

BOOK REVIEWS

William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World*. Rowman and Allanheld, New Jersey, 1982. Bibliog., illus., index, pp.viii+ 360. \$25.50 cloth, \$9.50 paper.

As courses in sports history and sports sociology are introduced into more and more 'human movement' tertiary programmes, and the hopes that secondary education might begin to pay attention to the serious study of leisure increase, there is need for a super textbook something like William Baker's.

It sets out, in 360 closely but not at all unreadably printed pages, a detailed history of sport from primitive, pre-Grecian, times to the late 1970s - and much of what he writes in the last two chapters, 'Sports Biz' and 'Sports in Perspective', both foreshadow and explain the sporting world of the 1980s.

One uses the term world advisedly: Baker is extraordinarily comprehensive in his range, at least in the first two thirds of his book. There is thereafter a tendency to become concerned primarily with developments in the United States, particularly in baseball and gridiron, that though relevant by analogy to what was emerging in, say, the English Football League? the Victorian Football League and World Series Cricket (which does get a couple of paragraphs - but no mention in the index, either as WSC or under Packer) is disappointingly thinly treated by comparison with the nineteenth century.

It may be that Baker's scale of treatment of ancient, medieval, and nineteenth century sport just could not be continued into this century: all that can be done is to select themes such as commercialisation, ideological conflict, racist and feminist impact upon sport, and so on, and use examples that come most readily to hand, or may be seen as typifying most clearly the underlying meaning of the particular sporting activity. In that case the value of the book for Australian readers, teachers and students, would be to snap them out of their Britanno-Hibernian-Australian ludocentricity and make them aware that the main events are, and have been since the 1920s, occurring elsewhere, in sports foreign

to the Australian tradition.

It is not only in Baker's later chapters that the importance of the interrelationship between American wealth, communication development, and particular ideology and its effect upon sport in lands far beyond the United States is justly emphasised. The early modern period is treated in such a way as to provide unfamiliar material in colonial American sport, on developments in the ante-bellum search for organised excitement. As Baker emphasises 'the effect was similar to the English pattern', but took a different direction almost from the start because, for one thing, 'most American cities are essentially different from those in the industrial Midlands and north of England'. That, together with the effects of an equally different set of social attitudes, helped form American sport into a shape recognisably kin to the British model, yet by no means a twin.

Studies of French sport and society and, less successfully so far, of Communist bloc countries confirm the validity of old fashioned views that people are different and that, unfashionable as it may be to say so, there is such a thing as national identity, exemplified as such in sport as in anything else.

If there is a fault in Baker's book it is in his reluctance to chance his arm beyond the oblique, or even the forthright, comment when it comes to identifying social significance. The sheer compass of the book precludes extended musing, and the reader can do much to utilise the gobbets of often *recherche* information provided: on the Highland Games of 1832 for instance, on Robert Drover's Cotswold 'Olympic Games' of the early seventeenth century, the association of 'real' tennis with French 'aristocratic opulence and vice' (a sadly cryptic statement I fear) and the like. The reader will be aided in the quest for more by an excellent semi-annotated bibliography which, though confined to books and excluding journal articles, is as comprehensive an introduction to the qualifyingly extensive literature of sport as I know. The index, as I have indicated, is less satisfying, but so rich in detail are many of Baker's pages that a proper index might have been as lengthy as the book. There are a number of full page and inset illustrations, not always much more than a peg upon which a trite (305) or an irrelevant (38) comment is hung.

The price of the paperback edition is remarkably low for such a valuable and interesting book, written in clear sensible prose and undoubtedly likely to form the basis for many an undergraduate essay - the flattering fate of all the best textbooks. But it is more than that: I can think of no one interested in either the history or the future of sport who would not find pleasure, food for thought and a hell of a lot he or she did not know from reading it.

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