

“Alarm, Amusements and Contempt”: Early English Critics of Muscular Christianity

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The phrase “muscular Christianity” is believed to have been coined in Victorian England of the 1850s by an unknown person who was attempting to identify certain sentiments contained in the novels of Charles Kingsley; and it was later applied to Thomas Hughes’ novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, also. These sentiments reflected a set of collective beliefs which came to comprise the muscular Christian gospel, the essential elements of which were that sports (especially *team* games) contributed significantly towards the development of moral character, that they fostered a desirable patriotism, and that such healthy participation and its ensuing virtues were transferable to other situations and/or to later life. One of the most frequently drawn analogies in this respect was from the school playing field to the military battlefield, as vividly expressed by Sir Henry Newbolt in his oft-quoted poem *Vitai Lampada*.

In retrospect, there can be no doubt that muscular Christianity was a convenient, seductive, and timely philosophy, and a widely accepted one which attempted to reconcile the centuries-old Christian faith with the realities of the modern world to the apparent satisfaction first of the Victorian, then Edwardian, and finally our later twentieth-century conscience. The triumph of the “cult of athleticism” within the quite phenomenal rise of sport in the world (including the revival of the Olympic Games) in the fifty years or so following the publication of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, attests to the powerful spread of the gospel. It was a crucial ingredient in the increasing acceptance of physical education into academic curricula everywhere, as well as in the growing role of the Church in athletic activities, and in the appearance and success of such institutions as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and Boys Scouts, with their “healthy minds in healthy bodies” programs.

Yet this status for sport as an antidote to vice and a means of attaining health and good character—a virtual international panacea—was not proclaimed or sustained without opposition. As *Tom Brown’s Universe* unfolded (to quote the title of J.R. de S. Honey’s 1977 book), the tenets of muscular Christianity were assailed by various critics. Accompanying the many voices raised in agreement with its ideals were others raised in protest and denial. Although these opponents (“heretics”?) may have been outnumbered by supporters, or “disciples”, they included among their number some very well-respected intellectual figures whose views were difficult to ignore or to take lightly. In fact, criticism of the growing importance attached to sport and its values actually began early in the nineteenth-century, long before the term muscular Christianity was in vogue (see, for example, the *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. XVI, April-August, 1810: 328-29) and it has of course continued to the present day. In recent years, especially, many more critics have lambasted the Public Schools and their games tradition with its associated values.

For the purpose of a brief paper, an arbitrary and personal selection of such critics was divided into nine convenient categories, which were given the following titles:

- The Dubious Book Reviewers
- The Concerned Clergy
- The Defenders of the Classics (and other Disgruntled Colleagues)
- The Anti-Female Muscular Christians
- The Cartoonists (14 cartoons from *Punch* were shown)
- The Literary Skeptics (of Fact and Fiction)
- The Reluctant Schoolboy Athletes (and later Autobiographers)
- The Masters of the Progressive Schools
- and
- The Sexually Disturbed Headmaster

Each group was discussed in turn; and to avoid problems of “overlap” (a Dubious Reviewer might also qualify as a concerned Clergyman and later become a Literary Skeptic, for example), all individuals were confined to membership of *one* group only. But the total selection in all nine categories gave a broad enough picture of the reasons for, in Bruce Haley’s words, the “alarm, amusement and contempt” of these early English critics of muscular Christianity.

If the views of the proponents of muscular Christianity can be summed up a single sentence, then probably the apocryphal saying attributed to the Duke of Wellington, that “the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”, is most appropriate. How can the views of the critics best be summarised . . . more than a hundred years later? Perhaps by Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, writing in 1977 of Public School-educated officers during the First World War: “There is a sense, because of the blithe, almost carefree heroism with which they went to such terrible slaughter, in which *the battle of the Somme was lost on the playing fields of Sherborne.*”