

Analyzing Disputes in Sport History: The Surf Lifesaving Debate

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HISTORIANS OVER THE LAST COUPLE of decades, stimulated by what has been variously termed the "cultural" or the "linguistic" or the "rhetoric" or the "postmodern" turn, have increasingly grappled with methodological, epistemological and ontological issues in their work. The "cultural" turn has created intense debate amongst historians. For example, British historian Arthur Marwick's most recent treatise, *The Fundamentals of History* published in 2001, was savagely reviewed by the editor of *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Alun Munslow. In his 7000-word review, Munslow attacked the three pillars of Marwick's premises of history—knowledge, evidence and language—and argued: "To suggest that empirical data is self-justifying because it can be understood without a theoretical or narrative-linguistic dimension makes little or no sense to me." He concludes: "An epistemological position of doubt, not disbelief as Marwick implies, about

the value of the empirical in doing history is, for me, the most realistic appraisal of its nature."¹ Marwick responded aggressively to this review: "Personally, I find it unforgivable when academics, instead of concentrating on the difficult task of 'trying to find out what actually happened' switch to the allegedly more 'important and morally useful' discussion of history 'as a cultural discourse or practice.'"² This example, of which there are many more, indicates the polemics about what constitutes history and historical practice.³

By comparison, sport historians have been reluctant to engage in the lively debates that have been common in mainstream history. There has been a raft of valuable articles starting in the early 1980s that have examined the defining features of sport history, particularly the close relationship with social history.⁴ Yet there are only a handful of sport historians—Douglas Booth, Jeffrey Hill, Colin Howell, Catriona Parratt, Murray Phillips and Steven Pope—that with varying commitment have tackled the fundamental issues raised by the "cultural" turn.⁵ This meager critical engagement is not meant to imply that the subdiscipline of sport history has been stagnant over the last three decades. Rather, sport history has reflected the shifts that have occurred in social history emphasizing, amongst many themes, social class, ethnicity, gender, race and multiculturalism. Sport historians have adopted cultural history themes by focusing on the body as a medium for understanding sport and by paying greater attention to the multifaceted meanings associated with sporting identities, as well as the role of memory and nostalgia in the sporting experience.⁶ Lastly, a handful of sport historians have embraced key aspects of the linguistic turn, employing new concepts such as discourse, text, voice and reading to enhance and sharpen their historical understanding of meaning and culture.⁷ Where sport history has lagged behind mainstream history as well as many of the arts, humanities and social sciences is at the epistemological level. Sport historians have failed to tackle the fundamental issues of the "cultural" turn that have challenged the subdiscipline's empirical-analytical foundation with new critical assumptions about objectivity and emplotment in historical narratives, and the transparency of language. The surf lifesaving debate has been organized, in part, as recognition of the need to grapple with some of the issues raised by the "cultural" turn.

Surf lifesaving is a distinctive feature of Australian culture, but it probably means precious little to the rest of the world except, possibly, for some New Zealanders, South Africans and West Coast Americans. In Australia, surf lifesaving clubs and associations were established on the beaches of Sydney in the first decade of the 20th century and in the following decades the movement spread to the beaches of other major cities, to encourage proper behavior for surf bathers, provide facilities for swimmers and teach lifesaving methods to those who guarded public safety. Surf lifesaving, as the title suggests, was a volunteer safety service with the motto "Vigilance and Service," which also developed a sporting dimension in order to develop, practice and hone surf lifesaving skills. These twin functions make surf lifesaving a unique activity in the Australian context but have led to ongoing tensions over the primary function of the movement. While public pronouncements by officials stress the association's humanitarian functions, in particular the lifesavers' duty of care to surf bathers, the majority of ordinary members define themselves as sports people with lifesaving clubs largely organized around sporting competitions.

As a field of inquiry, surf lifesaving has attracted a rich range of literature that includes the histories of clubs and associations in Australia, as well as a number of sources that

explore the humanitarian and sporting dimensions of this activity.⁸ Two historians who have written extensively about surf lifesaving in Australia are Douglas Booth and Ed Jaggard. Booth has assessed both surf lifesaving and surfing in a series of papers and chapters and has recently published *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf*. Collectively, his work represents the most impressive understanding of the role of surfing, surf lifesaving and the beach in Australian culture.⁹ Jaggard's contributions to understanding surf cultures have focused almost exclusively on surf lifesaving and, in a series of articles and presentations, he has critiqued many of the myths created by other historians.¹⁰ However, Booth and Jaggard, have each constructed quite different histories of surf lifesaving. In the first two contributions of this debate, "The Dark Side of Surf Lifesaving" and "Writing Australian Surf Lifesaving's History," Booth and Jaggard draw on well-trowled empirical evidence to challenge the other on two key issues: the role of women's participation in surf lifesaving and the broader nature of surf lifesaving culture. In the third contribution, Murray Phillips evaluates—rather than resolves—the surf lifesaving debate by assessing the role of narrative in history and the literary qualities of historical production. This approach reflects the growing interest in narrative as the *form* of history, an appreciation of poetics, and recognition of the literary tools employed by historians. Drawing on the work of a seminal figure in the "cultural" turn, Hayden White, and his tropic model of historical production, Phillips explores the narratives created by Booth and Jaggard and analyzes their works as literary constructions.¹¹ In essence, Booth and Jaggard do not have any major disagreements about basic facts such as the date of the inclusion of women into surf lifesaving or the influential role of the long term president of the Surf Lifesaving Association of Australia, Adrian Curlewis. Yet, the transition of these statements into a narrative discourse, which as White argues constitutes the historical process, creates considerable dissension. Phillips' evaluation of the surf lifesaving narrative discourses rests on four questions: How has the evidence been used to create contrasting narratives about surf lifesaving? How do Booth and Jaggard's interpretations of the present and the future impact on their versions of the past? Could Jaggard ever write a Booth-type history and vice versa? And, ultimately, do Jaggard's and Booth's histories support White's thesis that history is as much imagined/invented as found?

In the final contribution, Booth responds to Phillips and Jaggard with respect to empirical content and the nature of historical production. The three contributions, originally presented in a well-received session at the 2001 Australian Society for Sports History Conference in Adelaide, have been developed here with the aim of reaching a wider audience and to, hopefully, incite critical dialogue between sport historians. In the case of the latter, we particularly seek to encourage constructively critical discourse about the production of sport history: The three of us agree that the subdiscipline has been remiss in this area.



¹Munslow's entire review of A. Marwick, *The Fundamentals of History: Knowledge, Evidence and Language* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) can be found on the Institute of Historical Research World Wide Web address: <http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/munslow5.html>. Our appreciation to the anonymous reviewer for the address of this Web site.

²See <http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/marwick2.html> for Marwick's full response to Munslow's review.

³For a synopsis of the contemporary debate engulfing history, see <http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/>.

⁴See, as examples, Melvin L. Adelman, "Academicians and American Athletics: A Decade of Progress," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983): 80-106; William J. Baker, "The State of British Sport History," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983): 53-66; Douglas Booth, "Sport History: What Can Be Done?" *Sport, Education and Society* 2 (1998): 189-204; Allen Guttmann, "Recent Work in European Sport History," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983): 35-52; Richard Holt, "Sport and History: British and European Traditions," in *Taking Sport Seriously*, ed. L. Allison (Aachen: Meyer and Meyer, 1998), 7-30; Arnd Krüger, "Puzzle Solving: German Sports Historiography of the Eighties," *Journal of Sport History* 17 (1990): 261-77; Don Morrow, "Canadian Sport History: A Critical Essay," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983): 67-79; Roberta J. Park, "Research and Scholarship in the History of Physical Education and Sport: The Current State of Affairs," *Research Quarterly For Exercise and Sport* 54 (1983): 93-103; Steven A. Riess, ed., *Major Problems in American Sport History: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Nancy L. Struna, "In 'Glorious Disarray': The Literature of American Sport History," *Research Quarterly For Exercise and Sport* 56 (1985): 151-160; Nancy L. Struna, "Sport History," in *The History of Exercise and Sport Science*, eds. J.D. Massengale and R.A. Swanson (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1996), 143-180; Nancy L. Struna, "Social History and Sport," in *Handbook of Sport Studies*, eds. J. Coakley and E. Dunning (London: Sage, 2000), 187-203; and James Walvin, "Sport, Social History and the Historian," *The British Journal of Sport History* 1 (1984): 5-13.

⁵See, as examples, Douglas Booth and Annemarie Jutel, eds., *Sporting Traditions* 16 (1999); Jeffrey Hill, "British Sport History: A Post-Modern Future," *Journal of Sport History* 23 (1996): 1-19; Colin D. Howell, "On Metcalf, Marx, and Materialism: Reflections on the Writing of Sport History in the Postmodern Age," *Sport History Review* 29 (1998): 96-102; Catriona M. Parratt, "About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s," *Sport History Review* 29 (1998): 4-17; Murray G. Phillips, "Navigating Unchartered Waters: The Death of Sport History?" *Sporting Traditions* 16 (1999): 51-56; Steven W. Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Steven W. Pope, "Sport History: Into the 21st Century," *Journal of Sport History* 25 (1998): i-x.

⁶For a more detailed discussion of the influence of the "cultural" turn in sport history see Murray G. Phillips, "Deconstructing Sport History: The Postmodern Challenge," *Journal of Sport History* 28 (2001): 327-343.

⁷See John Bloom, *To Show What an Indian Can Do: Sports at Native American Boarding Schools* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); David McGimpsey, *Imagining Baseball: America's Pastime and Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Peter Mewett, "History in the Making and the Making of History: Stories and the Social Construction of Sport," *Sporting Traditions* 17 (2000): 1-17; Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Catriona Parratt, "Of Place and Men and Women: Gender and Topophilia in the 'Haxey Hood,'" *Journal of Sport History* 27 (2000): 229-245; Richard Peterson, *Extra Innings: Writing on Baseball* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Synthia Sydnor, "A History of Synchronized Swimming," *Journal of Sport History* 25 (1998): 252-267; Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁸See, as examples, Sean Brawley, *Vigilant and Victorious: A Community History of the Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club 1911-1995* (Sydney: Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club, 1995); Sean Brawley, *Beach Beyond: A History of the Palm Beach Surf Club 1921-1996* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996); Roy Brunton, *Alexandra Headland Surf Life Saving Club: 75 Years of Safe Surfing* (Alexandra Headland, Queensland: Alexandra Headland Surf Life Saving Club, 1999); Barry Galton, *Gladiators of the Surf: The Australian Surf Life Saving Championships, A History* (Sydney: Reed, 1984); Reg Harris, *Heroes of the Surf: Fifty Years' History of Manly Surf Life Saving Club* (Manly, N.S.W.: Manly Surf Life Saving Club, 1960); C. Bede Maxwell, *Surf: Australians against the Sea* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson,

1949); John Palmer, *History of North Wollongong Surf Life Saving Club, 1908-1996* (Wollongong, N.S.W.: North Wollongong Surf Life Saving Club, 1997); George B. Philip, *Sixty Years Recollections of Swimming and Surfing in the Eastern Suburbs* (Sydney: G.B. Philip, 1940); Ken Pollard, *History of Torquay Surf Life Saving Club* (Torquay, Victoria: Torquay Surf Life Saving Club, 1996); Kay Saunders, "'Specimens of Superb Manhood': The Lifesaver as National Icon," *Journal of Australian Studies* 56 (1998): 96-112; Tom Symonds, *Maroubra Surf Club: The First 75 Years* (Sydney: Lester-Townsend, 1982); and John R. Winders, *Surf Life Saving in Queensland* (Brisbane, Queensland: Queensland State Centre of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia, 1970).

⁹Douglas Booth, "War off Water: The Surf Life Saving Association and the Beach," *Sporting Traditions* 7 (1991): 135-162; Douglas Booth, "Swimming, Surfing and Surf-Lifesaving," in *Sport in Australia: A Social History*, eds., W. Vamplew and B. Stoddart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 231-254; Douglas Booth, "Healthy, Economic and Disciplined Bodies: Surfbathing and Surf Lifesaving in Australia and New Zealand, 1890-1950," *New Zealand Journal of History* 32 (1998): 43-58; Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (London: Frank Cass, 2001); and Douglas Booth, "The Dark Side of Surf Life Saving," paper presented at Sporting Traditions XIII, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia, 2001.

¹⁰Ed Jaggard, "Saviours and Sportsmen: Surf Lifesaving in Western Australia 1909-1930," *Sporting Traditions* 2 (1985): 2-22; Ed Jaggard, "Chameleons in the Surf," *Journal of Australian Studies* 53 (1997): 183-191; Ed Jaggard, "Australian Surf Life-saving and the 'Forgotten Members,'" *Australian Historical Studies* 30 (1999): 23-43; Ed Jaggard, "Welcome to the Clubhouse? Women's Entry to Surf Lifesaving in 1980," paper presented at Sporting Traditions XII, Queenstown, Victoria, Australia, 1999; Ed Jaggard, "Australian Surf Life Saving: Images, Realities and Change," paper presented at Sporting Traditions XIII, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia, 2001; and Ed Jaggard, "'Tempering the Testosterone': Women, Masculinity and Surf Lifesaving in Australia," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 18 (2001): 16-36.

¹¹Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).