

Carter, John Marshall. *Sports and Pastimes of the Middle Ages*. Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1988. Pp. 77. Index, bibliography.

Medieval sport is neither easily definable nor, for the most part, readily accessible. It sets the initial task of finding some valid concept of organised play and competition to apply to a world where such notions were only partially formed. Folk play overlapped often and elusively with religious ceremony-in communal football contests, in the baiting of animal doppelgangers for Pontius Pilate on Good Friday, and in the dancing, running and leaping of other calendar celebrations. At another social level, the line between military training and sporting competition is often blurred, sometimes by the performers themselves, those "carpet knights," as John Bromyard called them, anxious to pass off their jousts as preparation for holy warfare. These problems of definition add to the temptation to draw all that we can into the amorphous ambit of "sport." If Professor Carter should occasionally lapse (identifying, for instance, one court

case as “sport-orientated” when it was more likely to be about farming and poaching) (pp. 23/4) this is no more than a reflection of the difficulties presented by diffuse and fragmentary source materials.

A major contribution made by Professor Carter has been to open many new doors to the sporting life of the Middle Ages. In this slim paperback he reproduces some of his earlier studies, and extends the reference to medieval public records beyond the usual menu of Statutes and Proclamations. His use of Coroners’ and Assize Records and Royal Court Rolls is a significant innovation, and one that might be profitably extended in future to take in, for instance, Ecclesiastical Court Records and Municipal Archives. The proceedings of local historical and archaeological societies often suggest that there is interesting material on medieval sport and play lying untouched in Country Record Offices. Carter’s commentary on the Bayeux Tapestry is again fresh and imaginative and it is welcome to have that time-honoured authority, William Fitzstephen, (first resurrected by the *Sporting Magazine* in 1793!) set for once in a wider context.

The limited scope of *Sport and Pastimes of the Middle Ages*—somewhat less than 30,000 words—sets its own bounds on what it can achieve. Judgment of a writer’s earlier work also runs the risk of pointing to gaps which have already been filled. However, once a book has been launched, it has to stand alone and justify itself at least by its own inbuilt criteria. Thus the chapters described as a “historiographical and bibliographical guides” do admirably. Less successful, and largely because of the limited space for the development of their themes, are those sections which aim to be “descriptive narratives of a transformation of attitudes towards sport.” To take just one example, in the chapter on “God’s Athletes: The Ecclesiastical Acceptance of Sport in Anglo-Norman Society, 1050-1200,” St. Bernard of Clairvaux, while acknowledged to be “enigmatic,” is apparently ranked among the promoters of more encouraging attitudes toward sport. In the light of his views on the mind-body relationship—essentially a denial of the healthy mind/healthy body correspondence—the comments on Bernard certainly need further amplification. The lingering influence of classical literature, particularly of authors such as Galen, also was possibly worth a mention in this discussion of the minor sporting renaissance of the twelfth century.

Such mild questioning, though, only serves to underline the vastness of the untilled lands of medieval play, fields which Professor Carter and other medievalists are now seeking to bring under cultivation. As he himself remarks, “Many years and much research will be needed to uncover the ebb and flow of the sporting life of the Middle Ages.” Such research is all the more needed because of the overwhelming concentration of historical attention on the sport of the last hundred years or so. The very weight of research into more recent history reinforces theories of discontinuity, seeing modern sport as some bright and pristine Phoenix, rising ablaze and fully fledged from the dead ashes of pre-Victorian folk play. Awareness of the deep roots of much contemporary sporting experience cannot fail to provide a valuable corrective to the cataclysmic

interpretation of its history. Professor Carter is to be congratulated both on the direction of his research and its undoubted quality.

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