

CRITICISMS AGAINST THE VALUE-CLAIM FOR SPORT AND THE PHYSICAL IDEAL IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

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In the early 1880s the *Daily Telegraph* printed a scathing comment on the condition of the country's youth and an assured prediction on the possible outcome of this state of affairs. Typically, claimed the critic, the young Australian was "nothing if not a cricketer, a footballer, or a rowing man".¹ He continued: "to handle a bat deftly, to be able to kick an inflated bladder to a greater distance than any other fellow, or to handle an oar with skill and dexterity, appears to be the very climax of his ambition". He condemned this myopic behaviour: "the busy life of the world around him with its fluctuations and its vast concerns, has no more interest for him than the breaking of the distant waves on the base of Cape Otway. To him a big score is a grander event than a general war in Europe". The prospects were, he concluded, quite bleak: "If the new generation of electors...are samples of what the fully-developed young Australian will be bye-and-bye, then will the Legislative sink into a mere club for popular athletes...such is a true picture of one very pronounced type of young Australian".² Such condemnation drastically countered the popular attitudes regarding sports' redeeming qualities. It suggested that over-indulgence in Australia's sporting 'passions' was the sure path to social atrophy and indifference. It challenged the very foundations upon which the value-claim for sport and physical exercise in the Victorian world were built. In this latter regard, the reviewer's criticisms indicate the existence of period concerns which have been overlooked by historians interested in explaining the Victorian obsession with physical culture in the antipodean colonies.³ While there is overwhelming evidence to document the virtues of and vindications for 'the ideology of sport', there is, in sharp contrast, little to offer an alternative, and more balanced, perspective.⁴

Reaction against certain aspects of colonial recreational activity has been identified previously. The blood and violent sports such as cockfighting, ratting and coursing attracted a body of admirers as well as their detractors.⁵ And the more organised team games of cricket and football, particularly the evolving Australian rules code, had their 'gentlemanly' character tarnished in the late nineteenth-century by crowd misbehaviour which paralleled the 'social disorder' of the times and which illustrated the larrikin element of spectatorism.⁶ This was a clear sign of societal degeneration rather than the notions of progress which contemporary commentators chose to see through advancements in 'population, trade and revenue, cultivation and stock', and, indeed, through sporting prowess in competition against the Mother Country.⁷ Further conflict in sporting circles was evident in debates on amateurism, professionalism, gambling and sabattarianism which focused on social and ethical problems arising from the extension of a vast array of physical activities to a broader spectrum of the population.⁸ But the moralistic and character-building assumptions which justified active involvement in 'noble' and 'manly' games seemed beyond reproach. This, however, was not the case. At a time when physical development was constantly endorsed through a number of powerful and prevalent ideas, various colonists found it necessary to oppose these views. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the nature of the criticism against the value-claim for sport and the agencies of physical development in late nineteenth-century Australian social thought.

At least three issues offered supportive rationale to the pervasive Victorian ideals of 'muscular Christianity' and 'manliness', and consolidated connections between sport, physique and character, and education, intellectual and political expressions; these involved debates over educational reform, 'nurture' and nationalism. It was with reference to these issues and to the Australians' apparent preoccupation with sport that a small number of social commentators raised their objections against the manner in which Australian society was developing and against accepted theories of colonial progress.

As the Victorian era drew to an end, Australian intellectuals were caught up in the nature-nurture controversy "which concerned

the relative importance of heredity (nature) and environment (nurture) in the process of evolution".⁹ Those who preferred the environmental explanation were convinced that Old World problems and deficiencies would be solved and overcome in the New World. They subscribed to the belief "that, the Australian environment could transform the British raw material and create a new man, physically healthier and mentally more stable".¹⁰ In an essay on 'An' Australian Dominion' in *The Victorian Review* in early 1880, one proponent of this theory was confident that the Anglo-Australian would stand up favourably against the average Briton.¹¹ He was certain that "under the stimulus of a bright atmosphere, and of the hopeful conditions of life in a young country, the enterprising and adventurous characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon race are capable of reaching an even higher degree of development in Australia than they do in England".¹² The benefits to 'physical development and mental capacity' predicted by this environmentalist were considered by another acolyte writing in the *Sydney Quarterly Magazine* in 1886. A.J. Ogilvy advanced the invigorating effects of the elements, skilfully linking physical and psychological improvement with soil, climate and geography in a deliberation on 'National Character'.¹³ And speaking a decade later, 'the President of the Royal Society of Queensland, William Taylor, told his audience that the climate had "not exercised any injurious effects" on the youth of the colony. Instead it had given them "a taste for out-door exercises of a healthy invigorating kind" and an athletic appearance more than favourable with their British counterparts'.¹⁴ But amidst these geophysical vindications there were serious misgivings over the nurture concept.

Opponents were unconvinced of the beneficial nature of the 'sunny summers' and¹⁵ of the geological propositions associated with racial superiority. An early stand against the claims of the 'soil and race dominance' theorists appeared in a foreboding article entitled 'Will the Anglo-Saxon Race Degenerate?' Basing his conclusion on the presentation of evidence which shared a definite relationship between certain soil and rock characteristics, and particularly the 'palaeozoic' type which formed the greater part of Australia's settled areas, and the deterioration of racial groups, the author put forward his 'unpalatable prospect': "Now, if it be true that the physique, intelligence and morale of a race are

determined by the geological conditions of the country it inhabits . . . we must be prepared for the inevitable degeneration of the Anglo-Saxon stock".¹⁶ This pessimism harmonised with a more renowned authority on the matter, Marcus Clarke's *The Future Australian Race*, published in 1877.¹⁷ Clarke did not predict the demise of Anglo-Australians, but he was satisfied that there would be a number of changes, not all of which could be regarded as healthy. He envisaged the future Australian as a 'tall, course, strong-jawed, greedy, pushing, talented man, excelling in swimming and horsemanship'; he would be vigorous and athletic rather than intellectual. The physical features, according to Clarke, would undergo modification in the New World climate:

The sun beating on the face closes the eyes, puckers the cheeks and contracts the muscles of the orbit. Our children will have deep-set eyes, with overhanging brows; the lower eyelid will not melt into the cheek, but will stand out *en profile* clear and well-defined. This though it may add to character, takes away from beauty. There will be necessarily a strong development of the line leading from the nostril to the mouth. The custom of meat-eating will square the jaw and render the hair course, but plentiful. The Australian will be a square-headed, masterful man, with full temples, plenty of beard, a keen eye, a stern yet sensual mouth. His teeth will be bad, his lungs good. He will suffer from liver disease, and become prematurely bald.¹⁸

There was clearly, as Douglas Cole has argued with some authority, controversy surrounding the supposed connection between the colonial climate and superior physical and anthropomorphic development.¹⁹ It is also apparent that ideas on 'nurture' blended quite easily with notions of 'national character', an essential ingredient of nationalism. And the status of Australian's sporting character figured prominently in expressions on this subject. The comments, in this regard, as those of Marcus Clarke indicate, were not always kind.

It is safe to say that the moral basis for Victorian sport was grounded in the ideals of 'muscular Christianity' and 'manliness'. The sentiments of these expressions, that situations in games such as cricket and football could be used to test the various qualities of a man's character, like self-discipline, courage, endurance and a sense of honour and duty, were quite evident in the rhetoric of sport in the antipodean colonies.²⁰ By the latter decades of the nineteenth-century sport had assumed a prominence in the life of

Australian society; there was a flourishing system of intercolonial and inter-club competitions in various sports; governing bodies or associations were established to regulate affairs; international games became more frequent; and facilities for participation, as players and spectators; were improved and built.²¹ Some believed that this rising popularity was detrimental to social progress. James Hogan, an educator in Victoria gave his public opinion on 'The Coming Australian' in 1880: "It is no exaggeration to say that out of every ten native Australians, nine spend all their leisure in the practice of either cricket or football...the coming inhabitant of the Southern continent will be peaceably disposed and sportingly inclined; rather selfish in conduct and secular in practice; contented and easy-going, but non-intellectual and tasteless".²² Australia had, by accounts, taken their indulgence in sport to the extreme, and it was not only the intellectuals, such as Clarke and Hogan, who were bothered by this state of affairs. Even the proselyte of 'manly' exercises was concerned. One such admirer, Samuel Rinder, penned his views in the *Melbourne Review* just two years after Hogan's protest. He was convinced that the 'love of out-door games and athletic exercises' was a 'redeeming trait', but put this in proper perspective by outlining that "the very proficiency in these sports, of which we hear so much, and the eager interest shown in the peaceful victories that are blazoned in the columns side by side with stirring incidents, that make the great world pause, furnish but another instance of the passion for pleasurable excitement that must be gratified at the cost of nobler aims".²³ Cricket, football, racing and rowing, said Rinder were becoming "the serious business of the day instead of its rest and relaxation". This was moving very much away from sport's moralistic roots. It was not, declared Rinder, 'muscular Christianity'.²⁴

Recognition that zealous sporting interests were having a debilitating effect on the intellectual character was a theme of those-writers who contemplated the composition of Australia's sons. The healthy body was all too easily emphasised at the expense of the healthy mind, a danger pointed out to the readers of *Sydney's Quarterly Magazine* in 1890. It was a clarion call for a more balanced life and a reconsideration of the role of sport in an increasingly business oriented society.²⁵ The existing vices associated with

emergence of 'gate money' sports and the quest for 'some golden prize' were regarded as indicative of a "complete exclusion of higher thoughts and nobler aims". Football, cricket and boat-racing were "becoming more and more a mere business by which to get money... constantly being disgraced by the dark suspicion of foul play". And the national pride engendered through sporting victories in the international arena was considered useless if the 'intellectual life' was 'sacrificed' for the 'physical condition'.²⁶ Sports and physical exercise, when 'carried on reasonably', had little trouble gaining social approval. But when the promotion of them overstepped the acceptable ethical standards of practice and neglected their orthodox physical and psychological benefits, they became a source of contamination, injurious to the national character of the Australian people.

The search for 'character' was at the root of many Victorian ideals. Nationalists constantly sought to define it in context with their country's own peculiar habits, manners and circumstances. Educationalists, too, seemed obsessed with 'character formation' and they endorsed the 'techniques of persuasion and instruction' which brought about its inculcation.²⁷ While many subscribed to Arnold's concept of the 'Christian gentleman',²⁸ which represented the Christianising of a man's character through moral endeavours, there was a general consensus among would-be-reformers that any type of character improvement could only benefit Australian society.²⁹ Religious, spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical education each received attention from advocates in the leading periodicals of the age and more often than not, the harmonious development of man's faculties was stressed.³⁰ Both state and independent school authorities embraced the moralistic justifications of physical education and games. The country's public schools, in the British sense of the term, were upholding the ideology of athleticism before the Victorian era came to an end, while systematized physical exercise was only really extended to hosts of state school boys after 1900.³¹ The champions of physical culture were numerous. The sceptics were few and far between. But the few that spoke out, spelled out the warning of over-emphasis of athletic pursuits.

In his elegant study of athleticism in the public schools of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, J.A. Mangan has outlined with

clarity the powerful nature of this educational ideology which was to spread to many outposts of the empire, including colonial Australia.³² It has been observed that in some British schools, Harrow for example, the games 'cult' was taken to the extreme, overshadowing other aspects of school life. This 'liking' of outdoor sports, at times, 'close to a mania' was also apparent in schools of the antipodes.³³ And it was the inclination of over-emphasis on the physical imperatives of schooling, at the expense of intellectual ambition, which attracted its critics. The full blast of the reaction against the public schools' devotion to athleticism came well after the Great War, but there were clear signs at the end of the nineteenth century of an emerging disapproval.

As early as 1879, the state of Victoria's pedagogues had been awakened to the virtues of 'intellectual recreation' for 'the ordinary battle of life' or 'the busy hive of modern civilization'.³⁴ However, in this state and throughout the rest of the country, preparation for life's struggles was better achieved through involvement in sport. James Hogan wrote at length on the topic of the lionising of the Australian sport hero and noted, in comparison that "the far more deserving victors in the arena of literature and art received but scant sympathy from the-colonies that they once honoured by their presence".³⁵ The situation, in Hogan's mind, warranted serious consideration for 'to deify muscle, and denigrate [sic] the mind' did not present a favourable 'reflection on the national character' of the Australian people and did not, he predicted, 'auger well for the future'.³⁶ Despite his warnings, 'the arena of muscle' and its accompanying accolades, were continuously endorsed over the following years. As one Queenslander in the early 1890s stated: "The fittest survive in every walk of life, and those who distinguish themselves as cricketers and footballers are worthy of our esteem and admiration".³⁷ Such comments only encouraged physical indulgence, particularly in the public schools which were beginning to become engrossed in 'the worship of sport and sportsmen'.³⁸ While some headmasters watched nervously as 'the cult of games' took hold,³⁹ warnings were issued.

Schoolmasters and schoolboys were reminded of the educational and moral contexts and virtues of games. At St. Peter's College

in Adelaide for example, speeches by visiting dignitaries throughout the 1880s pressed the school to keep athletics and scholarship in a proper perspective.⁴⁰ And in one instance, the words of Hogan and Clarke, with a touch of inspiration from Thomas Carlyle, were reinforced:

In this glorification, however, we are apt to lose sight of the fact upon which I wish specially to lay emphasis, namely, that we in Australia are guilty, aye, and promise to be still more in this matter of the worship of those who shine in the performance of some manly sport . . . if this worship of heroes in bodily exercise is not controlled and checked we shall quite eradicate the pursuit of letters and literature, and of the arts and sciences, and create a false impression of ourselves. By all means let us admire those who love to indulge in healthy sports, but we must cultivate the mind and the body . . . There is a great deal more in this life than being able to run faster than anyone else, or to lift a greater weight, or to strike a heavier blow.⁴¹

While interested observers chartered events in the antipodes, comparison with England's renowned institutions was a matter of course for anxious spectators. *The Queensland Cricketer and Footballer* reprinted a speech by a Cambridge Don delivered at Warwick School's Annual Prize Day and entitled 'Too Much Athletics'. The 'extreme devotion' to games 'in the public schools' of England was charged with 'lowering' the ideas of boys. It was 'nothing more than intellectual vulgarity' and resulted in the loss of 'intellectual enthusiasm for higher and nobler pursuits'.⁴² This line of argument supported the earlier social criticisms of Hogan, Winder and Walters and the extreme anti-athletic stance of Donald Cameron, a second master at Brisbane Grammar School (1869-1875), and later Headmaster of Ipswich Grammar School (1875-1900), who believed that all 'sport or exercise' was mere 'lost time' which was better spent 'improving the mind'.⁴³ Under Cameron, Ipswich's academic reputation prospered. 'Habits of application' were forged in the classroom more so than on the cricket square or football field.

Cameron's suspicion of the value of games in disciplining the mind and the perceived indulgence of the country's public schools in organised games, especially after 1900, were merely illustrative of broader trends and issues which appeared to indicate that Australians of all classes were embracing their sporting interests to

the exclusion of the more important 'social and political questions'.⁴⁴ The message was clear but fell, all too often, on deaf ears. While some were sympathetic to the arguments put forward against sporting involvement and the development of a healthy physique, many Australians of the period chose only to see the benefits. Activities of all types continued to satiate their athletic appetites. The passion for sport remained a feature of the antipodean Victorian world.

NOTES:

1. *The Daily Telegraph*, (February 27 1882).
2. *Ibid.*
3. This is not a criticism of the quality of previous research but rather a comment on the nature of the work completed in an emerging field of study.
4. Ian Turner, 'Work and Play in Victorian Victoria', *The Victorian Historical Journal*, 49:1 (1978), 37-48; K. Elford, 'Sport in Australian Society: A Perspective', in T.D. Jaques and G.R. Pavia (eds.) *Sport in Australia: Selected Readings in Physical Activity* (Sydney, 1976), pp.33-45; W. Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 59:4 (December 1973) 225-246; Keith Dunstan, *Sports* (Melbourne, 1981); and John Daly, *Elysian Fields: Sport, Class and Community in Colonial South Australia* (Adelaide, 1982).
5. See J.W.C. Cumes, *Their Chastity was not too Rigid: Leisure Times in Early Australia* (Melbourne, 1979).
6. For a discussion of troubles with football, see Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner, *Up Where Cazaly? The Great Australian Game* (Sydney, 1981); Richard Cashman looks at cricket and larrikinism in 'Ave a Go, Yer Mug! Australian Cricket Crowds From Larrikin to Ocker' (Sydney, 1984); contemporary views of larrikinism can be gleaned from 'Larrikinism', *Sydney Quarterly Magazine*, (January 1884), 207-215; and 'The Genesis of the Larrikin', (February 1885), 20-23.
7. See 'Australian Progress', *Australian Sketcher*, 11:21 (October

- 31 1874), 162; Turner, *op.cit.*, and Mandle, *op.cit.*
8. Cashman, *op.cit.*, p.32; Maxwell L. Howell and Reet A. Howell, 'Sport in Australia', Unpublished manuscript, University of Queensland (1989, p.28; and John R. Ross, 'Pedestrianism and Athletics in England and Australia in the Nineteenth-Century: A Case Study in the Development of Sport', Unpublished honours thesis, University of Queensland (1984). Researchers have only scratched at the surface of these areas. Each is in need of elaboration and further analysis.
 9. C.L. Bacchi, 'The Nature-Nurture Debate in Australia, 1900-1914', *Historical Studies*, 19:75 (October 1980), 199-212.
 10. *Ibid.*, 200.
 11. Vincent Cavendish, 'An Australian Dominion ', *The Victorian Review*, 1:3 (January 1 1880), 384-391.
 12. *Ibid.*, 385.
 13. A.J. Ogilvy, 'National Character. A Sketch by an Evolutionist', *The Sydney Quarterly Magazine*, (October 1883), 73-78.
 14. W.F. Taylor, 'Presidential Address', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, Volume XI, (Brisbane, 1896), pp.xxiii-xliii.
 15. 'English Prejudice - Australia's Misfortune', *The Sydney Quarterly Magazine*, (October 1883), 73-78; and 'Will the Anglo-Saxon Race Degenerate?' *Victorian Review*, 1:1 (November 1879), 114-123.
 16. 'Will the Anglo-Saxon Race Degenerate?' *ibid.*, 122.
 17. Marcus Clarke, *The Future Australian Race* (Melbourne, 1877).
 18. *Ibid.*, pp.20-23.
 19. See Douglas Cole, 'The Crimson Thread of Kinship: Ethnic Ideas in Australia, 1870-1914', *Historical Studies*, 14: 56 (April 1971), 518-529.
 20. Turner, *op.cit.*; Elford, *op.cit.*, and Daly, *op.cit.*
 21. See Ronald Lawson, *Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society* (Queensland, 1973), p.20; and Howell and Howell, *op.cit.*, pp.24-29.

22. J.F. Hogan, 'The Coming Australian', *The Victorian Review* 1:13 (November 1880), 102-109.
23. Samuel Rinder, 'The "Foreigner" in Australia', *The Melbourne Review* (October 1882), 437-442.
24. *Ibid.*
25. George Walters, 'The Young Australian', *The Sydney Quarterly Magazine* (March 1890), 63-73.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Daniel Walker Howe, *Victorian America* (Pennsylvania, 1976), pp.24-25.
28. C. Turney, 'The Advent and Adaptation of the Arnold Public School Tradition in New South Wales', Part I, *The Australian Journal of Education*, 10:2 (June 1966), 133-144; Part II, 11:1 (March 1967), 29-43; Bob Bessant, 'The Influence of the 'Public Schools' on the Early High Schools of Victoria', *History of Education Review*, 13:1 (1984), 45-57; and C.E.W. Bean, *Here, My Son: An Account of the Independent and Other Corporate Boy's Schools of Australia* (Sydney, 1950).
29. See for example, 'The Social Effects of Universal Education', *The Australian Sketcher*, II:19 (September 5 1874), 130; W. Tomlinson, 'Education, True or False', *The Victorian Review* 1:4 (February 1880), 633-640; Charles Strong and Reverend Dr. Bromby, 'Religion in State Schools', *The Melbourne Review* (April 1882), 192-206; and Bella Guerin, 'Modern Education', *The Sydney Quarterly Magazine* (July 1884), 353-368.
30. See particularly Henry W. Sanderson Edmunds, 'Public Education', *The Sydney Quarterly Magazine* (July 1884), 353-368.
31. See Geoffrey Sherrington, 'Athleticism in the Antipodes: The Athletic Association of Great Public Schools of New South Wales', *History of Education Review*, 12:2 (1983), 16-28; Bean, *op.cit.*, pp.159-173; and W. Gordon Young 'Physical Education in Australia' (Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1962).
32. J.A. Manga, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge, 1981); and more recently *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects*

- of the Diffusion of an Ideal (Middlesex, England, 1986). Other studies which have studied the international aspect of athleticism include David W. Brown 'Athleticism in Selected Canadian Private Schools for Boys to 1918' (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Alberta, Canada, 1984); Scott A.G.M. Crawford, 'A History of Recreation and Sport in Nineteenth-century Otago' (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Queensland, Australia, 1984); and Sherrington, *op.cit.*
33. Geoffrey Blainey, James Morrissey and S.E.K. Hulme, *Wesley College: The First Hundred Years* (Melbourne, 1967), p.71.
 34. William Farqhar, 'Intellectual Recreation', *The Victorian Schoolmaster*, 1:3 (September 17, 1879), p.30.
 35. Hogan, *op.cit.*, p.107.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. 'Athletes, Athletics, and the Public', *The Queensland Cricketer and Footballer*, 2:1 (September 15, 1893), 14.
 38. Bean, *op.cit.*, p. 169.
 39. *Ibid.*, p.170.
 40. See for example excerpts from speeches in *St. Peter's College Magazine* 1:4 (September 1884), 2; and 1:6 (March 1885), 2-3.
 41. 'Heroes and Hero-Worship', *St. Peter's College Magazine*, III:12 (December 1892), 176-177.
 42. 'Too Much Athletics', *The Queensland Cricketer and Footballer*, 2:5 (January 15, 1894), 17.
 43. Joseph Henry Allsopp, *A Centenary History of the Ipswich Grammar School, 1863-1963* (Queensland, 1963); pp.33-43; and Mr. Justice Powers 'Recollections', in Stuart Stephenson *Annals of the Brisbane Grammar School, 1869-1922* (Brisbane, 1923), pp. 57-58.
 44. 'Football Fun', *The Queensland Cricketer and Footballer*, 1:7 (March 15, 1893), 4. The article remarks on 'the hold football has got on the working class' and suggests that it occupies all their conversation. This, perhaps, is an over-exaggeration but does support observations made by John Lack in 'Working-Class Leisure'. *The Victorian Historical Journal*, 49:1 (1978), 49-63.