

Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds

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In the year of the XXIX Olympiad in Beijing it is perhaps timely for us to revisit the philosophy which inspired Pierre de Coubertin to develop the Olympic Movement, and its more familiar expression through the modern Olympic Games. Muscular Christianity, the theme of John J. MacAloon's edited volume (2007), is just that ethos. [\(1\)](#) MacAloon's recognition of the importance of this principle, both historically and sociologically, informs the ten essays that make up this collection.

MacAloon, a significant figure in the study of the modern Olympic Games, offers us a predominantly sophisticated and fascinating set of essays from a relatively global perspective (with the notable absence of Africa - the continent where the colonial dimensions of the original muscular Christian projects were very much focused). Written by a collection of historians and anthropologists, these essays explore the status of muscular Christianity today. While no longer an explicit philosophy, the traces of sport as moral crusade are tracked in these papers. Each essay begins from the premise that the muscular Christian ethos emerged from the novel *Tom Brown's School Days* by the Victorian Christian socialist Thomas Hughes (and to a lesser extent his contemporaries Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice). It is important to note here that we are not talking about the educationalist and headmaster of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold, to whom Coubertin mistakenly attributed the work of Thomas Hughes and who he claimed as his inspiration for founding the modern Olympic Games. This is the original muscular Christianity from the Victorian Christian socialists, of whom Hughes was just one. They fought for the Factory Acts, and taught working-class boys how to box, as much as they did Oxbridge hopefuls how to row. Readers would do well to keep Coubertin's error and its transformative effects in mind when working through this volume, as it explores the ways in which the

muscular Christian ethos still gets re-read and altered as it travels through time and space. These papers move between explicit analysis and contextualisation of Thomas Hughes's seminal text, to more ethnographic considerations of value-centred sport. The essays tack between the history and legacy (both explicit and implicit) of *Tom Brown*. Although it would have been helpful if the editor had presented a clearer direction to the reader as to why the text is organised in this way, each essay successfully speaks for itself.

In 'Introduction: muscular Christianity after 150 years', John MacAloon walks us through why muscular Christianity is an important concept for those who are interested in both the history of sport and in cultural history more generally. Rather than simply commemorating Thomas Hughes, MacAloon seeks to re-present the ideas of the original Christian socialists as a challenge to the presumption that muscular Christianity was a hyper-masculinist, chauvinistic and self-righteous expression of Victorian imperialism. He follows C. L. R. James's positive take on this ethos, rather than the more conventional narrative stated above and accepted by most 20th-century scholars of sport. One must be careful, as MacAloon is, to avoid conflating muscular Christianity with the 'games ethic'. It was Christ's manliness, not just manliness *per se*, that inspired the Christian socialists like Thomas Hughes - and Christ should not be underestimated. MacAloon seeks to take seriously not just the muscular and the socialist, but also the Christianity that underpins this philosophy. This is a surprisingly radical move for a sport scholar, in a field that tends to veer towards the secular, but perhaps less radical for a text that was compiled in the US during the end of the G. W. Bush administration. Indeed, one of the most compelling examples that MacAloon provides as to the continuing significance of the muscular Christian ethos is an explication of a *Newsweek* article from the 2000 Bush/Kerry presidential campaign. This piece of journalism explored the influence of the politicians' prep school and Yale educations that provided them with a 'version of the "gentleman's code of muscular Christianity"' (p. xv). Anyone who has followed US politics over the last decade cannot fail to recognise the significance of manliness and Christian morality in the public rhetoric of that nation's leaders.

MacAloon's project, however, is a deeply intellectual, rather than political, one. It argues, following the influence of C. L. R. James, that we should explore:

the transformations of muscular Christianity around the world to break free of the simplistic binary of colonial hegemony and resistance and into new logics of hybridity and indigenous appropriation (p. xi).

This is an ambitious project that the essays in this collection do both more and less successfully.

Speaking of the logics of a kind of hybridity, MacAloon must be praised for his attention to the question of gender. Unfortunately, this parsing out of the distinction between muscular and manliness is not followed through in most of the essays in this collection (with the exception of Millikan). In his acknowledgments we discover that a number of women were involved in the conference that led to this volume. It would have been a great addition to this collection to have heard some of these female voices, both in authorship and in the topics analysed. The history of sport is still a field very much dominated by male scholars exploring male experience; the opportunity to explore female dimensions of the muscular remains under-developed in this volume. Despite Millikan's valiant effort to provide us with a welcome relief to all that manliness, it seems that as with almost all sports scholarship, the discipline is still at the 'add-women-and-stir' (2) stage. It is arguable that the fact that most sport is still marked as male/masculine adds a level of complexity to this issue few have yet to work through successfully. Perhaps we should be talking about masculine Christianity and not muscular Christianity! Despite MacAloon and Millikan's successful efforts, more work still needs to be done to tackle this problem.

The first contributor to this volume is the Olympian, historian and social activist Bruce Kidd. His essay 'Muscular Christianity and value-centred sport: the legacy of Tom Brown in Canada' explores the history of *Tom Brown* as both a novel and a pedagogical model in Canada in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He then

goes on to present us with a grounded account of the role of sport as education for citizenship and social responsibility in contemporary Canada, further allowing him to explore the Christian dimensions of muscular Christianity, as well as the questions of morality and values that still permeates amateur sport in that country. This allows for a consideration of the ethical context in Canada that informed responses to Ben Johnson's Seoul Olympics doping scandal.

Moving to the other side of the Pacific, but staying with the transformative effects of *Tom Brown*, we have Ikuo Abe's 'Muscular Christianity in Japan: The growth of a hybrid'. While a little less cogent than some of the other papers in this volume, anyone who is interested in how it is that cultures so seemingly different as, say, Britain and Japan can compete in the Olympics with a shared commitment to the ethos of fair play and sportsmanship should read this paper. Abe argues that it was the influence of Japanese Christians, inspired by Hughes and Kingsley, who developed a 'hybrid' form of bushido that contained a muscular Christian ideology. Once again we see that the ethos is transformed and reformed as it travelled, carried by those inspired by a book written, seemingly, for children.

Robert Foster's 'From Trobriand cricket to rugby nation: The mission of sport in Papua New Guinea' is one of the stronger pieces in this volume. Almost every undergraduate in socio-cultural anthropology has had the pleasure of viewing Leach and Kildea's 1975 ethnographic film *Trobriand Cricket*. This film shows the people who were studied by one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology (and the practitioner who developed the participant observation method), Bronislaw Malinowski, and their adaptation of the missionaries' game. Every student who views this visually stunning documentary should read Foster's essay to truly appreciate the social and political contexts that made it possible to film. It should debunk some of the conventional narratives that surround this film, notably those which MacAloon described as the 'simplistic binary of colonial hegemony and resistance' (p. xi). Foster goes back and explores the political and economic goals of those who staged the cricket match for the film-makers, putting the final nail in the coffin for the noble savage image that the famous film suggests. But his paper goes further than this, and explores the way in which rugby has come to play a significant role in the nation-building projects of contemporary Papua New Guinea.

Whether Yoga is the least or most manly of sports is open to much vigorous debate. However, few would argue that it is in any way Christian. So it may seem surprising that anthropologist Joseph Alter makes an argument surrounding the influence of muscular Christianity in India in his essay 'Yoga at the fin de siecle: muscular Christianity with a Hindu twist'. He recognises that there is a link between the body and morality that can be seen is something like a muscular Hinduism. To fail to see this is a colonial distortion. For those who are interested in sport and empire, this is an important observation. Indeed, the role of sport and empire is tackled by J. A. Mangan in his paper which revisits a now classic example from his book *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (London: Frank Cass, 1998). This historical account is certainly interesting, and helps explicate just how the muscular Christian ethos was carried out 'on the ground' in Victorian imperial contexts. This is a well-worn path by Mangan, and could certainly provide a useful introduction for those not familiar with his work.

In yet another Indian context we return more directly to the text of *Tom Brown* in historian Boria Majumdar's 'Tom Brown goes global: The "Brown" ethic in colonial and post colonial India'. Once again we are asked to consider the role of sport, morality and education. Majumdar argues for a 'Brown ethic', an adaptation/appropriation of the games ethic of muscular Christianity, first in the service of challenging caste prejudices in sport in the 1880s, and as part of the emerging nationalist Indian identity towards the end of the colonial period. Much like Foster's analysis of Trobriand Cricket, we see that sport, often through its moral and spiritual rhetoric, can play important roles in post-colonial nationalist projects.

Indeed, MacAloon argues that it is also politically important in post-imperial Britain. He points out that through the British reaction to the takeover of cricket by South Asia, racial integration in British football, and the winning of the 2012 Olympic bid that combined classical games ethic themes such as youth moral development, urban renewal and class peace through sport, there has been a renewed significance, if not a hidden dependence, on muscular Christian ideology (p. xiv). Although MacAloon does not explicitly

propose a project that will explore these issues, this collection would have benefited from an essay that considered some of these themes from the British perspective. He rightly observes that in the areas of education and sport examined in British scholarship today there is some uncertainty as to how to proceed under the now maturing post-imperial condition of contemporary Britain. While his contributors point to the cultural, social and political significance of sport and morality, MacAloon also touches on the important role it has in sports scholarship. A longtime advocate for more careful scholarship in the study of sport (3), he again implies a frustration shared with Anthony King (4) that the study of British sport lacks needed theoretical sophistication. I would concur with MacAloon here, especially given the decline of Marxism and Cultural Studies in British history and sociology. A serious consideration of muscular Christianity as an under-riding ideology could be one solution to this seemingly analytic paucity. His edited collection explores the historical and anthropological iterations of this ideology around the world, but, sadly, fails to come home and tackle the question from a British angle. An essay out of the British sport academy that sought to answer MacAloon's long-standing criticism would have benefited the collection immensely.

Rather than turn to Britain, the volume instead moves back to the Americas with John Kelly's account of baseball in the Caribbean, especially Cuba, in 'Baseball and decolonisation: the Caribbean, 1945-1975'. This paper explores sport organisation and the complex international relations that the dreams of professionalism can bring. Bearing in mind that amateurism was at one time a fundamental principle of moral and ethical sport (especially within the Olympic Movement), a consideration of the relationship between professional sport and muscular Christianity is a useful addition to this volume. This solid essay provides us with an account of baseball in the decolonisation era and its significance in neo-imperial US policies of race and economics.

In the US Matthew Millikan explores the role of women within the context of a muscular Christian ethos. As noted above, this paper, 'The muscular Christian ethos in post-Second World War American Liberalism: women in Outward Bound 1962-75', is an essential contribution to this volume, and it uses the example of the Outward Bound movement, an organisation with British origins, that uses rock climbing, sailing and other physical activities of outdoor adventure, to emotionally and physically challenge the participants in order that they may realise their inner strengths. Originally posited as masculine a programme as any of the other sports thus far examined, the movement was originally about turning boys into men. However, in the 1960s this changed. Millikan argues eloquently that there is a transformation into a co-educational programme that emphasises humanistic principles and inner strength. If we want to know where muscular Christianity exists today, Millikan provides us with a compelling example.

Alexander Dent's 'High ropes and hard times: wilderness and the sublime in adventure-based education' continues this theme set by Millikan in what is the most theoretically sophisticated paper in this collection. He uses the concept of the 'sublime' to explore how adventure-based education can change the mode of consciousness of young people who experience it. He focuses on the 'high ropes' and 'low ropes' obstacle course and the student's narratives following their completion of these sometimes terrifying and challenging activities. From an anthropological perspective it benefits from being the only piece in this collection based on first hand participant observation. From 1989 to 1996 Dent volunteered as an instructor in an adventure-based education programme that worked with disadvantaged urban youth from New York. As a result, it contains evocative ethnographic descriptions that make it a pleasure to read. This paper will be especially of interest to those who study the relationships between youth, sport and education. Thomas Hughes (and perhaps Thomas Arnold, also) would have been particularly enthused to see the ways in which a morally infused 'sport' (or perhaps more properly speaking, physical activity) attached to a social movement of sorts (Outward Bound) has a transformative effect on disadvantaged youth.

As should now be apparent, the concept of muscular Christianity has shifted and changed through time and space. On the whole these papers do an excellent job of describing not only how and why this happens, but why it is as significant for us today as it was in the Victorian era after Thomas Hughes wrote his tale of life at Rugby school. The importance of the ethos and tradition of muscular Christianity should not be underestimated by anyone interested in engaging in sociological or historical analysis of sport, for its themes of fair play, morality, youth development, and sociality through sport permeate texts written on sport, from

both the left and the right, and continue to influence people across the globe, in both colonial and post-colonial contexts.

But for those who are interested in the broader significance beyond the study of sport, there is also much to take away. This volume presents accounts of cultural change, appropriation, adaptation and ideology that have shaped the lives of millions of people through the experience of colonisation and beyond. For many, sport is the new religion. We should take this claim seriously, not just as a reflection of devotion and community, but also in terms of its potential as an ideological frame. Max Weber taught us that the Protestant ethic was the ethos that laid the foundations for the modern world. But what came next? The time has come to take seriously just what role muscular Christianity played, first as a principle of imperialism, but also as an ethos for creating socially and morally virtuous citizens of both nations and the world. MacAloon certainly suggests that this is necessary, and this text should generate lively debate as to whether sport does indeed play such a role.

Notes

1. A disclaimer: I have worked closely with John J. MacAloon (as my academic advisor), as well as some of the contributors, for a number of years. While this review is intended as an objective analysis of this text, it must also be read as an 'insider's' perspective. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. This was a phrase used by feminists critical of some of the methods of the women's movement. It was taken up by Anthropologists in the 1980s to critique the work of the two previous decades that had sought to explore the experiences of women, but had failed to develop a more sophisticated analysis of gender. See H. Moore *Feminism and Anthropology* (Minneapolis, 1988). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See J. MacAloon 'The ethnographic imperative in comparative Olympic research' *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 9 (1992), 104-130. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See A. King, *End of the Terraces* (London, 1998) [Back to \(4\)](#)

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