

Mrozek, Donald J. *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983. 284 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. \$24.95 (cloth), \$12.95 (paper).

Recently a growing number of historical studies have shown that sport is far from the trivial topic it was once assumed to be. Happily, Professor Donald Mrozek's *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* continues this trend.

Both the title and much of the text contend that several of the changes which occurred in American culture and thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found expression in a variety of sporting practices and re-definitions of the human body. This idea, of course, is not novel with Professor Mrozek, but he has taken several important steps toward furthering our understanding of how numerous concerns, anxieties, aspirations, and beliefs which permeated at least a substantial segment of the broader society were caught up in and sometimes given intensity by means of those events which we label "sport." A number of themes are included: ideas of physical regeneration and renewal, both personal and social; sport, character-development and social efficiency; sport and the spirit of victory; a search for social order and concepts of the regulated life; evolutionary and hereditarian theories and a concern about physical vigor, sexual potency, and fears of race decline; wealth, conspicuous consumption, and sport; fitness, physical attractiveness, the emergence of the "new woman," and sport; a thrust toward nationalism, efforts to form a distinctively American character, and sport; borrowings from various biological theories and the formation of new concepts of the body. Readers familiar with Professor Mrozek's work know that one of his special interests is military history and will not be surprised that the discussions of sporting practices and values of American military officers, in particular, offer entirely new and useful information.

The title and thrust of the book, *Sport and American Mentality*, is intriguing and bears some examination. Whereas the majority of work to date in the area referred to as sport history has taken an approach which can be identified as "social" history, Professor Mrozek has grappled with a different—and much-needed—approach. The orientation is substantially "intellectual" history. (This is not to suggest, of course, that entirely satisfactory distinctions can be drawn between social and intellectual history as Gordon Wood, to name only one, has pointed out in "Intellectual History and the Social Sciences," *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Eds.), or as is argued in some of the more recent works dealing with hermeneutics, history, and the social sciences.)

"Mentality" in this case, I think, can be rather accurately defined as "the thought processes characteristic of a group." Work in the history of mentalities, which owes a great deal to Durkheim, seems to be among the more promising directions which the writing of history has taken in recent years. What the reader will find set forth are the beliefs, attitudes, concerns, anxieties, and modes of thought of a rather articulate, usually well-educated, often well-bred group which Professor Mrozek refers to as "middle class," "gentry," "traditional governing elite" (p. xv), not the concerns, or modes of thought of industrial workers, urban immigrants, mid-western farmers, or the like. Men like Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, William Godkin, General Leonard Wood, William James, and Dudley Allen Sargent predominate, as do ideas and values expressed in the pages of journals like *Scribner's Magazine*, *Outlook*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harvard Graduates Magazine*,

and *Outing*, rather than the *National Police Gazette* or even the pages of most daily newspapers.

Several themes occur repeatedly, and in various contexts, throughout the book, none so often as ways in which late nineteenth and early twentieth century American spokesmen for a "genteel" tradition postulated intimate relationships among healthful, vigorous "action" (especially as this occurred in sporting events), moral rectitude, and cultural regeneration: ". . . sport appealed with special force to the contemporary passion for the deed, since it offered a way of learning through the senses and expressing oneself through action" (p. xx). When Professor Mrozek points out, as for example on page 166, that ". . . action was taken to be functionally equivalent to character" (one should read predominantly Anglo-Saxon views of character), indeed, he has focused upon an idea which appears repeatedly in the contemporary literature. The whole concept of "action" (willed and intentional activity), however, is fraught with frightful philosophical and epistemological problems, and these need careful sorting when one is trying to grapple with this concept. While *Sport and American Mentality* touches upon some of these myriad difficulties, it does not deal with this problem in depth. It would be ungracious and unsound, however, to level too much criticism on this point for few scholars have dealt with the problem in relation to sport. and Professor Mrozek is to be commended for heightening our awareness that it must be dealt with.

Especially in chapters 3 ("Winning and the Regulated Life") and 7 ("Toward A New Image of the Body"), the author discusses how developments in the biological sciences, as for example, Marey's studies of animal locomotion, Bain's work on the physical basis of perception and the intellect, and Chittenden's research in physiology were often applied (or misapplied) by advocates of sports and vigorous physical activity. Changes in concepts in biology, especially as these may have found expression in social and cultural concerns, need much more attention from scholars interested in sport, physical education, health and the like.

If anything, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* raises more questions than it answers. This is both a weakness of the book and one of its major strengths. A great deal is covered and the reader may frequently wish for deeper analyses. However, Professor Mrozek is often ploughing new ground and does not have the luxury of a substantial corpus of already published work upon which to draw. The rather cursory coverage of some topics does, I think, lead to some errors. For example, most nineteenth century American Turners would have strenuously objected to being associated with "Swedish" gymnastics, and most leaders of the embryonic professional field of physical education made a sharper distinction between physical education and athletic sport than is suggested in the book. The brief, but important, comments on anthropometry and various tests of physical efficiency would have benefited from insights such as those raised in Stephen J. Gould's *Mismeasure of Man*. Given the scope of topics covered in only 235 pages, however, these are rather minor criticisms.

Although some readers are very likely to disagree. I felt that chapter 5 ("From 'Swooning Damsel' to Sportswoman") provided a more balanced, and in some ways a more comprehensive, assessment than has often been the case in the recent rush to rescue women from obscurity and give them their place in history.

In concluding his study Professor Mrozek points to a fact that becomes increasingly apparent throughout the book—and one which historians of sport know all too painfully: "The complex and sometimes countervailing forces within sport militate against simple explanation" (p. 234). The various strands of this complexity do, however, need to be teased out and carefully examined so that deeper and more comprehensive understandings might be ultimately achieved. *Sport and American Society, 1880-1910* does an admirable job of illuminating the extent of the complexity and suggesting a number of ways in which various forces may have operated. The thoughtful reader will be richly rewarded with relevant information and a gold-mine of highly significant unanswered questions: And this, after all, is worth a very great deal! *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* should be on all of our reading lists.

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