

The First “Tom Brown’s Schooldays” (1804) and Others: Origins and Evolution of “Muscular Christianity” In Children’s Literature 1762- 1857

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A consensus exists that authors Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, through their works, stimulated the appearance and general use of the term “Muscular Christianity”. Kingsley is generally considered as the founder, whilst Hughes’ fictional novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857), in particular, is regarded as the “bible” of the doctrine, the ultimate expression in print of the combination of widely-held sentiments which comprised the Muscular Christian gospel. In summary, the essential elements of this gospel were that physical activity and sports (especially team games) contributed towards the development of moral character, fostered desirable patriotism and that such participation and ensuing virtues were transferable to other situations and/or later life (such as from playground to battlefield). Indeed, many have seen Muscular Christianity as extremely significant within the subsequent growth of the British Empire. Others have claimed that Hughes created a new *genre* in the field of Children’s Literature with his (boys) school-and-sports story. Certainly we are indebted to scholars like Guy Lewis, Peter McIntosh and John Lucas, among others, for accentuating the importance of this phenomenon within the development of nineteenth-century sport, on both sides of the Atlantic ocean.

Yet despite its popularity and the large claims made for Muscular Christianity, comparatively little research of a comprehensive nature has been done with a movement of such significant dimensions. The origin of the term itself, for example, is obscure and subject to contradictory explanations. The attitudes of its prime recipients, i.e. Hughes and Kingsley, towards the term, and their contributions, are similarly clouded. Kingsley apparently detested and suspected the term: Hughes enjoyed it at first but became concerned over its implications in later years. The essential contribution and motivations of Dr. Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby, towards the games cult has also been the subject of re-evaluation in recent years. The prophets and disciples of Muscular Christianity have received more attention than its critics: and the period *before* the 1850’s has inevitably received less scrutiny in this regard than the “rise in sports” era which followed the publication of Hughes’ and Kingsley’s novels. For most, these authors were *founders*, pioneers of the gospel, and their novels often regarded as the *beginning* of an irreversible trend which successfully merged athleticism, patriotism, and religion into a palatable philosophy for Britain and the Western World in the second-half of the nineteenth-century.

Not all of these authors’ works were school stories, some were general or specific narratives on sport, story books of a general nature, or books on instruction. In deference to *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, however, perhaps the most striking comparisons or similarities can be found in school stories. For example in a novel about fictional school career of a

“pious Christian” written by William Beloe and published as early as 1792, we are afforded a glimpse of the boys at Westminster School: “asking leave to go to the play, of some great match at cricket, or tennis, or billiards . . . Others were putting themselves into fighting attitudes, and speaking of an intended boxing match betwixt Humphries and Mendoza . . . of races, and cock-fights”. Such sport descriptions became more usual and comprehensive in succeeding school stories. Thirteen years later, for example, the school career of “Thomas White”, under the care of “a respected clergyman . . . Dr. Benson”, was described in: *The Book of Games: or a History of the Juvenile Sport, Practised at the Kingston Academy*, published in 1805. The name “Tom Brown” for a schoolboy hero fond of games was probably first used by Dorothy Kilner in her book: *First Going to School: or the Story of Tom Brown and His Sisters*, in 1804; and again fifteen years later in her book: *The Good Child’s Delight* (1819). although this was not a school story as such. Other authors such as George Mogridge also used the name “Thomas Brown” for their heroes, probably for the same reason given later by Thomas Hughes himself, i.e. that it was a typically English name. But whatever the heroes’ names, the immortal schoolboy figure of Rugby which Thomas Hughes revealed to the world in 1857 had many predecessors in Children’s Literature. created by their authors in the same Muscular Christian image.

Other factors, too, probably contributed towards Hughes’ and Kingsley’s successful timing. Events such as the success enjoyed by Stanley’s biography of Thomas Arnold, published in 1844, or the Great Exhibition of 1851, or the fantastic approbation given to Sir Edward Creasy’s unique bestselling military book of the same year, for example, can be said to have also helped blend Christian thought with the competitive Victorian Society, and justify the concept of Empire. As John Keegan recently put it: “Creasy . . . was quite as attuned as any Victorian to the difficulty of reconciling Christian compassion and a belief in progress with the inhumanity of a getting-and-spending world.” Above all, the tenor of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, in particular, successfully reflected the aspirations and inexorable rise of the middle-class in England during the nineteenth-century.

To summarize, one is reminded of J.G. Dixon’s phrase in reference to the history of German gymnastics: “But though Jahn plucked the fruit, it was Guts Muths who ripened it.” An analogy applies here, for as far as Muscular Christianity is concerned, Hughes and Kingsley may have reaped the harvest, but the seeds were planted and the crop carefully tended by lesser-known laborers beforehand.



Some say it never rains at Windsor