

Playing the Old Works Historically: Interpretations of Sport and Leisure in the Western Canadian Fur Trade

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The primary purpose of this paper was to examine sport histories and, more recently, social histories which have commented upon the sport and leisure activities of the nineteenth century Canadian fur trade. Have these histories been situated within the framework of the socio-political-economic industrial revolution and, if so, has this resulted in the publication of more valuable commentaries on sport and leisure activities?

The historical writings of Max Howell, Nancy Howell, Peter Lindsay, Don Morrow, Richard Gruneau, Greg Thomas, and Michael Payne were examined as they related to early Canadian sport history. This paper argued that these historians over-emphasized the larger Canadian political, economic, and social context and, in doing so, misunderstood the socio-culturally complex nature of the Canadian fur trade. Fur trade society was not viewed by these historians as a traditional lifestyle which was closely interwoven with the daily and seasonal rhythms of production that served to bond and order communities. Instead, the sport and leisure of the fur traders was examined from the perspective of the binary opposites of work/leisure, metropole/periphery, and institutionalized activities/impromptu activities. priority was given to the first element in each couplet.

Most interpretations of the history of sport within Canada have focused upon Montreal and its British traditions as the organizing hub from which most of Canada's sporting structure spread. Unfortunately, such a belief presumed that sports were only those activities which required physical prowess and which were associated with an organized institution. Such a bias banished the sport and leisure activities of the Canadian fur traders to an impromptu and thus secondary status within the literature.

Despite its marginal status the fur trade should hold a central and privileged position in Canadian sport history. A re-examination of the sport and leisure of the nineteenth century Canadian fur trade invites consideration of forms of sport other than those proposed and legitimated by the British, hegemonic sporting culture. What is required of further research is a re-conceptualization of historians' understanding of nascent Canadian sport. Such a reconceptualization will not emphasize the binary opposites of work/leisure, metropole/periphery, and institutionalized activities/impromptu activities. Instead it will place Canada's sport and leisure heritage within a broader understanding of the definitions, meanings, and dichotomies which have been assumed to underlie historians' interpretations of work and leisure in Canadian society.