

The Schoolboys of Summer: Juvenile Literature and the Sports Metaphor in America

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Juvenile literature is a valuable means by which to discover the values or mindset of a given culture at a given time. In the United States between 1896 and World War One, a new genre of children's books and stories appeared which featured sports heroes and which were typically set in New England private schools or colleges. Two of the most important authors of this type of fiction at the time were Gilbert Patten, who single-handedly wrote eight hundred and fifty episodes of the Frank Merriwell series, as well as literally hundreds of other boys sports stories. and Ralph Henry Barbour, author of more than fifty schoolboy sports novels. An examination of their works is of great importance given the time of their appearance. a period which saw a tremendous growth in the popularity of sports in America, and given the immense popularity of the stories themselves.

Although there are certain structural differences between the Merriwell episodes and the Barbour novels. the central values and images are the same. Both writers were of course influenced by Englishman Thomas Hughes' classic *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857). and thus we see the same overriding concern with "manly" character. Patten and Barbour both valued the silent endurance of pain, the spirit of "never giving in" and the spirit of team work. and both stress courage and fair play. Moreover, like Tom Brown and his Rugby School friends, the American boys go through quasi-religious conversion experiences which transform them from bullies, rowdies, or outcasts into vigorous "tight thinking" young men.

Organized athletics are the central feature in the lives of these boys. The stories emphasize sports as a means by which to shape and reveal character, and as a way for any boy, regardless of background, to find acceptance by his peers. The stories also feature long play-by-play descriptions of athletic contests which frequently include charts and diagrams: the role of juvenile fiction in pushing the popularity of sports, especially at a time before radio and television, should not be underestimated. Sports fiction also became a model for sports journalism and given the likes of Frank Merriwell. Babe Ruth had very large shoes to fill, indeed.

These boys stories also played a part in presenting and transmitting a stereotypical image of the New England prep school and Ivy League college. Thus they played upon or even created an urge toward upward mobility in the large middle class audience. Along with Frank Merriwell. who attended Yale, was born the image of the All-American Boy, an image still compelling to Americans young and old.

Most importantly, these stories played upon the adolescent insecurities of their audience. and sports. which offer an unambiguous set of rules and definitions. are presented as the ideal metaphor for life itself. Throughout the Patten and Barbour stories, sports are encouraged and defended as invaluable preparation for "the game of life"; moreover. boys