

John Marshall Carter, *Sports and Pastimes of the Middle Ages*. Brentwood University, Columbus, 1984. pp.77.

This slight book deserves a short notice. It appears to be essays and notes left over from the author's *Ludi Medi Aevi* (1981), though I have not been able to sight this and so confirm my impression. Some of the components of the book have been published before, others are new. Altogether they add up to much less than an account of the subject proclaimed by the title. The Middle Ages, which I understand here denote the centuries from 300 to 1500, are in practice reduced to England in what are generally known as the High and Late Middle Ages, there being very little on the period from Constantine to the Norman Conquest of England. Continental Europe is hardly dealt with. There are here some things to be learned about English behavior, but anyone who has read Teresa McLean's *The English at Play in the Middle Ages*, for all its lack of scholarly apparatus, will not bother with Carter's book. Nevertheless, if this kind of lightweight history, however, gets sent all the way from Columbus, Georgia, to Sydney, Australia, presumably because it is thought worth the sending, then it must be treated with some seriousness.

I will confine myself to three criticisms. Carter is taken with Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and is led astray by the idealism inherent in that work. He refers to Huizinga's definition of play as the antithesis of work; later to his definition of sport as the antithesis of play (it must be Carter's slip here). I myself cannot find in the 1970 edition of *Homo Ludens* any such definition, though I find that play is never a task, never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty - which may imply that work is a task

undertaken out of necessity or duty. However, eating and sleeping, while necessary, are hardly work and yet are not play: or are they not tasks? Anyway, whether it is Huizinga's or not, the notion that play is the antithesis of work somehow leads Carter to ask, not what work was in the Middle Ages, and what sport was, but what the concept of work meant to medieval people, what were the nobility's ideas of leisure and the church's view of sport, etc. We are out of the realm of actions and into the realm of perceptions and concepts, that is, into idealism. What people thought is more important than what people did.

His idealism leads Carter to neglect pictorial evidence for sports and games in favor of written documents. (Oddly, I cannot tell whether Carter reads Latin or even French; all the material used is in translation, though, perhaps this is for the benefit of monoglot students,) He cannot tell us what the peasants thought. This is because the peasant did not write and the chroniclers (we are told) did not write about the peasants. Maybe not. But there are innumerable illustrations of peasant pastimes available in Books of Hours and calendars, and in the illuminated borders of manuscripts. McLean's book suggests the wealth of non-verbal documentation that can be exploited. Carter does have two chapters on the Bayeux Tapestry, but is more concerned to show that the tapestry reflects Bishop Odo's perceptions and concepts than the reality of the activities he had his embroiderers depict. In any case, what can one do with statements like this: 'The existence of cock-fighting is apparent from the weather-cock atop Westminster Abbey in scene No. 36 (of the Tapestry)'?

The last criticism is that Carter fails to appreciate anachronisms as a source of medieval sporting history. He tends to seek out contemporary accounts of contemporary events; whereas it must strike everyone who peruses an illuminated manuscript or reads a saint's life that the details of the decor are drawn from present-day life even when the subject dealt with comes from a time long before. Medieval authors and artists had little feel for period. Thus Jacob's bout with an angel (in the margin of a manuscript *Genesis*) or a decoration for Virgil's second *Georgic*, line 531, may be an excellent portrayal of ninth-century wrestling; while an account of the miracle of Saint Eustace (reign of Frajan) or Saint Hubert

(eighth century) may prove a useful description of a fifteenth-century hunt. Indeed, the more remote or fabulous the story, the more up-to-date the decor is likely to be. Anachronisms are not merely charming, but are valuable sources for the period when the work was produced.

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