

BOOK REVIEWS

William J. Baker and James A. Mangan, editors, *Sport in Africa: Essays in Social History*. Africana Publishing Company, New York/London, 1987. Illus., index. pp.xiii+309., \$49.50.

This book is important - perhaps even central - to any tertiary course on sports *culture*. But its significance lies as much in its four basic flaws as in its many merits.

Thirteen authors contracted original, or perhaps specially tailored, chapters. In three parts, the essays treat indigenous traditions, colonial ways, and contemporary trends.

The work is sub-titled 'Essays in Social History'. Several of them are nothing of the sort. They are, indeed, excellent little treatises in social and cultural anthropology, in imperial history, in political sociology and in urban politics. Perhaps 'social history' is simply a convenient shorthand. But my guess is that the editors were reaching out for academic respectability, for the legitimacy that comes with the somewhat fashionable term 'social history'. Therein lies my objection. Sports history, sports culture, sports criticism have arrived - legitimate, valid, solid. We no longer need to stretch 'upwards' to the coat-tails of conventional academe.

The editors claim their definition of sport is deliberately 'liberal and comprehensive'. Liberal, yes; comprehensive, no. Part One has three finely written essays on indigenous recreation. But can a 300 page book justify a full quarter on the cultural anthropology of dancing, wrestling, and gambling ritual, and on their role and function in traditional societies? Again, as a hunch, it looks like a *stretching* for academic credence, a conscious or unconscious validation of our sports-centred interests.

The objection is not to Part One, but to its emphasis in a book on sports in colossal Africa. Why not more on modern, organised, competitive sport? What of long-distance swimming and running, in Egypt and Morocco respectively? Of soccer, race, and 'civilization' in Portuguese Africa? The politics inside and outside the Supreme

Council of Sport in Africa? What of sport and "negritude" in Senegal and in Ethiopia? What of the havoc wrought by the South African and Rhodesian Olympic movements? (Several of these topics are dealt with by Baker - but *en passant* in a wider essay.)

Without any such intention, I'm sure, the editors have nonetheless produced an essentially Anglo academic history (and anthropology) of Anglo behaviour in black Africa. Apart from an excellent thesis by Ali Mazrui - on the gender gap - much of the material is sophisticated analysis of what white administrators, white settlers, and white missionaries felt, believed, and did. Sport in Africa is relatively embryonic; writing about it even more so. But surely there was room for more black perspective, even without footnotes?

A final quibble: why do academic writers on sport - in this book and elsewhere - treat sport with such icy distancing, with such leprous quality so as to be as far removed from it as possible? What, for heaven's sake, is wrong with passion, commitment, liking or better still, love of sport? Cashman and Stoddart do it in Australia. In this book Anthony Kirk-Greene's "Imperial Administration and the Athletic Imperative" is a jewel. His account of "character" as a pre-requisite for colonial service, of team sport as the "builder" of character, of how "athletic excellence became the logarithm tables from which to calculate potential performance" is a joy to read. His ability to make his points about colonial history is enhanced by his obvious liking for sport. What better illustration of the Colonial Service Appointments Board attitude to the "three guarantees" - "some brain, some brawn, and lots of breeding" - than this extra sentence?: "In our service, Brearley would have got in, but Boycott and Botham would never have passed the Board."

There are several outstanding contributions: firstly, Kirk-Greene's piece, with its serious messages - that the athletic excellence of the colonial administrator "was to make the Briton a better administrator", not the African a better athlete or citizen; that the postcolonial African found a B.Sc. in economics indeed counted "far more" than scoring a century at Lord's.

In similar vein we have a splendid analysis by James Mangan on "Ethics and Ethnocentricity: Imperial Education in British Tropical

Africa". He begins with that marvellous homily from a *Pedagogue's Sketchbook*:

Realise the importance of games. It's in football and cricket and rowing that Englishmen get their splendid moral training which no other nation gets... Be proud of your reputation for efficiency in games - it is the source of...higher imperial efficiency.

With fine scalpel Mangan proceeds to vivisect this "foolish but perfectly serious philosophy of education". The Mangan and Kirk-Greene essays are essential reading - especially here, where some of this foolishness still persists with vigour in our private schools. "Education for obeisance" was what Lord Lugard sought in Nigeria. How many of our schools want independent minds and contrary values?

At pp.157 ff Mangan gives a short but compelling and cogent analysis on assimilation, adaptation, accommodation and assorted other "philosophies" on race. "By and large", he concludes, "the African was unimpressed with the imported concepts of Tom Brown, assimilation and adaptation. Character mattered less than accreditation, and husbandry was less attractive than professionalism." All this is fascinating to me, as a student of Aboriginal administration: our officer recruitment was the very negation, at least until the 1980s, of the "three guarantees": no brains, no sporting brawn, and certainly no gentlemanliness.

Ali Mazrui, as always, gives us his insight and perception: this time a reflection on the ways in which tribal tradition and Islamic codes of conduct have inhibited black women in competitive sport. What makes a woman physically attractive in Africa? Fatness, he says; but the measure of fitness for sport is slimness - and so they have a wide *sexercise* gap! As important is his perception that "the ethos of armed men and protected women was the most persistent and most primordial of all forms of stratification". Nothing in human history, he concludes, has been "more responsible for the political subordination of women than their demilitarization**.

Baruch Hanzan's account of the Russian use of sport as an instrument of political expansion in Africa is a useful, factual account. Robert Archer's study of politics and sport in South Africa's black townships summarises, somewhat flatly, what he and

Bouillon did so well in their book *The South African Game*. But both enhance a reading of William Baker's concluding essay, "The Meaning of International Sport for Independent Africa". This is a superb assessment of black nationalism and the role of mythology in nationhood - including the necessity of and for heroes. "No one heard of Kenya until Kip Keino won in Mexico City": a simplification, but real enough and, as Baker points out, more so because not only were the heroes highly visible, they also had (have) the advantage of not being able to be toppled by *coups*.

Sport for emergent African states has become "the leverage for the moving of political mountains". Sport has also been the vehicle for political coherence among diverse and diverging states - through the commonality of their political and sporting enemy, South Africa. The "strict separation of sport and politics was an enshrined myth for the friends and heirs of Avery Brundage": this, a very apt closing to the book, demonstrates both African unity against that arrant nonsense and white infuriation at this black reaction.

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