

**John Lowerson, *Sport and the English middle classes 1870-1914.*
Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993.
Index, notes. pp. 310.**

The period of what Mandle long ago referred to as the ‘Games Revolution’ (1870 - 1914) represents one of the most well-trodden paths for sports historians. It is the era which has produced the most outstanding monographs. Mangan, Mason, Holt, Vamplew, McCrone and many others have all written substantial and acclaimed works on this era. Even though Lowerson writes from the perspective of a particular class, there is the danger that in a book of this kind will merely re-traverse familiar territory and synthesise what is already known.

However, Lowerson has written a startlingly original and refreshing monograph which avoids the above pitfalls. He achieves this a number of ways. While touching on the work of Mangan *et al*, he refrains from repeating what is already known. The strength of the book is that Lowerson looks at middle-class sport in its widest perspective including much material on sports neglected by social historians: golf, angling, croquet, table tennis, badminton, mountaineering, winter sports and many others.

Lowerson is also a fine social historian who touches deftly on the social nuances of particular sports, teasing out their geographical, ethnic, religious and class links. He also makes fine use of literary sources and writes with a wry humour. The two phrases which he has coined for the period – ‘The Scramble for Sport’ and the ‘Great Sports Craze’ – are both suggestive.

Lowerson demonstrates that historians of mainstream team sports, football and cricket, have yet to come to grips fully with the wide panorama of the ‘Scramble’. The more individual sport of golf, which focused middle-class ambitions, enjoyed a breathtaking expansion after 1870 when it boomed more than any other sport. Golf was the epitome of middle-class ambitions, was a fine instrument for social differentiation

and was a 'mechanism for business negotiation' (pp. 125-30). Lavish club houses, which were erected, came to rival grand hotels. Lowerson also details how golf was the most land-hungry sport leading to many disputes over common land, between golfers, commoners and commonable beasts.

There are also many fine sections on individual and minor sports which loomed large in the Victorian middle class mind. Mountaineering, which involved both romanticism and risk, involved a form of secular mysticism and was attractive to the professional classes living out their school dreams. Winter sports, Lowerson reminds us, were essentially a British invention.

Looking at the range of middle-class sports in their widest perspective also provides a more well-rounded view of sport. Cricketers Grace and Stoddart were both involved in the table tennis craze after 1900. The sport produced clubs and tournaments and even a split, between the elite table tennis and the more popular and 'frivolous', ping pong. Grace was also involved in the administration another boom sport, lawn bowls, before he was elbowed out by its oligarchy. Another minor sport badminton was responsible for the production of the famous Badminton Series creating a library for sportsmen. The publication was so successful that the initial plan to publish some seven volumes extended to twenty-nine volumes. Lowerson includes much interesting material about the growth of sporting publications, newspapers, magazines and books. *C. B. Fry's Magazines of Sports and Outdoor Life*, which began in 1904 and soon had a circulation of 100 000, was influential. The magazine attempted to combine 'good writing with a high moral tone and an increasingly fervent patriotism' (p. 252).

This substantial book contains a mine of information about English middle-class sport and many wider issues. The section on amateurism even contains some pertinent comparisons between rowing in Britain and Australia. Lowerson argues, correctly in my opinion, that the social fluidity of Australian society gave rise to 'far greater tensions' than were

apparent in Britain and that in New South Wales there was more determination to stay 'Henley-pure' (p. 161).

The most puzzling aspect of this book is the treatment of women who share a chapter on the 'Lesser Breeds' and follow a discussion on employees. Lowerson admits in the Preface that his book is 'very masculine in its subject, and not all feminist historians are likely to approve of the place I have given to women's sport' (p. viii). He justifies his approach further arguing that:

recent fashion in historical writing has demanded that the latter [women] be treated as a separate entity, and some very good studies, notably those of Dyhouse and McCrone, have resulted. I choose not to seek hermetic isolation for women here, however, because the arguments over inferior ability and status were closely related to the masculine middle-class perception of other dependent groups and their supposedly inferior intelligence (p. 191).

This approach does not appeal. Lumping together employees and women in one chapter does not work well structurally and the two sections sit awkwardly together. A more serious criticism is that this approach underplays the broader theme of gender. The opportunity has been lost, in my opinion, to compare and contrast the role played by sport in the construction of both masculinity and femininity in this era. The discussion of one has the potential to illuminate the other. A recent trend in historical scholarship, to look at the broader issue of gender rather than women (or men) specifically, has proved fruitful.

Although this book is a times encyclopaedic and even densely-argued, it is for the most part an impressively researched, pleasantly written and an outstanding contribution to sports history.

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