

Metcalf, Alan. *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987. Pp. 243. References, index. \$15.95 (paper).

Alan Metcalfe is Canada's most accomplished sports historian. (It is, admittedly, a very small group.) Founder and editor of the *Canadian Journal of Sports History* (now in its 20th year), he was the first to go beyond the descriptive "first order" studies of the "Alberta school" established by Max Howell to use the more theoretically conscious methodologies of social history to investigate the making of Canadian sports. His articles on the social and ideological roots of the Montrealers who founded so many of Canada's first sports bodies in the late nineteenth century have been standard references for years.

Canada Learns to Play will consolidate Metcalfe's reputation as the authority on the creation of organized sport in Canada in the years between Confederation and the First World War. While primarily a summing up of his own extensive research, it is also the first major synthesis of other studies of the period. The result is an ambitious, persuasive and thought-provoking interpretation of major developments, practices, and meanings, supported by a greater array of empirical evidence than anyone else has hitherto marshalled.

Those familiar with Metcalfe's earlier work will recognize his main arguments here. He shows once again that the key steps in the transformation of pre-industrial game forms into the codified and highly bureaucratized and rationalized practice we know as sport were taken by a small group of urban, anglophone businessmen and professionals, first in Montreal and then in Toronto. These men were broadly supportive of the attempt to create a new nation independent of Britain and the United States and a vibrant capitalist economy—the ambitions of Confederation and the National Policy. They sought to create "national" sports and organizations and to declare "national championships" to strengthen the new nation (and ideologically, themselves). In this, they both took advantage of and were buffeted by the complex processes of urbanization, industrialization, and technological innovation unleashed by the larger political, economic and social developments of the period.

In *Canada Learns to Play*, Metcalfe has extended his previously published work on the backgrounds of the leaders and the social context within which they

lived and worked by examining the results of their interventions. In an effort which must have been every bit as painstaking, he has examined the nature and extent of participation, the adherence to rules, and the stability of teams and leagues to determine the ethos of competition and whether anything like a "Canadian sport" uniting all classes, ethnic groups and regions actually existed. He found increasing attention paid to winning and the staging of events as a commercial spectacle, even among the staunchest amateurs. Despite the widespread popular belief in the integrative powers of lacrosse and ice hockey, he found that except for the "American" game of baseball, "all others drew their support from particular groups. . . Canadian sport cannot be characterized by a single definition." (p. 98) It's unfortunate that these important conclusions are undercut by the book's main title, which perpetuates the romantic view he has laboured so long to correct.

In the course of his thematic analysis, Metcalfe details the rise of professional and commercial sport, and provides an extensive case study of lacrosse. He offers much intriguing food for thought on the contradictions of amateurism, pointing out that those who "denied the ultimate importance of victory gained (their) greatest power by making victory the most desirable end product." (p. 220) He argues that the triumph of strict amateurism in the war between the Amateur Athletic Federation and the Amateur Athletic Union between 1906 and 1909 paved the way for the Americanization of the game in the post WWI years, because it left the hockey entrepreneurs with nowhere to turn but to their US counterparts (pp. 131-2).

But *Canada Learns to Play* is not without its disappointments. Despite an introductory promise to eschew those explanatory formulations which privilege "modernization" and the winners of historical development (p.11), Metcalfe frequently phrases explanation and doles out praise and blame on just this basis. Thus, although few of them were aware of it at the time, organizers "launch(ed) lacrosse into the world of contemporary sport" by adopting league play in 1885. This, he continues, "reflects clearly the perceptive insights of some of these lacrossists and the complete blindness on the part of the majority of the real consequences of their actions." (p. 190). Such a perspective leads him to undervalue the concerns of those who did not have the benefit of his hindsight (and might not have wanted that outcome on every issue anyway) and to minimize the contingency of developments. Off the playing fields, he gives us little sense of the hopes, fears, passions and tensions of organizers, players, and spectators in his narrative.

There are other shortcomings as well. For all his care, he treats amateurism as a largely unchanged vestige of the pre-industrial era of gentlemen's sport, ignoring the extent to which it was reformulated in the late nineteenth century, in the guise of "rational recreation," as a response to an explicitly urban and industrial crisis. I think this is why he has so much difficulty in understanding the hold of strict amateurism on so many sports leaders for so long. While he draws much of his evidence from the newspapers and acknowledges the wide variation in coverage afforded different sports, he offers no analysis of the role

of the capitalist media in shaping meanings and possibilities. He has little to say on the gendered nature of Canadian sports.

But these failings cannot undo Metcalfe's accomplishment. For a country which still suffers from a dearth of careful historical writing on sports, it is a very important contribution.

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