

and Manners of Wild Animals, Hornaday said that, “our highest duty is to be sane and sensible in order to be just, and to promote the greatest good for the greatest number.” Yet, in terms of continuing efforts at wildlife conservation, the question each generation must continue to ask is whether the tenets of the “Hunter-naturalist” or those of the “hunter-slob” prevail or whether both exist simultaneously and, ultimately, who is the real beneficiary.

Puritan Attitudes Towards Physical Recreation in 17th Century New England

by
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A survey of the existing literature about physical recreation in 17th century New England, which focuses particularly on the last three decades, reveals a surprising phenomenon. While there is a large camp of authors denying the existence of physical recreation—the severe frontier conditions or the averse attitude of Puritanism supposedly nipped recreation in the bud—there are a few authors who maintain that physical recreation did take place and was even encouraged, if moderately practiced.

The explanation for these totally contradictory opinions lies in the methodological approach of both partisan groups. They presuppose a monolithic Puritan theology with certain tenets that were universally accepted. Certain conclusions are then drawn as to the “Puritan’s attitude” towards recreation. These are finally strengthened with the quotation of a prohibitive law or another fitting Puritan source. This approach leaves historical accuracy to the individual author.

New England Puritanism, however, was not at all monolithic, as the wave of studies after Perry Miller’s death in 1963 indicates. Hence the pluralistic movement needs a specific approach which also considers differing and contradictory attitudes.

An objective analysis of the writings of three important 17th century New England Puritans (Michael Wigglesworth, Cotton Mather, Samuel Sewall) demonstrates possible Puritan attitudes towards physical recreation. Chronologically these authors cover the period from 1653 to the first decade of the 18th century. A comparison discloses that within the limits prescribed by the Bible and the secular laws (the Puritans distinguished between ‘lawful’ and ‘unlawful’ recreations) there was enough freedom left to take distinct, if not controversial positions on such a question as physical recreation. One could accept it as a means to stay healthy, for instance, or approve of it with certain conditions, or fully welcome it as a pleasure-yielding human activity.

An assessment of Puritan ideology and physical recreation, i.e., the attitudes of the

educated few ('the speaking aristocracy') who exerted influence on a large public, is not sufficient. It is as important to determine what the common man was thinking and doing. What did New England really look like and how did it operate below the ideational level? Did the people practice what the sermons and laws constantly urged them to do?

An interpretation of the jeremiads (1650 to 1700), which is corroborated by some records of the towns, courts, and churches, shows that the impact of dogmatic theology upon the population has been vastly exaggerated. Even the church members indulged in physical recreation whenever there was an opportunity. The prohibitive laws did not have a great influence since they were not sufficiently enforced.

The historiography of American sport will probably have to reconsider some of the judgments passed on the early Puritans in New England.

Reaction

by

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A revisionist is one who advocates a departure from any authoritative or generally accepted doctrine or theme. Rational and disinterested historical revisionism is the essence of the profession. The host of scholars that followed Herodotus and Thucydides must have given serious consideration to the need for fresher and more accurate interpretations. Wars, saints, despots, ideas, and ideologies, all have undergone revision. For example, Adolf Hitler has received new credentials every decade since his death in 1945. This is as it should be. The danger lies in the revisionist who calls Hitler a good man and Albert Schweitzer a devil. Fortunately, Dr. Wagner, in his study of sporting practices among seventeenth century New England Puritans, does not allow such extremism in his paper.

But, on occasion he comes close. Robert Lee's quotation that "there is evidence enough to indicate that the Puritans were not opposed to diversion and recreation, provided it was truly refreshing, was not a waste of time, was not done in excess, and was not immoral or sensual," is not evidence at all! What a left-handed compliment of Puritan attitudes toward fun and games! To cite the muted support of physical activities by Baxter, Burkett, Shepard, Cotton Mather, Wigglesworth, and Sewall is only to show how few spokesmen for games there were during the seventeenth century. Still, Professor Wagner does us a service, as have several other contemporary writers, in rendering a very early New Englanders as eminently human—occasionally dancing, singing, playing unobtrusively, and throwing themselves into the camouflaged recreations of house and barn raising, hunting and fishing, and the traditional husking bees of the period.

I do not mean to be over-pedagogical, but from a visual, rhetorical, and substantially scholarly view, the paper appears uneven. While there are many excellent, primary sources cited, the paper begins with back-to-back quotes from Charles Hackensmith and Norma Schwendener. Reliable but still secondary sources follow rapidly, i.e., Dulles, Carlson, Gabriel, Davis, Brightbill, Durant and Bettman, Van Dalen and Bennet. This is no way to footnote the first three pages. Eye-witness accounts do, of course, strengthen the paper