

Christopher Dodd, *The Oxford & Cambridge Boat Race*, Stanley Paul, London, 1983. Illus., appendices, bibliog., pp.405. \$39.50.

Christopher Dodd, rowing correspondent for the *Guardian* is the author of two previous rowing books, *Henley Royal Regatta* and *Boating*. The author states his intention 'to relate the history of the Boat Race by telling its best stories', and herein lies the basic flaw in what is a very handsome volume, for while the book is not a full history of the race, neither is it simply a telling of the 'best stories', being, in fact, an often confusing amalgam of the two. The author has been extremely diligent in using written and oral sources to collect a great amount of data, but seems unable to make up his mind as to what type of book he is writing.

One must not suppose, however, that there is nothing of value in the book. Chapters 1-4, for example, give excellent accounts of the birth of the race, the relationship of the two universities to their rivers, and the nature and dangers of the famous Putney to Mortlake course. Dodd's background is evident in Chapter 14, where he recounts with obvious sympathy the successes and

failures experienced by the media as it has attempted to report what is one of the most difficult sporting events for reporter and spectator to follow. In the final four chapters, we see the journalist's skills at their finest, for as Dodd takes us through the 1982 challenge, we realise what the race means to the participants, we learn something of the lives of the coaches, we meet Boris Rankov who completes his fifth successive victorious race in the Oxford boat, and we follow the full program of the last fortnight before race day in a way that well illustrates the pressures that confront modern sportsmen (and Oxford's female coxwain). The sports historian will be annoyed by the total lack of references in the text, though a real bonus at the end of the volume is the 110 pages devoted to results, crew lists, oarsmen and bibliography.

Despite the usefulness of these sections, Dodd has written a book essentially for aficionados, for it is necessary to have much background knowledge to appreciate the text fully, as for example in the various references to Bumps, the relationship of which to Varsity rowing is never fully explained, and would remain a mystery to the lay reader. The relevance of quite a deal of the material is therefore lost, as when Chapter 12 describes only two visits to England by Harvard crews in 1869 and 1906, or in Chapter 13 when we follow the exploits of Oxbridge rowers outside Britain. As often happens when an author is writing sports history, Dodd can be quite uncritical in the selection of his material, and I, for one, was not particularly interested in a list of Blues who have changed their name (W.C. Lecky-Browne, Cambridge 1973-4, became Lecky-Browne-Lecky), or of those Blues who became bishops (even if the See concerned was Mashonaland, in the case of J.P. Burrough, Oxford 1937-8).

As in any book for the initiated, it is essentially an inward-looking work, and the relationship of the events portrayed to the outside world seems not to have been of great importance to the author. Many questions remain unanswered: Why did the race become so popular? Why did it remain so popular for so long? Why has its popularity declined since World War II? Was its popularity widespread in Britain, or was it a South-Eastern England phenomenon? What has been its importance, if any, to other parts of each university? None of these matters is ever really tackled, and

Dodd's book must be labelled an interesting but rather jumbled  
addition to the rowing literature,

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