

Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain

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In October 2001 the IHR organised a one-day conference, 'Historians on Sport', inviting the editor of the *New DNB* to give the keynote address. Brian Harrison happily confessed to a poverty of sporting knowledge, but readily conceded the centrality of sport to our understanding of the changing nature of British society over the past two hundred years or more. Assembled to hear Harrison were specialists in the history of sport as well as those who, like the plenary speaker, have come late to the field. The more jaundiced sports historian might suggest that too many of the late arrivals have been dragged there kicking and screaming. Nevertheless, the conference confirmed what a growing number of historians were already well aware of, that in Britain the history of sport has at last come of age. Not that there has been, with sport studies still a buoyant recruiter, a dearth of students discovering how and why their chosen subject has come to secure such a prominent place in all our lives, whether we like it or not. More recent is the phenomenon of sport establishing its credentials as an appropriate topic for historical inquiry within what might loosely be termed the mainstream curriculum. For obvious reasons sport could scarcely be ignored by social historians, and yet for too long it was rarely studied in its own right: in contrast to North America and Australasia, multi-disciplinary sport studies departments remained very much the focal point for historical investigation. Unlike their colleagues in sociology, with certain notable exceptions, British historians were hesitant to pick up the ball and run. With hindsight this is baffling - try teaching the history of New Zealand without reference to the unique role of sport within both Pakeha and Maori cultures. Or nearer to home, imagine a panoramic view of industrial life in either the Pennines or the Welsh valleys that failed to encompass the respective contributions of rugby's twin codes. The significance of sport in comprehending the dynamics of class is of course signalled strongly throughout *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, its author implicitly - or

even explicitly - acknowledging that a sea change has occurred in British historiography. It's no coincidence perhaps that Ross McKibbin is an Australian, and his invitation to the IHR conference signalled the book's success in repositioning sport and leisure at the heart of any discussion of social stratification in mid-century Britain.⁽¹⁾

Within the British Isles the history of sport is still sufficiently young as a sub-discipline for its pioneers to remain active and productive. Two key figures over the past two decades, Richard Holt and Tony Mason, recently combined forces to construct a carefully nuanced but very informative overview of the postwar era, *Sport in Britain, 1945-2000*, a worthy successor to Holt's pioneering essay, *Sport and the British*.⁽²⁾ Martin Polley, prominent amongst a younger generation of British sports historians, had previously produced a largely thematic commentary upon the events of the past half century: *Moving the Goalposts* eschewed straight narrative, its discourse constructed around discreet explorations of sport and class, nation, ethnicity, finance, and gender. Like Holt a decade earlier, Polley took the opportunity to reflect upon the state of the art, generously acknowledging the contribution of enthusiasts beyond the academic community (note my reluctance to describe the latter as 'amateur' - not surprisingly, sports historians were the first to trace the adjective's rapid transition from ultimate accolade to definitive insult).⁽³⁾ Polley's textbook reflected sports scholarship's healthy interaction between history and sociology, with the latter discipline invariably setting the intellectual agenda (witness the contribution of Eric Dunning to the 'civilising process' debate, and Jennifer Hargreaves' pioneering work on women and sport). That heavy debt to sociology is readily acknowledged by Jeffrey Hill, in his extended essay upon the British at play across the full stretch of the twentieth century.

Hill is in a unique position to write on sport and leisure, having succeeded another founding father, Wray Vamplew, as Director of De Montfort University's International Centre for Sports History and Culture. Not only does he head a major focal point for the study of sport in Britain and Ireland (hence Leicester hosting the IHR conference), but he boasts an enviable familiarity with most facets of cultural theory. In consequence, Hill can engage sympathetically with the more unsettling charges of the postmodernist sceptic while still maintaining, in his own words, 'a fairly traditional empirical approach' to his subject. Unlike Polley, or Holt and Mason, Hill embraces the full panoply of sport and leisure provision, tracing a nation's capacity to enjoy itself from the Indian summer of manufacturing industry at the start of the century, through to the 'post-Fordist' society that so enthusiastically embraced globalisation and the communications revolution at the end. In this respect Hill has more in common with influential commentators on nineteenth-century leisure, such as Hugh Cunningham and Paul Bailey, and he duly acknowledges their importance, along with that of Gareth Stedman Jones, in identifying class tensions over leisure within late Victorian society. Thus Bailey's thesis of 'rational recreation', depicting a guilt-ridden bourgeoisie fruitlessly encouraging the semi-educated masses to spend their precious spare time in worthy self-improvement, is seen to cast a long shadow over more recent attitudes towards publicly-funded recreational provision.

Hill takes nothing for granted, and he spends some valuable time at the outset defining his terms, not least his three keywords: 'leisure', 'sport', and 'culture'. He avoids a semantic minefield, reminding his reader that the simple Victorian concept of 'leisure' as being any time other than when working (or sleeping, as refined by the Eight Hours movement) has proved remarkably resilient. Hill offers a succinct and informed critique of this simple definition, noting that for the unemployed many non-working hours are by no means recreational, and that contemporary work practices and attitudes to work, blur the edges. Importantly, he points out how issues of gender and race have encouraged a less hardnosed approach to our understanding of leisure, citing research on the experience of British Muslim women constrained by prevailing socio-cultural attitudes.

Hill establishes his working definitions while at the same time revealing how much his methodology owes to Weber and Veblen at the start of the century and the French structuralists nearer the end. Sport and leisure are processes that have an all-pervasive influence over even the least athletic member of the community. Thus, 'The practices and texts of sport and leisure exist not simply as something shaped by other forces, but as cultural agencies with a power to work on their participants and consumers ideologically . they are processes from which we derive *meaning*.' [author's italics] Drawing on 'this eclectic ensemble of

philosophical postmodernism' (Bourdieu, Barthes and Baudrillard are joined by influential American cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz; and somehow or other the umbrella even extends to Gramsci, 'a postmodernist *avant la lettre*'), the author invites his reader to explore these 'practices and texts' in a variety of contexts, most predictably in his discussion of the cinema. Hill's capacity for intuitive and refreshingly jargon-free deconstruction is seen at its best in the chapter on the 'holiday as a cultural text', not least when he leaves Barthes behind and, flying solo, skilfully decodes a riding school leaflet picked up on holiday in Malaga. More of this would have been welcome, and yet too much could easily have undermined the primary purpose of the book.

This is after all a textbook, and in terms of organisation, design and presentation it fulfils its task admirably. As the title suggests, this is a volume that ranges far and wide, but the information contained within is easily accessible. Three self-contained parts - 'Commercial sport and leisure', 'Leisure, the home and voluntary activity', and 'Public policy: the role of the state' - cross-reference neatly, and the constituent chapters each offer a valuable introduction to study of their chosen topic. In other words, this is as good a place to start as any, not least because Hill tells you where to go next. Each chapter is broken up in to key sections, boasts full and helpful footnotes, and concludes by listing the key texts drawn upon in the preceding discussion as well as a one-page 'Chronology of events'. An annotated bibliography is equally informative, even if the relentless praise might have given way to an occasional burst of Marwickian spleen (albeit for the author wholly out of character).

Anyone teaching British social history would have little hesitation in recommending Hill's book to her/his students. Having said that, its strength is also its weakness with regard to its credentials as an undergraduate textbook. Hill is unashamedly discursive and reflective, offering a clear exposition of relevant sociological, anthropological and historiographical debates. There is an overarching discourse, and as such students are encouraged to think for themselves. This is of course wholly laudable, but the downside is that when it comes to content, individual chapters are not always as comprehensive as one might expect. No doubt the author had a Palgrave editor repeatedly whispering 'word length' in his ear, but there are moments when one is left crying out for more. This feeling of being short-changed is compounded by the problem encountered by any commentator on contemporary Britain, that of being overtaken by events. This is clearly the case with regard to television, not least coverage of sport, but the minimal treatment of post-war radio is less excusable. A similar complaint applies to the press and sport, but it would be carping to list every omission as the strengths so heavily outweigh the weaknesses.

Thus, where Hill does discuss television and sport he explains for the lay person how cricket has been remoulded by the demands of the cameraman and the programme scheduler; and in explaining how the mass media can deliberately trivialise a sport he offers a chilling reminder of just how much damage the BBC inflicted upon rugby league in the 1960s (for younger readers of this review, outside its northern heartland rugby league was synonymous with Eddie Waring, a jokey and eccentric commentator whose catch phrases were easily mimicked, not least by the impressionist Mike Yarwood on his prime-time TV show). Hill writes of a 'discourse of sport', with the capacity to shape social attitudes, and here the role of mass media is of course critical.

The flag of cultural studies flutters bravely as he moves beyond print and broadcast journalism to explore the less obvious influence popular literature has exerted on a mass audience. Not surprisingly he focuses upon cricket, with familiar names such as Cardus, Arlott, and James looming large. He notes the timelessness of Wodehouse's *Mike*, a feature of so much cricket fiction until the Packer revolution of the 1970s. Some of us may lament the unpardonable absence of any reference to Roy Race and the rest of the Melchester Rovers side (it would be interesting to know if *Tiger's* Charlton-esque cover hero predated the 1958 Munich plane crash); but the brief aside on comic book heroes notes the presence of Alf Tupper, 'The Tough of the Track', alongside *Sergeant* Braddock VC in the *Hotspur* - clearly something was happening in Fleet Street basements in the early 1960s to signal the demise of *Eagle's* officer class, role-model heroes.

After a decade of Ealing comedies and stiff upper lip war movies, similar stirrings were evident in the film industry: witness the northern-based social realism that signalled a fresh decade and fresh attitudes.

Nevertheless, Hill emphasises the inherent conservatism of British cinema, with its capacity for self-censorship, and at moments of commercial and critical uncertainty, its readiness to fall back on unthreatening 'feel good' films like *Notting Hill*. Hill qualifies his claim that, 'as a leisure form, cinema in Britain worked successfully as a force for conservatism', suggesting that the jury is still out on the extent to which film operated 'as a means of social control'.

Of course the late S. G. Jones argued persuasively that interwar cinema was a powerful agent of social control, and Hill similarly points to the films of Gracie Fields as a conscious morale-boosting vehicle at the height of the Depression. Arguably Fields deserves closer attention than she attracts here, not least because she was the first genuinely multi-media star: she triumphed in films and on stage, as well as selling records and sheet music in unprecedented numbers. She attracted voluminous newspaper and newsreel coverage, and like all great stars her fall was rapid (marrying an Italian on the eve of war, thereby opting for Capri over Rochdale, and later being upstaged by Vera Lynn and Ann Shelton). Hill can call on the likes of 'our Gracie', George Formby, and Hugh Grant as ready evidence that commercial films in Britain have rarely taken risks; but perhaps he overstates his case, ignoring those directors capable of achieving box office success without sacrificing their radical credentials, notably Lindsay Anderson, Ken Loach, and Mike Leigh.

As already suggested, the chapter on holidays is excellent, and here there really is an abundance of useful information: witness the quantitative and qualitative appraisal of interwar holidaymaking. Hill shows how, contrary to popular assumption, British seaside resorts remain remarkably resilient, not least because of their capacity for reinvention whenever a terminal crisis looms. He makes an interesting observation that, unlike the early 1960s, when lower middle class families venturing abroad planned for every eventuality (the AA supplied drivers with street by street directions for touring France - I recall my father dumping his voluminous instructions just outside Calais), modern tourism is a de-skilling phenomenon as so many travellers have everything done for them.

Predictably, the most disappointing chapter is on youth culture, notwithstanding a sensitive treatment of Richard Hoggart's despairing view of the threat posed by milk bars (and Macmillan) to the finest values of an industrial working class well in to its twilight years. Historians rarely write well about rock'n'roll, Arthur Marwick being a prime example. Sociologists are only marginally better, although Simon Frith remains an obvious exception. One problem is a lack of empathy, and another is a failure to read the best writers. Thus, Hill gives punk only a passing mention, which isn't surprising given the absence of Jon Savage and Greil Marcus from the bibliography. In truth there is almost nothing on music, while the 'drugs problem' attracts only brief mention (again the absence of contemporaneity). While rightly calling for more 'bottom-up history', the author is clearly happier analysing how the great and the good have repeatedly agonised over 'young people', but singularly failed to come up with any answers. In the late 1950s, for example, the Albemarle Committee generated plenty of worthy suggestions, yet never thought to consult anyone under the age of 25. To be fair, although reluctant to immerse himself in sex and drugs and rock'n'roll, Hill does demonstrate his talent for offering a fresh perspective on familiar territory. Nowhere is this more apparent than when exploring gender issues, for example his argument that for much of the past fifty years youth culture has been a male-dominated phenomenon.

Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain fulfils a useful role in tackling a presumed undergraduate deficit in cultural capital. Jeffrey Hill pulls off a difficult task, prompting debate among his peers in a number of key areas, while at the same time convincing his student audience that the story of a nation at play can be both interesting and intellectually challenging. Provocative and illuminating, polemical and instructive, Hill's book is genuinely engaging, sending the reader off in a number of different directions. In this respect it fulfils its remit admirably, and the author is to be congratulated on his skill in maintaining throughout the volume a rare blend of empirical inquiry and postmodernist commentary.

Notes

1. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

In actual fact illness prevented McKibbin from giving his lecture.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Richard Holt and Tony Mason, *Sport in Britain, 1945-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Richard Holt, *Sport and the British. A Modern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Martin Polley, *Moving the Goalposts. A History of Sport and Society Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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