

Bill Murray. *The Old Firm: Sectarianism, Sport and Society in Scotland*. John Donald Publishers, Edinburgh, 1984. Bibliog., illus. pp.294. £8.50.

This book is centered on the history of rivalry - nearly a century between Glasgow's major football clubs, Celtic (with Irish and Catholic origins and support) and Rangers (with its roots and sustenance in ultra-protestantism). Its major achievement is to demonstrate how a game reflects, expresses, sustains and moulds, vital conflicting currents in the society of which it is a part.

Bill Murray's is an impressive vindication of those who claim major social significance for sports history. It might be argued that he is unfairly advantaged by his subject area, in that Scottish football is patently more of a religion than religion itself - perhaps the notion of football as a substitute religion is not as fully explored in this book as it might have been. But the virtues of the excellent and spectacular case demonstrated here in a Scottish context of football as a sectarian sport draw to the mind the more subtle dimensions of less forthright cases that might otherwise escape notice. As one who sustained a permanent knee injury in the name of a tiny Rugby Club fittingly (given its origins and support) also called Celtic, and with green and white jerseys similar to its Scottish soccer counterpart, it is sobering to note in retrospect milder elements of sectarian structures and hostility that featured in the New Zealand sporting scene of the 1940s and 50s. Murray's observations and analysis have a much wider, though perhaps not as intense, application than in the Scottish history with which he deals.

All this book is interesting and much of it fascinating to the social historian - and perhaps it will send sporting and particularly footballing historians into veritable ecstasy - but of particular importance to the discipline is the way Murray sees sport as an expression and outlet for social tensions. Put very crudely (whereas Murray puts it with care and refinement) it nevertheless amounts to the proposition that Scotland is a religiously divided country, and that this division and hostility is represented and acted out by two major football teams, Celtic (R.C.) and Rangers (Protestant). Further, that this conflict is itself ritualised into a social institution - *The Old Firm*, as a term for the two teams together, operating as both joint and separate commercial enterprises. The suggestion is that in this case, an established sporting conflict and rivalry acts as a mode of sublimation of social rifts and tensions that would otherwise be more destructive in the 'real', non-sporting world than they in fact are. Dr. Murray goes so far in this direction as to describe the demise of Belfast Celtic as (274) 'a sad loss with repercussions in regard to the defusing of sectarian hatred in Ulster that can only be guessed at'. True, but the implication of the author's guess would seem to be moving towards the idea that if only the IRA and the UDA fielded opposing football teams in Northern Ireland they would cease killing each other, the British Army, and various spectators - or (to be more fair) the proposition that if they only had been this ritualised denominational football there would never had been need for Irish Republican Army or Ulster Defence Army or their like.

Yet Murray does not quite occupy that position. One of the problems of the sport as sublimation, games as reality rendered less harmful theory, is that it may work also in reverse. It can be argued that (in this case) sporting clubs not only embody and express sectarian feelings, but they provide the structures for permanence of those feelings and indeed contrive regular opportunities for their continuance. The necessary inter-club program of sporting contest and triumphalism sustain and resurrect old antagonisms and perpetuate them.

Now Murray is a right-thinking liberal-minded person who believes that sectarianism is a *bad thing*, sensitive to the idea that

these clubs might be fostering sectarianism, and he is at pains to point out that it exists in Scottish society quite apart from football. But that, if true, does not solve the problem of the relationship, which seems to this reviewer more complex than is indicated here. Murray is fierce in his denunciations of sectarianism, but rather lighter on analysis and sympathetic understanding (in the historian's sense) of what bigotry is and why it exists - though he is excellent in showing some of the social functions it serves. Still, if Cardinal Newman found it impossible to comprehend, let alone eradicate, 'the stain on his imagination' inflicted by his early anti-catholic upbringing, it is a bit much to expect a historian of Scottish soccer to elucidate the process.

It is a tribute to this book that this and so many stimulating questions arise from it. It should be compulsory reading in all sports history courses to illustrate, with a brilliant case study, the relationship between sport and social pathology: that it does not answer all the questions is a function of such pioneering. Bill Murray is an enthusiast in the best Knoxian (John as well as Ronald) tradition. He lays about him in great style, smiting friend and foe when they fail to live up to his high standards in sport and life. This is bracing stuff, hair-raising at times in the way it casts down the mighty from their seat, blasting Archbishops (still living) for hypocrisy, castigating catholic education, naming names. No wonder this book made headlines in Scotland. But its contribution is away beyond the sensational and disputatious. This is serious and original scholarship, both of a high order: it is a marvelous bonus to have it served with so much relish and zest.

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