment by Jim Callaghan at the Home Office. Whilst Jenkins the academic was in tune with permissiveness, Callaghan, a Baptist and trade unionist, was not. His conservatism blocked reform, despite leading cultural figures of the time calling for change (the Beatles for example, who allegedly smoked it in the toilets of Buckingham Place when they went to collect their MBEs in 1965). By the early 1970s, cannabis was classified as a class B drug and, while easily obtainable in Europe (at Dutch coffee houses), it was demonised by successive British governments on both Left and Right. Cannabis came to 'stand' for permissiveness and a target for the Thatcher backlash from 1979 onwards. The consumption of cannabis was popular amongst the Afro-Caribbean community and members of this community, under suspicion of carrying it, were the targets of police stop-and-search tactics in the early 1980s. These rather heavy-handed policing measures were a contributory factor to the inner-city riots that engulfed English cities in 1981. By the 1990s, however, police were far more likely to caution for possession than arrest and in the early 2000s under Tony Blair the drug was downgraded to class C, although Claire Short was reprimanded for suggesting its legality. In an effort to appear tough on law and order as an election loomed, Gordon Brown subsequently elevated it back to class B status in 2007. Martin concludes that given the relatively light policing of the drug by the turn of the century, permissiveness has ultimately 'won out' in this case.

In the final contribution to the volume Cecile Doustaly provides a survey of women's leisure in the 20th century, with special consideration of recent decades. Where women are concerned, the notion of 'leisure' in the 20th century has proved more problematic for the historian than used in the context of men, given that once married, spare time is often those minutes snatched between domestic duties. The life-cycle has been explored by historians such as Claire Langhamer, and Doustaly reiterates this notion in the context of the 1960s onwards, although more detailed research is needed into the post-1960 experience. One popular post-war leisure institution for women was (and is) the bingo hall, often staged in defunct cinemas. For working women since 1970, leisure time has still been rather limited, with the working married woman still having to balance work, domestic duties and child care. However, since 1970, there have been some significant shifts in gendered leisure patterns. Women's pub attendance has risen since the 1970s, stimulated in part by the

rise of the gastro-pub in the 1990s, while more men now go to bingo halls. Fitness has escalated as a leisure pursuit whether taken in mixed or female-only gyms. Shopping figures as a popular female leisure activity as well. Both sexes enjoy (perhaps in each others company) watching television.

Leisure for women is still perhaps most clearly identified in the context of pre-married life, and over the last two decades, more people are living the single life for a longer period. Retired women's leisure is given shorter shrift in the chapter. Doustaly notes that women may end up living for some years after the death of a spouse on a limited pension, without access to leisure and without family near them to offer support. Placed alongside this rather sad image is, however, a more positive one, where retired couples (or widows) move to smaller villages, participating in a range of village activities such as wine-tasting, bowling clubs, dinner-clubs, theatre clubs and the Workers Educational Association. The latter institution has shifted its profile substantially in the last thirty years, now offering courses for the purposes of 'learning for leisure'. The Women's Institute is also still a significant club in which mature women participate.

This collection of essays is a valuable contribution to leisure history. It deserves to be included on reading lists and study guides relating to 20th-century leisure and sports history courses. Such is the nature of the essays, they also deserves inclusion on wider survey courses that consider the interaction of sport and politics conceived of as spelt with both a small and large 'P/p'. The book also points the reader in the direction of the other monographs published in the *Studies in Popular Culture* series issued by Manchester University Press - a series which includes titles written by some of the contributors to this volume. For the uninitiated the book might be usefully read in conjunction with Jeffrey Hill's 2002 text, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (3), which provides useful timelines to put the essays in this collection into better context.

## Notes

1. Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885* (London, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863-1915* (1980); Richard Holt, *Sport and The British: A Modern History* (Oxford, 1989).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jeffrey Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1432>

### Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/66686>