

Charles Wesley Dickinson: A Case Study of a Canadian Cocker, 1860 to 1904

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Cockfighting has received brief coverage from Canadian sport historians, perhaps because few primary sources exist. Newspaper accounts, although helpful in conveying the social composition of a cocking crowd, are limited. Nineteenth century journalists mirror the biases of a middle class who viewed cockfighting as cruel and immoral. For this reason they should not be accepted as the sole basis of research on cockfighting in Canada.

This paper examines a heretofore unexamined primary source document, a memorandum book, kept by a cocker named Charles Wesley Dickinson. Dickinson raised game cocks in Brockville, Ontario from 1860 to 1904. Thus far he has not been a prominent figure in Canada's sporting history and he could easily have become one

of the silent players of history had it not been for this memorandum book. His book is historically significant because it is, to my knowledge, the only known primary source document on Canadian cockfighting written from the perspective of the cocker. Although it contains the experiences of only one man, this book provides insight into a little understood sport and sportsman. Further, Dickinson's experiences challenge previous historical interpretations of the role of cockfighting in Canadian history.

Dickinson's memorandum book permits historians access to an illegal sport. Articles of agreement drawn up between Dickinson and his opponents hint at the organizational structure of cockfighting. Address listings refer to the social composition of his cocking fraternity. A ledger of yearly earnings offers insight into his gambling habits and expenses. Further, this memorandum book broadens historical understanding of the period of transition from traditional to modern sport. Traditional activities did not disappear because a dominant culture labelled them cruel or immoral. Nor did they fall by the wayside amid a flurry of new activities. Among meticulous records of the daily care of game cocks lay clues to the values held by a traditional sportsman within an emerging modern world. Interestingly, Dickinson's opinions concerning animal cruelty, the value of scientific training techniques, and the importance of winning were not unlike those of modern sportsmen despite his illicit behaviour as a cocker.