
Book Reviews

BIRLEY, DEREK. *Land of Sport and Glory: Sport and British Society, 1887–1910*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. Pp. x, 287. Notes, photographs, index. \$24.95 pb., \$69.95 cb.

BIRLEY, DEREK. *Playing the Game: Sport and British Society, 1910–1945*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. Pp. x, 342. Notes, index. \$24.95 pb., \$79.95 cb.

The second and third volumes of Derek Birley's trilogy of the history of British sport (Sport and the Making of Britain was the first) cover the late Victorian and Edwardian periods and 1914 to 1945, respectively. Birley's contributions to the Manchester University Press's series of international studies in the history of sport, which is edited by J.A. Mangano are written with the general reader in mind, as well as the serious scholar, and as such are accessible overviews of the major developments in British sport and some of the forces shaping it. Though each work stands on its own as a study of sport in particular periods characterized by specific social, cultural, and political circumstances, there is an overarching unity of subject matter, theme, tone, and method that makes it appropriate to treat them as a whole.

Birley's work addresses many sports, games, and physical recreations, but cricket, football (particularly the association and rugby codes), field sports, horse racing, and to a somewhat lesser degree boxing, rowing, athletics, golf, and lawn tennis figure more often and more fully than the likes of netball, wrestling, and bowling. Similarly, though the geo-political and cultural range of both volumes is meant to extend to "Britain," but despite some consideration of athletes and events in the "Celtic fringes," it is England and the English that predominate; as do, predictably, men and manly sports although, again Birley makes an inclusionary nod in the direction of the female half of Britishkind.

A central theme running through the various elements out of which Birley crafts his narrative is that although internal tensions and divisions stemming from social class, regional and ethnic realities and identities and, to a much lesser degree, gender tugged and pulled at the fabric of British society, and though these tensions and divisions were manifest in sport, the latter, the "British

addiction, it was one of the things that held it all together. It was in periods when national and imperial interests were threatened by external, foreign forces that sport's cohesive powers mattered most. Thus, on the eve of the First World War, though there were many national sports, Britain was a land of sport-lovers, and while many things would never be the same again after the war, people of all classes would continue to find solace or inspiration or escape in sport and glory (p. 15). Likewise, during and after the Second World War, sport was part of Britain's common precious heritage, one that was worth fighting for against the barbarous atrocities of the Nazis. Britain had changed markedly since the glory days of Edwardian sport, and the old patriarchal and class order had been shaken by the claims advanced by women and the working classes, and by challenges to the nation's industrial and imperialist power. But that there still persisted a sense of the importance of playing the game is testimony in Birley's mind to the survival of a core element of the old Britain in the new. In the new kind of Britain of 1945, the notion of 'fair play' came to be recognized as having a social dimension. It was part of the better world envisaged in the Beveridge plan and the Butler Education Act...with fair shares for all (Playing the Game, p. 332).

The ideal of fair play was part of the ideology of amateurism that certain sectors of British sporting society held dear to their hearts and which they upheld against the professional and commercial elements whose crass and sordid values threatened to debase sport. The battle fought between the defenders of pure, amateur sport and grasping, win-at-all-costs sporting mercenaries, gamblers, and entrepreneurs constitutes another major theme of both volumes. By the 1930s and 1940s it was apparent that the amateurs were in the rear guard and not the van, and Birley's ironic tone is perfect for capturing the humbug and hypocrisy of some of the most sanctimonious proponents of the amateur code. Introducing the infamous 'bodyline' controversy of the 1933 Test Against Australia, he notes slyly that while 'vulgarians studied racing forms... the better sort preferred the cricket scores.' Cricket, according to the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) which ruled it, was 'more free from anything sordid, anything dishonorable, than any game in the world.' Then...in January 1933, the Australians outraged all right-thinking people by suggesting that a new tactic used against their cricketers was unsportsmanlike. The team responsible for the tactic was sponsored by MCC. It was managed by an Oxford man and captained by another. The allegation therefore was like 'suggesting that the Holy Trinity was a set of atheists' (Playing the Game, p. 246). That the violators of the sacred trust of sportsmanship in this case were not the Australians, but the high priests of amateurism themselves was hardly surprising. Birley details many similar though less visible and symbolically charged instances but the incident exposed at the highest level amateurism's bankruptcy as a code of sporting conduct. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the working and 'gradgrind' classes, particularly from the north, had been the primary agents of such debased countervalues as wanting to win rather than simply 'playing the game'; by the 1920s and 1930s their ranks had been swelled by scholarship and state-supported 'professionals' from the United States and the likes of Germany and Italy. The British found themselves in a new

world order of sport in 1945, and Birley concludes with the suggestion that in the post-war era they would re-make their approach to sport as they had been forced to alter their vision of war; when saturation bombing seemed the only way to win the war they took it up, reluctantly but purposefully. The Newbolt spirit and Rupert Brooke's ideal of self-sacrifice gave way to less high-flown sentiments... Sport...too had to change (p. 332).

Birley has little sympathy with the self-deceptions and double standards of so many professed amateurs, but that does not mean he allies himself with their putative antitheses, the professionals and the purveyors of sporting spectacles. However, his take on the latter two is not easy to determine. In large part this is because it is not clear whether the irony which Birley employs so well to disabuse the reader of any notion of amateur purity among the *éclasse* is also being used consistently to undercut the amateur ideologue's attacks on professional and commercial sport among the *émasses*; or whether occasionally Birley abandons his position as sly commentator and slips into the role of sporting censor whose disapprobation extends to all but the *étrue* amateur. At times, particularly in *Land of Sport and Glory* it seems that it is the second of these positions that Birley inhabits: professional and commercial sport is almost always, and apparently irredeemably, *édebased*, *écorrupt*, *ésordid*, and Birley's writing style offers no clues as to whether these are the judgments of contemporaries or his own. This problem is exacerbated by Birley's referencing style which inclines to the elliptical, and though the spareness of footnotes (both in terms of quantity and fullness) may well add to the book's appeal to a more general audience, I found it frustrating.

Land of Sport and Glory and *Playing the Game* work well as engaging introductions to and overviews of the history of British sport; they are somewhat less convincing as social histories of the same, for although Birley frames each chapter or major chronological division within certain social, economic, cultural, and political circumstances, he eschews analysis in favor of description. But Birley's description is spiced throughout with a lively commentary that is very appealing, both for its scepticism and, perhaps even more so, for its occasional wistfulness about an ideal of British sport and society that while far removed from their realities is nonetheless worth hoping for: a new kind of Britain with fair shares for all, an entirely appropriate sentiment for the era of a new Labour Party.

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