

ATHLETICISM REVISITED: SPORT, CHARACTER BUILDING AND PROTESTANT SCHOOL EDUCATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY MELBOURNE

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During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Church sponsored public school constituted the dominant vehicle for the higher, or secondary education of young men in the Australian colonies, and their subsequent entry into Universities. The first public school established in Australia was the Church of England Kings School in 1832 in Sydney. A non-denominational, state supported Sydney Grammar School was established in 1857, and the Methodist Newington College in 1863. It was however, Melbourne which became the centre of public school education in the colonies during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Church of England Melbourne Grammar School was established in 1858 followed by the Presbyterian Scotch College in 1859 and the Methodist Wesley College in 1865.

The growth of public schools in the Victorian colony in general, and Melbourne in particular, reflected the emergence of a significant middle class. Between 1860 and 1880 the population of Victoria had increased from 170,000 to 280,000, and Melbourne had become a city of 'bustle, money making and rapidly solidifying class distinctions'. A visitor to Melbourne during the 1870s observed:

All the suburbs appear to have sent large contingents of wealth and beauty to give animation to the scene. Men were formally dressed in the emblems of their middle class rank - top hats and morning suits - while their ladies were particularly vivacious, exhibiting the bright colours of their dresses, their happy looks, and their eyes sparkling with excitement.¹

The standards of Melbourne's public schools were generally seen to be high. According to one contemporary observer:

Victoria offers infinitely superior advantages to those of the other colonies combined, a feeling of *esprit de corps*, exists, not so strong, perhaps as in English public schools, but very strong considering the number of day boys. In other colonies it does not take root at all firmly, or else degenerates into party spirit.²

A number of commentators concluded that these schools had been explicitly modelled on the public schools of nineteenth century England. Twopeny noted, for example, that the prefect system had been established, albeit, with modification, to reflect 'the democratic spirit of this country'.³ Similarly, Turney observed that the more prestigious church secondary schools, like Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College, sought to follow their English contemporaries in almost every aspect of organisation. He noted:

The house system, prefects, the emphasis on games and manliness, the moral code (good learning and godliness) all took their cue, directly or indirectly, from the Arnoldian tradition. There was no question here of a colonial solution to the problem of secondary education. It was taken for granted that what suited the English middle class was eminently suited to his colonial counter-part.⁴

Mr E.E. Morris, Headmaster of Melbourne Grammar between 1875 and 1882, ex-student of Rugby school, and graduate of Oxford University, made it perfectly clear what his intentions were on becoming Headmaster:

The school should be as far as possible worked upon the basis of an English public school, and prove in this colony no unworthy younger brother of the public schools at home.⁵

Morris' view that Melbourne public schools should replicate the English system was not shared by every colonial headmaster, as will be indicated later. However, in general, the English system provided both an ideological and organisational framework for the development of the

local system of higher education. What, then, was the ethos or ideology of the nineteenth century public school system?

At the general level it constituted a philosophy of education which attempted to balance the intellectual with the moral and physical.⁶ In the colonies, this view was exemplified in the Scotch College Annual Report of 1861, by the Headmaster, Rev. Dr. A. Morrison. Morrison indicated that it was his earnest aim and endeavour to educate the ‘whole man’; ‘combining intellectual moral and religious training with a sound healthy physical development’.⁷ At the specific level the ethos involved the use of team games to develop in the boys the traits of manliness, character, gentlemanly behaviour and patriotism. According to Mangan, the ethos was constructed around an ideology of athleticism.

Physical exercise was taken, considerably and compulsorily, in the sincere belief of many, however romantic, misplaced or myopic, that it was a highly effective means of inculcating valuable instrumental and impressive educational goals: physical and moral courage, loyalty and co-operation, the capacity to act fairly and take defeat well, the ability to both command and obey. These were the famous ingredients of character training which the public schools considered their pride and their prerogative.

This ideology has its origins in two related doctrines, first, muscular Christianity, and second, social Darwinism. The muscular Christian doctrine was reflected in, and promoted through, the fictional novels published by Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes in the nineteenth century. Kingsley is considered to be the instigator of the term with the publication of *Westward Ho!* in 1855, where, in Amyas Leigh he created the quintessential muscular Christian. Hughes’ novel, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) is regarded as the bible of muscular Christianity, the ultimate expression in print of the sentiments which comprised this doctrine. According to one reviewer of the impact of muscular Christianity on school life:

Moral earnestness and compassionate gentility symbolised ideal qualities which it was deemed necessary for men to possess if they

were to be perceived as 'men of character' and 'decent' members of society. These qualities were central to living a Christian life. To be an earnest Christian demanded a tremendous effort to shape the character in the image of Christ. Christ-like attributes such as a sense of duty, virtue, courage, self-discipline and purity, were encapsulated in the 'ultimate masculine quality' of manliness. And a man's manliness was tested in everyday life and enhanced by involvement in approved physical activities.⁹

The essential elements of the muscular Christian doctrine were that sports, and especially team games, contributed towards the development of moral character, fostered a desirable patriotism, and that such participation and its ensuing virtues were transferable to other situations and to later life.

Herbert Spencer's social Darwinian theme of survival of the fittest was also an important part of the ideology of athleticism. Spencer believed that in a competitive, industrial society, as in nature, the weak would fall, thus making way for the strong, and that in generations to come, the typical human would be stronger, both mentally and physically. In its application to the English public school system Social Darwinism became 'the cultivation of physical and psychological stamina at school, in preparation for the rigour of imperial duty'.¹⁰ Brown's study of public school life in nineteenth century Canada neatly exemplified the social Darwinist theme. Living conditions were uncomfortable and severe, and disciplinary measures were administered frequently and rigidly. All were designed to build character. An ex-pupil recalled:

At Trinity College School during the 1870s the routine was necessarily strict . . . food, while adequate, was not wasted, and our appetites were those of growing boys. Often I spun knives with other boys for toast at breakfast. If I won, I was not hungry that morning; if I lost, I was a little hungrier than usual. It was worth taking a chance... it was survival of the fittest...¹¹

The 'father' of the athleticism ideology was originally thought to have been Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby school between 1828

and 1843. This view, however, has little support from modern scholars. While Arnold was committed to the training of 'Christian gentlemen' who would become the 'champions of righteousness', ready to combat the 'ever watchful forces' of evil,¹² he did not view team games and exercise as the dominant vehicle for the development of character. Rather, Arnold's educational philosophy was centred on moral education. Although Arnold enjoyed watching the boys play their sport, he was blind to the moral possibilities of cricket and football.¹³ His writings on educational theory and practice do not include reference to the role of physical activity. Arnold's ideal of the Christian man did not attach any great importance to the physical.¹⁴ The pioneers of the athleticism ideology were to be found elsewhere.

According to Mangan, team games were not assimilated into the English public school curriculum until after 1850.¹⁵ This coincided with the emergence of a new breed of headmasters. They were all relatively young, active, and convinced that team games and exercise had profound character building properties. The appointment of C.J. Vaughan to Harrow in 1845, G.L. Cotton to Marlborough in 1853, E. Thring to Uppingham in 1853, H. Walford to Lancing in 1859, and H.H. Almond to Loretto in 1862, led to a transformation of the public school ethos. Prior to this era, staff were not responsible for boys outside the classroom; nor were team games the most popular pastime. Exploring, hunting, fishing and nesting were the dominant activities.¹⁶ However, by the 1860s games had become a core component of the curricula. In the early days of the development of the athleticism ideology, games were used not only as character building activity, but also as a form of social control. For example when Cotton went to Marlborough, he aimed to create a school out of mutineers, and 'consciously developed organised games as one of the methods by what the school be brought into order?'¹⁷

By the time Thring, Walford and Almond had consolidated their headmasterships, the ideology of athleticism had cemented its position as a powerful instrument of school boy character building, and its

proponents were articulating its underlying theme. Thring believed that while education included the imparting of both knowledge and Christian manliness, the latter was the supreme aim.¹⁸ Similarly, Walford considered that the great value of a school is that it is, or ought to be, a place of moral discipline, and that this discipline is taught as much in the playground or cricket field as in the classroom.¹⁹ Almond epitomised the ideology of athleticism in its mature form as an integration of muscular Christianity and social Darwinism. He urged the boys to consecrate their bodies as a living sacrifice to God, and espoused a vigorous and manly religion. At the same time he viewed vigorous physical activity as the way of improving the human stock of the nation.²⁰

At least one educational historian has claimed that the cultivation of 'Christian gentlemen' was not an objective of higher education in colonial Australia.²¹ However, there is substantial evidence to suggest that team games were a significant part of the curricula of Melbourne's public schools, and that the ideology of athleticism was clearly articulated by their headmasters.

The inaugural Headmaster of Melbourne Grammar School Dr. J.E. Bromby, was a student at Uppingham and a graduate of Cambridge University. Bromby was headmaster between 1858 and 1874, and was instrumental in organising the first inter school boat race in 1868 and combined sport day in 1872. These initiatives were seen to be an indicator of the school's progress, and its ability to take the lead in matters pertaining to public school life.²² Bromby was aware of the need to balance the intellectual and physical sides of school, but generally believed that games and exercises were important in 'developing' the boys. He noted:

One enemy to continuous application, against which we have to contend, is the great fondness which colonial boys have for out of door exercise, and I am quite ready to admit that one may be made auxiliary to the other. Yet the task of retaining the latter within due bounds is not always an easy one. If, however, too much time is occasionally given to these vigorous athletic efforts, it is a

mistake on the right side. It is far better to be energetically engaged in any employment of time, and to have physical stamina consolidated than to be spending every leisure hour in idleness and frivolity.²³

Mr. E.E. Morris was Headmaster of Melbourne Grammar between 1875 and 1882, and like Bromby, was a product of the English public school and University systems. His views were succinctly espoused in a lecture on health and physical activity at the Prahran Town Hall in 1877. In his discussion on the role of games, Morris noted that there was a 'danger of making too little of games and of fostering a race of do-nothings'. Morris also proposed that team games were better than athletics (an individual activity) since they focused on moral issues like 'pulling together' and 'keeping your temper'. He compared team games to a mimic war, and reminded his audience that Wellington had said the Battle of Waterloo was won on the Eton playing fields. Morris considered cricket to be the noblest game of all, 'bringing out mental virtues as well as bodily', but also criticised it for being too long, for the batting being too strong for the bowler, and for 'one side being idle for too long together'.²⁴

A comprehensive articulation of the 'mature' version of the athleticism ideology (which integrated muscular Christianity and social Darwinism was promulgated by Mr. R. Pyne, Headmaster of Melbourne Grammar between 1882 and 1885. In his address of March 1, 1883, he sketched his 'model' of public school education:

The public school has much to teach besides what is learned in the form of lessons. It is a moral gymnasium, an arena for contest, a republic in which personal rights have both to be maintained in oneself and respect in others. It should be a training-ground for the business and struggle of life, and for the duties of a world in which men have to work with men and to contend with men. It is here that habits are formed and character moulded; obedience to discipline, punctuality, self-restraint, manly independence,

self-sacrifice, the sentiment of honour - these are some of the qualities which every great school engenders and evokes.

Now, with regard to school-games, I will not conceal from you the fact that I attach no little importance to them. That champion of 'muscular Christianity', Charles Kingsley, said, 'In the public schools of England, cricket and football are more or less compulsory, being considered integral parts of an Englishman's education.'

[and] what of the 'moral' tone of the school?... with whom lies the forming of it? Not with the boys of brain usually, but with the boys of muscle - the big fellows of the school. To such I would say, be muscular, since nature has made you so, . . . but, in heaven's name, be muscular Christians. It is a fine saying, We cannot all be scholars, but we can at least be gentlemen.²⁵

While Pyne was one of the few early Melbourne Grammar headmasters not to have been educated at an English public school, he enthusiastically endorsed the Thringian, Waldfordian and Almondian educational philosophies. Pyne ironically, was forced to retire as Headmaster due to chronic ill health. His successor, Dr. A.J. Wilson was, like Morris, a graduate of Oxford University. He was no less supportive of athleticism. In a sermon preached in Christ Church, South Yarra, in July 1888, shortly before his return to England, he spelt out his educational philosophy. Like Morrison, then still Headmaster at Scotch College, Wilson identified three special characteristics of the ideal public school education. They were first, spiritual training of the character; second, intellectual training of the mind; and finally physical training of the body. In respect of each characteristic, Wilson said:

What can be of greater value to a nation than to develop and improve the national mind and body, that is, the mental and physical powers of each member of the growing generation; to train a race which has the wit to plan, and the strength to carry out all the details of material development, which God has placed within its reach.

We ought to train all alike, by a regulated system of gymnastics, swimming, and the like, so that every child, as it grows to man's estate, would be laying up a stock of vigour to expand for the material advancement of the country. I hasten to consider the first requisite of education, 'the training of the character'. In a course of true education the training of character underlies all other training just as the exercise of character is required in all after-life in the world.

And, think what the school games may be doing for a boy, if mismanaged. Their moral effect on him may take the direction of unfairness, or selfish display, or vanity or brutality. But when the spirit that animates them is a true one, is it nothing for a boy to learn in the school fields the chivalry which would scorn to take a mean advantage of a foe, and the patriotism which plays for the victory of his team and the honour of his school, caring little by comparison for his own displays of prowess. You may be fashioning the spirit of the patriot, and the courage of the Christian martyr, among the small ambitions of the cricket or football ground.²⁶

At Wesley College games were also an important part of the curricula. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, the school magazine, the *Wesley College Chronicle* gave significant space to a review of the school's sporting achievements. There were few extended editorials or Headmaster's reports which articulated in detail the role of sports and exercise, or expressed the ideology of athleticism. This is not to say, however, that sports and games were 'underplayed' or devalued at the school.

The Rev. Dr. Way, Headmaster between 1882 and 1892, writing in the school magazine in 1885, reminded students that a healthy mind must be housed in a healthy body, and that a life and energy in sports reflected well on ... school work.²⁷ Two years later, writing in a similar vein, he pointed out that the school 'had the responsibility for training not only the mental and bodily powers, but also for promoting

gentlemanly feeling'; and that the school 'was a place where something is taught beside book learning - perseverance and unselfish striving'.²⁸ Way did not, as Wilson, Payne and Morris did in their addresses to Melbourne Grammar students, assert that the primary vehicle for the development of gentlemanly conduct and manliness, was, indeed, the playing field and river. In an 1888 school magazine editorial, though, it was argued in strongly social Darwinist terms that:

If you have not succeeded in getting your cap for games, still the work you have done in trying for it has strengthened your muscles and toughened your limbs for future use; and, before your time, the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.²⁹

The most influential proponent of the ideology of athleticism at Wesley College, was L.A. Adamson. Although he was not appointed Headmaster until 1902, he was, in his prior role as senior resident master, able to establish games as an integral and popular part of the curricula. Adamson was appointed to the school in 1887, and was welcomed as an old boy of the Rugby school, and a member of the football team of that time.³⁰ With the encouragement of Dr. Way, Adamson aimed to reproduce the Rugby model at Wesley. He introduced the award of colours, codes of privilege, and sporting songs (many of which he wrote himself). Adamson believed that 'the challenge of the games field and the river held superior outcomes beyond the competition of classroom subjects'.³¹ He wanted to demonstrate that sport was capable of transmitting the Christian message to his Wesley boys, and that it had the practical means to mould gentlemen. According to one scholar, Adamson's immediate desire was to create a 'Rugby in the Antipodes'.³² Adamson's views came to dominate Wesley College so strongly during his headmastership that the period 1902-1913 constituted the golden age of sport at Wesley.³³

Scotch College exhibited an enigmatic quality with respect to the place of games in its curricula. It had only one headmaster during the

nineteenth century. The Rev. Dr. A. Morrison, a Scot, and educated at Aberdeen University, was appointed as the inaugural headmaster in 1858, and retired in 1907. Morrison believed in the education of the whole man, and, unlike Morris at Melbourne Grammar, considered that a transplanted English public school model was inappropriate for local conditions. Although he believed classics and mathematics should have their due place and attention, there was also an important place for English, the natural sciences and commercial studies.³⁴ As far as moral and religious education was concerned, he sought to cultivate and maintain a high tone of moral feeling and upright honourable conduct.³⁵ In the physical domain, Morrison noted the attention that society gave to man's physical development, and considered that the school 'was not behind the age in our appreciation of all that is manly and excellent in the athletic sports and exercises now so much in vogue'. He went on to say, with apparent pride, that 'in addition to the ordinary school games such as cricket and football, we have now established a boating club; and all the boys of the college now have the opportunity of attending Mr. Johnson's admirably appointed and conducted gymnasium'.³⁶ Morrison also frequently commented upon the military drill program, and the efficiency with which it was carried out. In a later Annual Report, he noted that the inter-school football matches encouraged a commendable *esprit de corps* amongst the boys, and taught them two important lessons; to endure defeat without a grudge, and to bear success without undue elation.

However, the fact of the matter was that Morrison had a decidedly ambivalent view about the role of games at Scotch College. His resistance to aspects of the English public school ethos was reflected in a number of statements that appeared in the school's annual reports during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

At different times, during the early period of his headmastership Morrison noted:

To physical training is perhaps now-a-days a danger of devoting too much time and attention, arising, probably, out of a reaction from the opposite extreme, which obtained some twenty or thirty years ago; but, kept within proper bounds, and judiciously regulated, it plays an important part in education, and tends to promote vigour and manliness of character.³⁸

At cricket and football the College representatives have not been so successful as in former years, but on the river they retain their superiority. Whilst anxious to foster manly exercises, it has in some instances been found necessary to discourage an undue application to athletics to the neglect of the more important work of study.³⁹

I have always encouraged boys to take suitable outdoor exercise, and have recognised the importance of games as a means of maintaining health, affording relaxation, and supplying an outlet for pent-up physical energy. But whilst excellence in athletics, as in other things is desirable, I believe that to give it undue emphasis has an injurious effect on individual boys, and on the literary work on the school. I have therefore, for the past few years been gradually lessening the time given to interscholastic and other matches, and I shall, if necessary, take still further steps to prevent devotion to athletics encroaching on the more important work of the school.⁴⁰

By the 1890s Morrison's tone had become more forceful and agitated.

For several years the College played only one match at cricket and football with each school annually. Of late, return matches have been played. I am doubtful if the change has been altogether beneficial. Apart from the question of the time occupied, there is some danger that the frequent matches may distract the attention of boys from their studies, and in some cases give a disrelish for the more important literary work of the school.⁴¹

In my last report I stated that I was anxious to prevent an undue amount of time being devoted to athletics, and that I would bring under the consideration of the headmasters, the desirability of

playing only one match each year at cricket and football. I regret that the other public schools did not agree to this proposal. I have on several occasions expressed an opinion that only one match should be played annually, and I trust that the authorities of the other schools will yet agree to this arrangement. I am convinced that too many matches interfere more than is desirable with the studies of the boys.⁴²

These statements show that Morrison was not an unqualified advocate of athleticism. Unlike Pyne, Wilson, Way and Adamson, he was not convinced that games were the great promoter of character. He had more in common with Arnold, than with Thring, Walford or Almond. That is, character was developed mainly through moral, not physical education. Morrison made it clear that the primary aim of Scotch College students should be intellectual achievement. Morrison, was therefore, in the way he viewed games, something of a maverick within the Melbourne public school milieu. The Headmasters at Melbourne Grammar, and and to a lesser extent Wesley, believed that not only was character building at the heart of a public school education, but also that the playing field and the river were the best vehicles for achieving it.

Morrison, though, was not alone. Other educators also expressed their concern about the Victorian obsession with physical culture in the antipodean colonies. James Hogan, a local educationalist, asserted 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; to deify the muscle and denigrate [sic] the mind did not present a favourable reflection on the national character of the Australian People, and did not auger well for the future.⁴³

Reservations about the place of sport in public school life were echoed by Fr. Nolan of Xavier College, who considered that classroom study should dominate. He looked on sport as a diversion from, rather than an essential element of the education process.

While Morrison's influence over the tone and style of Scotch College was strong, and continued into the twentieth century, his views on the role of games were not shared by his successor, the Rev. Dr. Littlejohn. In his first Annual Report to the school in 1907, Littlejohn considered that the school had, in the Morrison tradition, struck an appropriate balance between the modern (natural sciences, languages and commercial training) and the traditional (the study of greek and latin). He then went on to speak about the place of games and exercise at the school:

May I crave your indulgence for a few minutes longer, while I glance at a charge that one often hears levelled against the public school, that of athleticism. If the term, and so I understand it, implies that athletics is made an end instead of a means, that it is the be-all and the end-all of a public schools boy's life, then, so far as we are concerned, the charge is without foundation.

School games not merely tend to generate a well-balanced mind and character, but they instil also into the boy nature, as no other appliance can effect, glowing spirits, robustness of health, quick response to calls of duty in place of lethargic habits, good temper under testing circumstances, a love of justice and fair play which becomes ingrained for life, self-reliance, endurance, confidence in comrades, a desire to excel which may ultimately expand into a noble ambition, rapid judgment, aptness to act unselfishly with others for the benefit of all, courage under difficulties, and self-control. In fact, most games form an exercise concurrently to muscle and brain, and involve both swiftness of observation and quickness of decision.

I trust I shall not be considered presumptuous if I add one thing. Perhaps the highest ideal with which his 'alma mater' can inspire a boy is this; the knowledge that he is a living integral part of the school organism, creating in him a consciousness of the corporate unity of the school and making him feel that its honour and good name are in his very hands. Surely such an ideal will help to carry him safely through the storm and stress of youth, and inculcate a larger patriotism, that will make him say and believe that as there

is no school like his school, so there is no country like his country. Apart from our daily religious exercises, I know of nothing that can inspire this thought of unity better than a healthy and active participation in the games of the school.⁴⁴

By the twentieth century, Melbourne's three major Protestant public schools were all preaching the gospel of athleticism. In this respect at least, the English public school model had been diffused to Victoria. The Melbourne public schools had become great character and patriot builders of middle-class Victorian boys, and games were viewed as indispensable instruments of moral education.

NOTES

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12. Dunning and Sheard, *op.cit*, p73; Mangan, *op.cit*, p15.
13. Mangan, *op.cit*, p17.
14. *ibid*, p18.
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