

HISTORIOGRAPHY

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History and the Text: **Reconstructing the Past from** *This Sporting Life*

This paper attempts two things. First, it offers a brief ‘literary’ analysis of *This Sporting Life* (the original novel by David Storey, 1960, and Lindsay Anderson’s subsequent film, 1963). The discussion is based upon the texts themselves, contemporary reviews and critical essays. The paper argues that in both novel and film there is a significant departure from the major preoccupation of other social realist texts of this era (Braine, Barstow, Sillitoe), namely the problem of social class. *This Sporting Life (TSL)* takes the genre into a new realm through its treatment of gender. In so doing, it presents a critique of a particular form of northern English working-class masculinity, which is reproduced through work and sport. In this sense *TSL* is not only an interesting historical source for its attempt to portray a historically specific working-class culture; it is also an engagement with and contestation of the meanings of that culture. *TSL* is thus a radical novel, which explains its attraction for the left-wing filmmaker Anderson.

Second, the paper goes on to consider the broader implications of both the novel and film texts. Their importance, it is argued, is not confined to Britain, nor to the domain of literary and film criticism. They have significance for historical methodology. Historians have traditionally tended to treat creative literature with a certain amount of suspicion as a source for reconstructing the past. Literature is expected to be a ‘reflection’ of reality, its ‘value’ to the historian judged according to how closely the literary text matches up to ‘objective’ interpretations of the past produced by conventional historical methodology. The paper rejects this privileging of conventional historical sources and methods, and proposes a different premise: that the *TSL* texts and others like them are part of an entire ideological process by which sport (and ultimately ‘reality’) is constructed. They are part of a language that shapes our thoughts on sport and related issues (gender, class place and so on). What sport means to people is determined by such mediations, and by the way they are challenged and re-defined. The texts of *TSL* are, in this sense, historical sources with no more or less a value than ‘conventional’ sources. The paper ends with a plea for historians to regard literary texts in this light, and at the same time to approach conventional sources as if they, too, were literary texts.