

“W.G.” and “John L.” Cultural Conflict and Resolution through Sport

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Focusing upon two of the most prominent sport heroes of the nineteenth century, this paper seeks to compare the cultural significance of W.G. Grace and John L. Sullivan.

The fact that they seldom find a place alongside other great names of the nineteenth century should not be interpreted as a devaluation of their contribution. Indeed, it would appear that only through the disinterest and lack of seriousness attributed sport by academe (and historians in particular), have the earliest of modern sporting superstars been robbed of a deserved chapter in cultural history.

Finding both fame and fortune within two contrasting cultural milieux, the author reaches beyond their sporting accomplishments which has formed the backbone of their many biographies. Exploring the impact of various social processes and institutions upon the apparent cultural affiliation of the “King of Cricket” and the “Boston Strong Boy,” this paper considers the effect of their celebrity status upon conflict and resolution within their group. Drawing upon recent and pertinent studies of the bourgeois hegemony of Victorian England and the emerging prominence of the nineteenth century American Irish immigrant, the importance of these men as something more than sporting heroes is underscored.