

Profit by the Stake: Animal Contests and the Entrepreneurial Spirit In Early Modern London

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British historian Alan MacFarland (1987), using criteria set forth by Max Weber in an analysis of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries argued the presence of conditions conducive to a capitalistic economy in sixteenth-century England. The widespread presence of private ownership, the development of mobility of labour, profit-motives and the emergence of a viable economic marketplace were all signals that sixteenth-century England had broken from its medieval bonds.

Prior to the sixteenth-century, English citizens watched and participated in a variety of sports held in conjunction with the principal dates of the agricultural and religious calendars. Time in such a predominantly agricultural society is seasonal, and not measured by clocks; rather, time is measured in terms of the recurrent cycle of festival and ritual: birth, death, and rebirth. Such a pre-industrial sense of time, where social intercourse and labour are intermingled reflects, as labour historian E.P. Thompson (1967) informs us, time not measured in terms of profit and creates a work-ethic not measured in terms of making money.

In fact during the nearly 100 year period from 1546 to 1642 London was never without an organized sporting enterprise. In addition to the private baits conducted at one of the royal residences or elsewhere, public contests were commonplace in and around the city. Among the most notable playing places were Robert Wistowe's commercial enterprise (which dominated the scene up until 1575) and William Payne's structure which later became the Beargarden (in the early 17th century it became the Hope playhouse, one of London's most successful multi-purpose playhouses).

This paper argues that the development of an organized profit making animal sport in Elizabethan London reflects the emergence of a new industrial order and also reflected an entrepreneurial spirit that serves as a basis of many of our professional sporting practices today. Specifically, this paper explores the political and social conditions that allowed for the transformation of London's animal baiting practices from rituals associated with open markets (the baiting of meat prior to sale) to an elaborate, organized profit-making enterprise. Particular emphasis is placed on the often adversarial struggle between the commercial speculators, the Queen's newly formed office, the Mastership of the Bears and the City Council. Theatrical speculators such as Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn invested significant sums of money into "playing places" such as the Bear garden on the Bankside and ultimately succeeded in development the sport of baiting into a profitable investment of effort and capital which repaid itself through public performance.