

**'IMPOSSIBLY ELITIST AND SNOBBISH':
AMATEURISM IN CANTERBURY; 1850-1880:
THE EXAMPLES OF AQUATICS AND ATHLETICS**

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With the exceptions of cricket and thoroughbred racing, no sports for men brought to Christchurch, the leading town in Canterbury, by colonists from Britain were more popular before 1880 than rowing and athletics. The class-based definitions of amateurism that were taking shape in English aquatics and athletics during the mid-Victorian period, and the attitudes underlying them, also survived the long sea journey to colonial New Zealand. However, this paper argues that attempts to introduce these ideals into the same sports in a community on the colonial frontier faced considerable difficulties and were quite probably doomed to failure.

Confusion reigned in English sport over precisely what constituted an 'amateur'. A variety of opinions emerged within rowing. E.D. Brickwood, the leading author and commentator on aquatics, considered in 1866 that amateurs could only be educated professional men at various stages of their intellectual and 'moral' development.¹ The influence of a growing body of oarsmen who had been imbued with the nascent 'amateur ethos' while undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge increased steadily throughout the period as they gained control over more clubs and regattas. They were firmly convinced 'victory should be its own reward' and that an oarsman could not race against professionals or for money and remain an amateur.²

Brickwood, the 'Oxbridge set' and many others believed that no oarsman could be an amateur if he earned his living as a waterman, through any occupation involving boats or by any other form of manual labour. Thus 'mechanics rules' were formulated by the organisers of many regattas to exclude as 'professionals' those employed in manual occupations. Various attempts were made to justify such actions. The muscular development gained by physical labourers through their work allegedly gave them an unfair advantage over others engaged in sedentary vocations. Moreover, the experiences of various English aquatic organisations, particularly the influential London Rowing Club, with North American oarsmen and domestic watermen at regattas suggested that 'artisans' were likely to cheat. All of the notions of 'amateurism' outlined above were merely the 'opinions of individuals', observes Halliday, and there existed no 'authoritative voice which others would be prepared to accept'.³

Those administering and participating in athletics were no more successful in constructing a definition of an 'amateur' that would win general acceptance. According to John Lowerson: 'Athletic competitions were an almost indispensable part of every mid and late Victorian charitable festival, town or village celebration and, at every level beyond Sunday school sports, were widely advertised for individual as well as club entries and offered prizes'. Pedestrianism also flourished during this period. These contests for cash prizes between professional athletes, frequently of working-class origin, were based on stamina and brute strength as much as on skill. They were also characterised by gambling, cheating, doping and fouling.⁴

Before 1880 no central body existed within athletics that could formulate an authoritative definition of an amateur acceptable to all involved in the sport. The most significant effort was made in 1866 by the 'influential Amateur Athletic Club' (AAC), which existed 'to afford as completely as possible to all classes of Gentlemen Amateurs the opportunity of practising and competing versus one another without being compelled to mix with professional runners'.⁵ In order to remove any lingering doubt over their intentions the AAC adopted in 1879 the definition of an amateur recently formulated by the stewards at the Henley Regatta.⁶ Thus, they excluded any competitor who was or had ever been 'a mechanic, artisan or labourer'. Working class competitors, it was believed, enjoyed an unfair physical advantage derived from their work and would inevitably cheat if admitted.

The exclusion of working class athletes was copied by several other clubs in and around London, but it was challenged by clubs in the north of England on the ground that the exclusion of genuinely amateur proletarian athletes was unjustified. This sentiment took concrete form in 1879 with the establishment of the Northern Counties Athletic Association, which accepted all bona fide amateur athletes regardless of class. The conflict was only resolved in 1880 with establishment of the less elitist and rather more democratic Amateur Athletic Association, which retained the prohibition on running for money but dropped the 'mechanics clause'. Thus, although it had a clear anti-working class bias, amateurism before 1880 was characterised by a high degree of confusion.

Amateurism in Canterbury before 1880 was not something imposed, with its associated middle class values, on sport in general.⁷ Rather, as the examples provided by rowing and athletics indicate, it was used as a means of fostering a sense of community among a small group within a larger sporting population.

Competitive rowing in Canterbury centred on the regattas that were held more or less annually at Lyttelton, Kaiapoi and the Heathcote Estuary. Most races were for cash prizes between £2 and £25, with occasional events for cups or trophies. The required funds were raised principally by public subscription. By 1870 the great majority of oarsmen competed through clubs. The only

'exclusive' body in the province was the Canterbury Rowing Club. Aspiring members had to be nominated by an existing member and elected at a General Meeting of the club, 'one black ball in four' being sufficient to ensure their exclusion.⁸ 'Open' clubs, such as the diminutive Cure Boating Club of Kaiapoi, were more common. All clubs survived to some extent on prize money won at regattas.

As in Australia, the organisers of regattas encouraged the participation of those who earned their living by the oar through the creation of events designated as being for watermen and 'open to all comers'.⁹ Entry to other races was restricted to amateurs or youths under a nominated age.¹⁰ Thus the 'amateur' competitors were carefully separated from any supposed 'professionals'. Two incidents indicate that the clear attempt to maintain some distance between the two categories of oarsmen evidently failed to allay an underlying hostility among amateurs towards their 'professional' counterparts.

In September 1866, an Interprovincial Coxed Fours race was organised at the Heathcote Regatta; the first prize was a trophy valued at £50 and a purse of 100 sovereigns. The Regatta Committee resolved that 'no person should be considered an amateur for the [race] who had plied for hire, or been professionally engaged as a waterman, within six months from the date of entry'. 'Amateur' oarsmen in Christchurch, including 'many who have belonged to the two University clubs and other principal rowing clubs in England', protested vociferously. They claimed that the Committee's decision would be entirely unacceptable at Henley or in 'amateur races on the Thames'. Furthermore, it would 'admit a great many...professional [watermen]...and...deter amateurs from other provinces from entering'. The Committee remained unmoved and changed only the wording, not the meaning, of their original resolution.¹¹

The basis of this hostility emerged only in February 1872, when the Regatta again became the centre of controversy. There appeared on the programme a "'Pair-oared Race.- Open to all members of Rowing Clubs in the Province of Canterbury *who do not get their living by bodily labour*, for a Challenge Cup, presented by W.C. Maxwell, Esq.', (emphasis added) valued at £18 10s.¹² Maxwell's belatedly announced intention was to induce the office-bound members of boating clubs to become more active in the sport by providing an event in which they could gain the confidence required to confront the 'experienced oarsmen whom they...think so formidable'.¹³ Although the identical event had aroused no comment in 1871, an acrimonious discussion now erupted in the letters pages of the local newspapers over the fairness or otherwise of a 'mechanics's rule'. An outraged *Cantab* thought that,

strictly interpreting the conditions laid down, no mortal creature will be able to compete. Bank and merchants' and Government clerks form the bulk of the

clubs. Are *they* excluded? . . . Is Jack Deal, carpenter, who undoubtedly gets his living by “bodily labour”, to be excluded, while Septimus Noodle, Esq., who gets his living by mechanically copying a few figures into a ledger – under constant supervision – is admitted?...Both get their living by “bodily labour”, with this difference – Jack Deal requires brains for his work, while Septimus Noodle, Esq., requires none.¹⁴

If the rule had been formulated to exclude crews comprised of working-class oarsmen, then ‘farewell all good feeling, farewell the cultivation of manly sports merely for their own sake, and farewell that fairplay itself which Englishmen boast so much about’. ‘Let there be no CLASS restrictions’, demanded *Cantab*, ‘let it not go out to the world that we are tainted with SNOBOCRACY’.¹⁵

While some endorsed ‘*Cantab*’s’ view, others supported the introduction of a ‘mechanic’s rule’. ‘Is there no difference’, asked *Cantabury*, ‘between the physical power’ of clerical workers ‘who can only steal the night and morning hours for practice, and the hardy sons of toil’, particularly watermen, whose muscles are strengthened by repetitive physical labour? *Cantabury*’s ‘hardy son of toil’ was

what is commonly understood by the word ‘handicraftsman’ – a man who obtains his living by manual labour, such as carpenters, boat-builders, licensed watermen, builders, founders, and the like – men skilled in muscular and mechanical or manual and bodily labour.¹⁶

A crew composed of manual labourers should not be permitted to enter the race, for they would certainly defeat any drawn from ‘men cooped up in their offices’. Such an outcome, said *Cantabury*, would frustrate Maxwell’s intention of providing that category of oarsmen who had ‘done the most for...boating in Canterbury’ with a prize for which only they might compete. The exercise of commonsense in deciding whether any particular individual was a ‘handicraftsman’ would ensure that ‘we need be under no serious apprehension of finding crews enough to compete’. He accused *Cantab* of pandering to ‘the “Jack Deals”’, and endeavouring ‘to create a schism between the classes where none exists – to foment ill-feeling where harmony and good-will do and should ever prevail’.¹⁷

‘One of the Soft-Handed’ attacked the rationale underpinning the ‘mechanics rule’. He considered ‘that men employed in banks or other offices,

who have more time to practise [and] go to their evening exercise comparatively fresh, instead of being tired out after a long day of manual labour, have rather an advantage over carpenters and other mechanics'. 'True', he admitted, 'their hands may not be as hard, but their muscles can be as strong if they will train properly, for which they have more time and opportunity than the mechanics'.¹⁸ Some oarsmen remained confused. One wished to know whether, 'being a shopkeeper, I would be allowed to form one of a competing crew? I don't know whether I get my living by "bodily labour" or not'.¹⁹

The tumult eventually subsided and the race was rowed under the conditions originally laid down by Maxwell. However, the inflammatory restriction was quietly dropped from the conditions of entry at later Heathcote Regattas. Any attempt to ostracise artisans from competitive rowing was totally impractical for the community was too small to permit the survival of exclusive sporting bodies.

Arguably the unease amongst amateurs over 'professionalism' abated with changing circumstances. The number and proportion of oarsmen competing through clubs increased while the ranks of watermen were simultaneously thinned through retirement or technological displacement. Facilities at the port of Lyttelton were improved dramatically from 1868-69, thus reducing the need for waterborne transport to ferry passengers and freight between ship and shore. Some watermen simply abandoned the profession while others, like George Agar, adapted to changing circumstances by investing in such new technology as steam launches. The source of the trouble was eliminated by attrition.

Even while aquatics in Christchurch were in turmoil over Mr Maxwell's cup, an attempt was made to introduce amateurism into athletics in the town. In Canterbury, as in Britain, any athletic event of significance was widely advertised and entries solicited. Competition took a variety of forms. From the early 1860s very popular Rural Sports meetings were held in Christchurch and most other towns to mark Anniversary Day, Boxing Day or New Year's Day. Programmes combined folk games and standard athletic events for men, women, girls, youths, boys and Maori. Prizes, usually in the form of cash or cups, were financed by public subscription.

Also noteworthy were the Annual Sports at Christ's College, at which trophies and other prizes of considerable value were offered. The College Sports provided the first competitive experience for some of the best amateur track and field athletes in New Zealand during this period.

Pedestrianism in Canterbury was centred on Christchurch and, to a lesser extent, Timaru. Publicans, particularly the landlords of the Plough Inn in Riccarton, organised contests in which athletes competed against one another or the clock. Compared with similar events in other parts of the world, the prize money was small (£5 – £100) and the matches honest. Public support for pedestrianism fluctuated but was never great. An attendance of 800 at a

pedestrian event in Christchurch was considered to be 'good', with four hundred being more usual.²⁰ By comparison, the Popular Sports held in Christchurch on the Anniversary Day of the Province regularly drew crowds of between twelve and fifteen thousand.²¹

In January 1872 the first successful effort was made to create an explicitly amateur athletic organisation in Christchurch. The Canterbury Amateur Athletic Association had its immediate origins in the second Boaters' and Cricketers' Athletic Sports, which had been held a few days earlier. Three previous attempts to form such a body had failed. However, the degree of interest aroused among the public in competitive athletics conducted outside the framework of the communal festival by the visit of a team of leading pedestrians from England and Victoria during 1871 probably provided the impetus required for this venture to succeed.²² Membership of the new body was initially restricted to those belonging to cricket and boating clubs. However, the Association was itself reconstituted as a Club (CAAC) in 1873 and opened to all *bona fide* amateur athletes, though 'one black ball in four' could exclude an aspirant.²³

The word 'amateur' proved fraught with difficulties for the new Association. Some of those attending the inaugural meeting thought the word should be omitted from its title, as 'there were very few in that room who, according to the English rules, could be looked upon as bona fide amateurs'. R.P. Crosbie presciently observed that the use of the term amateur 'would greatly restrict the operations of the association, and lead to endless discussion'.²⁴ More than a year was required to formulate a definition acceptable to a majority of the membership. At the General Meeting of the CAAC on 5 April 1873 it was resolved, on the motion of A.J. Cotterill, a leading lawyer in Christchurch at this time,

That any member of the club who shall be proved to the committee to have taken any advertised money [a cash prize offered at a rural sports meeting or pedestrian event in which a 'professional' might enter] after 17th April, 1873, shall be disqualified from competing in any of the events at the meetings of the club, but that nothing in the rule shall prevent such winner appropriating the same towards a trophy.²⁵

According to this interpretation an athlete could win a cash prize at a contest open to all comers, but remain an amateur and compete at the club's meetings if that money were used to purchase a trophy for which only members of the club could compete. One did not risk one's amateur status by competing against a professional, just by beating him and retaining the proceeds! According to Cotterill, the sole distinction 'between an amateur and a profes-

sional' was that the former compete 'for plate or other mementos of the competitions' while the latter compete for money.²⁶

The Annual Sports of the CAAC were similar in their tenor to those of Christ's College. Programmes consisted of standard athletic contests for prizes and cups of relatively low monetary value (£1/1/- – £20). They were also 'gendered' in a way that Rural (Annual) Sports meetings were not. Events were for men and boys only, perhaps reflecting the origins of most members in cricket and boating clubs. Spectators of both sexes were welcome, but 'special arrangements' were made for the comfort of ladies.²⁷

There is evidence to suggest that devotion within the club to the amateur ethos may have weakened over time. C.F. Bowley, a well-known local 'pedestrian', competed at the Club's meeting in 1875. Such ambiguities and contradictions notwithstanding, the CAAC managed to attract a membership drawn disproportionately from within the urban upper and middle classes in Christchurch.²⁸

The CAAC eventually collapsed in 1877, for reasons summarised by a correspondent for the *Lyttelton Times*:

The fault does not lie with the public, nor with a great portion of the local athletes. It is simply a case of divided efforts and interests in a community which is not large enough to permit such a division being attended with success. The Canterbury [Amateur] Athletic Club, for some years past, has made it a *sine qua non* that those who become members shall not compete anywhere for money prizes. The result is that all who cannot afford to expend time and money in practice without some prospect of return cannot join the club; thus a very large percentage of athletes are excluded.²⁹

The *Lyttelton Times* urged the establishment of an athletic club that would admit 'all respectable persons, without regard to class, as members, and [make] it optional for the prizes to be taken in money or plate'.³⁰

In conclusion, any attempt to introduce amateurism into sport in 'frontier' Christchurch was almost certain to fail. As the negative responses to the actions of the Heathcote Regatta Committee suggest, attitudes among the petit-bourgeoisie and lower middle classes in the town were similar to those described by Dunning and Sheard as prevailing among the middle classes of the North of England during this period.³¹ A strong sentiment was expressed in favour of 'open' clubs and competition free from restrictions based on class. The amateurism that existed in Christchurch before 1880 was not an ideology imposed on sport by a colonial elite in an effort to take control, but a mechanism used by a segment of the upper and middle classes to separate themselves from the wider sporting population. As the reporter for the *Lyttelton Times* observed, that community was too small for such ventures to succeed.

NOTES:

- ¹ E. Halladay, *Rowing in England: A Social History: The Amateur Debate*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, p. 75.
- ² J.A. Mangan, 'Oars and the Man': Pleasure and Purpose in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge,' *British Journal of Sports History*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1984, pp.245-71.
- ³ Halladay, *Rowing in England*, p. 76.
- ⁴ J. Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes, 1870-1914*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993, pp.162-70; P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Quest for Control, 1830 - 1885*, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1987, pp.140-1.
- ⁵ Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, pp. 139-40.
- ⁶ Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes*, p.163.
- ⁷ G.T. Vincent and T. Hatfield, 'Repression and Reform: Responses Within New Zealand Rugby to the arrival of the 'Northern Game,' 1907-8,' *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, p. 236; G.T. Vincent and T. Hatfield, "'A Tendency to Roughness": Anti-Heroic Representations of New Zealand Rugby Football, 1890-1914', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1997, pp.93-7.
- ⁸ Canterbury Rowing Club Minutes, 24 November 1868, Canterbury Museum, Christchurch.
- ⁹ M. Crotty, *Rowing in Victoria, 1875 - 1914: A Social History*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Monash University, 1995.
- ¹⁰ *Weekly Press* (W.P.), 5 Jan. 1867, 26 Dec. 1868, 22 Jan. 1870, 25 March 1876.
- ¹¹ *Lyttelton Times*, (L.T.), 25 Sept. 1866, 28 Sept. 1866, 9 Oct. 1866, 17 Oct. 1866.
- ¹² L.T., 5 Feb. 1872.
- ¹³ L.T., 13 Feb. 1872.
- ¹⁴ L.T., 5 Feb. 1872.
- ¹⁵ L.T., 5 Feb. 1872.
- ¹⁶ L.T., 8 Feb. 1872.
- ¹⁷ L.T., 6 Feb. 1872.
- ¹⁸ L.T., 9 Feb. 1872.
- ¹⁹ L.T., 7 Feb. 1872.
- ²⁰ W.P., 27 Sept. 1873, 14 Nov. 1874.
- ²¹ L.T., 17 Dec. 1872, 18 Dec. 1876.
- ²² W.P., 6 May, 26 Aug. 1871.
- ²³ L.T., 1 Feb. 1872, 21 March, 3 April 1873; W.P., 8 Feb. 1872, 22 March 1873.
- ²⁴ L.T., 1 Feb. 1872.
- ²⁵ W.P. 12 April 1873.
- ²⁶ L.T., 7 April 1873.
- ²⁷ L.T., 15 April 1873, 23 March 1874, 22 March 1875.
- ²⁸ W.P., 27 March 1875.
- ²⁹ L.T., 19 Feb. 1877.
- ³⁰ L.T., 19 Feb. 1877.
- ³¹ E. Dunning and K. Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*, Martin Robertson & Company Ltd., Oxford, 1979, pp.141-2.