

# *Navigating Uncharted Waters: The Death of Sports History?*

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This article distinguishes between two different, but obviously interdependent, versions of sports history. SPORTS HISTORY in capital letters is the field of history located in sport, history and cultural studies departments in academia. Its focus of concern is sport. Douglas Booth recently analysed the current dilemma of SPORTS HISTORY and the perils it faces in human movement and kinesiology departments where sport science has become the hegemonic discourse.<sup>1</sup> Sociology, philosophy and history of sport, as several Australian authors have pointed out, are constantly fighting rear guard actions to legitimise their roles in sport education.<sup>2</sup> This is certainly true in the departments in which I have worked. Here, however, I want to discuss sports history in the lower case. This is what I refer to as the epistemological, methodological and ideological underpinnings of writing sports history.

## **Sports History in the Lower Case**

I doubt whether it is possible to cover all forms of writing in the field in a coherent, concise and non-reductionist sense. Nevertheless, I will attempt to summarise the approaches to sports history while recognising the limitations this presents. The underlying premises of the rationale for the history of sport, not surprisingly, are similar to the features of historical practices in the mainstream.<sup>3</sup> I will briefly discuss several issues central to history including realism, empiricism, objectivity, evidence, writing style and liberal pluralism.

Many sports historians adopt realist positions: they assume that they have access to the past and that they describe rather than construct reality. Robert Berkhofer's, *Beyond the Great Story* argues that realism is basic to the paradigm of normal historical practice as historians present information as if it were simple referentiality.<sup>4</sup> As he states, 'realism enters historical practice to the extent that historians try to make their structure of factuality seem to be its own organising structure and therefore conceal that it is structured by interpretation represented as factuality'.<sup>5</sup>

In historical practice, realism is usually closely linked with empiricism. It is assumed that empiricism is a property of realism rather than loosely related. Many historians reject the view that empiricism is a theory that determines the selection, distribution and weight of facts; they contest the notion that it is the historian, rather than the past, which dictates history. This point was made in a debate in *The Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*: while 'historical narratives seemingly offer a neutral picture and understanding of the past, of life as it was supposedly really lived, they in fact brim with the narrator's own ideological assumptions and beliefs.'<sup>6</sup>

Another defining feature of history is the pursuit of objectivity. This is exemplified in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*.<sup>7</sup> Novick argues that the historian's role is as a 'neutral, or disinterested, judge' displaying qualities of 'balance' and 'even-handedness', who avoids 'bias', with the ultimate goal of 'objective historical truth'.<sup>8</sup> This central tenet of historiography has been challenged from a number of quarters. Sports historians have responded in a number of contrasting ways. Certainly Micheal Oriard's book, *Reading Football*, with its emphasis on multiple narratives as representative of different readings of American football drives a stake into the heart of absolute objectivity in history.<sup>9</sup>

Closely allied to the pursuit of objectivity is the sovereignty of the sources, in particular primary evidence. The Rankean dictum that 'the facts speak for themselves' is a guiding tenet. In this conception of history, archival research provides 'hard facts' which, after critical analysis, enables one to evaluate the historical record. In this regard, one Australian sports historian recommends that 'we should be encouraging students of the history of sport to be prepared to get their hands very dirty in the archives of sport'.<sup>10</sup> There are few suggestions that the emphasis on primary sources may blinker the historian's vision by restricting speculation about interpretation, ambiguities and contradictions. Nor is there any appreciation of the problematic position of tackling epistemological, methodological and ideological tensions within history by a technical solution — letting the facts speak for themselves.

In a similar vein, historians usually present their work in a 'non-rhetorical, commonsense, communication model of historical writing' and deliberately avoid technical jargon as often found in other fields like cultural studies, philosophy and sociology.<sup>11</sup> There have been some outstanding pieces of sports history written in the non-rhetorical, common

sense and communicative model of writing, but there is discernible hostility against complex linguistic styles as Roy Hay articulates: 'economic and social history which once had a wide audience here and overseas now speaks primarily to itself and its practitioners. I fear that sports history may follow down that barren track'.<sup>12</sup> This view refuses to even acknowledge the criticisms of historical writing made by, among others, Hayden White.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the 'linguistic turn', as I will suggest shortly, has much to say about the importance of language to historical pursuits.

Sports history is also characterised by the eclecticism of liberal pluralism. Empiricism, feminism, Marxism, neo-Marxism and many other approaches have been utilised by practitioners in the field since its emergence in the 1970s. Yet, it should be noted, there remains a firm line in the sand: not just anything can pass as history. Anti-foundationalist versions — postcolonialist, postmodernist and poststructuralist — are portrayed as present-centred, theoretical, political and ideological. For example, the *Journal of Sport History* recently published 'A History of Synchronised Swimming', an article by Synthia Syndor that eschews many features of traditional history.<sup>14</sup> But I wonder whether the *Journal of Sport History*, or any other sports history journal, would have published this anti-foundationalist article had it not been commissioned for a special edition dedicated to the field into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The final point I want to make is that many historians present themselves as 'anti-theoretical, anti-a-priori and non-present centred' who study the past 'as it ostensibly was' and 'for its own sake' uncontaminated by ideological assumptions.<sup>15</sup> The irony of this situation is that by adopting realist, empiricist, objectivist and documentarist positions, and by using commonsense communication style, by employing selective versions of liberal pluralism, some critics argue that traditional modernist history is as ideologically loaded and positioned as postmodern versions.<sup>16</sup>

### **Critiques of Sports History (in the Lower Case)**

Traditional history has been haemorrhaging from wounds inflicted from a number of fields, but Steve Pope in a recent volume of the *Journal of Sport History* contends that he is surprised at the lack of methodological debate in sports history. 'Most people I know', he says, 'come away from the annual North American Society for Sport History with warm, supportive experiences and memories'.<sup>17</sup> Australian Society for Sports

History conferences have been more polemic at times, yet debates about historical practices have been few. The following comments are made with the objective of stimulating healthy debate about the dilemmas facing sports history.

Historians are confronted with the problems of perception. This concern centres on the personal dimensions of working with data, 'facts', and the selection of material as well as the process of interpretation and the design of meaning. As Beverly Southgate in *History: What and Why?* argues: 'Historians are people, and history is about people, so many of the fundamental problems concerning the nature of history refer back to psychology'.<sup>18</sup> The way we see the past, the 'facts' we select as significant, the way we interpret them and provide meaning to them derive from the very personal and ideological nature of the individual historian.<sup>19</sup>

The commitment to this component of historical writing was elicited in the reaction to Simon Schama's book, *Dead Certainties*, published in 1991.<sup>20</sup> Schama's book was controversial because some of the passages were fiction and only in the afterword did he admit this to his readers. An early passage gives an 'eyewitness' account of a battle by a soldier, complete with 18<sup>th</sup> century spelling. But Schama constructed the passage from a range of sources. Not surprisingly, the historical profession criticised the book for violating the tenets of accepted practice outlined above.<sup>21</sup> Schama defended his approach, arguing that 'even in the most austere scholarly report from the archives, the inventive faculty — selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgments — is in full pay'.<sup>22</sup> According to Schama, the character and prejudices of the narrator will always fatally circumscribe historical knowledge.

Greg Denning's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*<sup>23</sup> is another book that draws out critical aspects of historical practice. Denning's book, which holds much for those interested in postmodern versions of history, shows how different generations have used the story of the *Bounty* to reflect their own interests and prejudices. In the era of British naval power, Bligh was a hero and the mutineers were villains. Later in the nineteenth century, in a more democratic climate, the *Bounty* was a tale of class conflict with Fletcher a victim and Bligh representing Tory power. In the 1960s it was story shaped by humane and liberal values with Bligh's restrictions on access to fresh water the catalyst for the mutiny. In the 1980s Bligh's homosexual attraction to Fletcher was the cause of the mutiny. As Denning

carefully shows, historians are imbued with the presuppositions, attitudes and values of the age in which they write.<sup>24</sup> Critics argue that personal perceptions and preferences ensure that impartial detachment is a dream rather than a reality.

As well as matters of perception, historians have to consider issues related to linguistics. Poststructuralist and structuralist theorists raise many questions about the nature and functions of language that impinge on many fields of academic endeavours. Historians are particularly vulnerable to poststructuralist attacks as they have to interact with past uses of language in the form of written texts and they also use language to frame, conceptualise and explain their work. The key issue in the debate is whether language directly corresponds to the external world, or whether it functions as a self-contained system of signs that bears little relationship to the external world. If the latter is accurate, notions of 'truth' and 'reality' are problematic and valid only in the context of more abstract and arbitrary concepts.<sup>25</sup> Arguments along these lines are certainly pushed by Hayden White and many of his acolytes. White used literary theory to analyse major works of history and concluded that history is a literary or poetic construct. He contends that the interpretations historians make are based on the types of poetic language — or tropes — that are embedded in human consciousness. These tropes determine the styles of explanation and result in different interpretations of the same historical events. For White and others, history is a poetic act.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, there is scepticism. Philosophical scepticism, which is inextricably linked to the previous two issues of perception and linguistics, raises important questions about whether we can rely on our senses, or on reason. It asks whether we have access to an external world, and whether it is possible to know the truth. These, and similar questions, apply equally to those working in the natural and social sciences and the humanities.<sup>27</sup> In *History: What and Why?* Southgate summarises these concerns: 'Taken together the related challenges from psychology, linguistics and philosophy, present a formidable problem for historical study, for they have served to undermine the foundations of the subject as traditionally conceived'.<sup>28</sup>

### **Responses to the Critiques of Sports History (in the Lower Case)**

How have sports historians reacted to these critiques? Broadly speaking we can recognize four categories of reaction. These categories acknowledge

the heterogeneity of approaches by practitioners in the field.

The first category is those sports historians who are oblivious to the debates about history which are consuming an increasing number of monographs and are given a voice in influential historical journals like *Past and Present*, *Social History* and *History and Theory*. For sports historians who have not kept abreast of historical debates, there is little appreciation of the distinction between a (presumed to be) past and history. There is little appreciation that the past is what has actually occurred while history is what historians make of the past. There is little appreciation that historians can never recover the past because the content is limitless; at best they can offer a selection of the past. There is little appreciation that historians can never recover the past because the past is gone; at best they can offer an interpretation of the past. There is little appreciation that historians can never recover the real past as they are of the present; at best they can offer versions of the past viewed through the present.<sup>29</sup> There is little appreciation that through hindsight — new documents, ideas and concepts — historians have the potential to actually know more than was ever possible in the past. However, I believe that scholars who lack these appreciations of history are rapidly declining.

The second category is those historians who have engaged with these debates but rejected them outright and have sought to demolish their intrinsic premises. There are some sports historians who concur with this mode of thought; they have expressed their views in debates in the *Victorian Bulletin of Culture and Sport*. Certainly Bryon Palmer's *Descent into Discourse* and Keith Windshuttle's *The Killing of History* exemplify the distaste for the postmodern influence on history.<sup>30</sup>

The third category is those sports historians who have selectively applied some of the ideas contained within postmodern history. These historians may object to some aspects of the postmodern critique but prefer to see the positive features and have repositioned themselves accordingly. Richard Evans in his recent book, *In Defence of History*, while defending many traditional values central to social history, views the postmodern critique as liberating: the attention to language has promoted more complex models of causation with more attention paid to the meanings of language. Evans contends: 'Studies of mentalities, of memory, commemoration and celebration, of the cultural dimensions of power and authority, of gender and the micropolitics of everyday life have added to historical knowledge'.<sup>31</sup> He sees postmodernism as not only

additive but actually reorientating many areas of political and social history.

Tina Parratt advocates this position in a recent article in *Sport History Review*. She describes the 'postmodernist, linguistic, literary and cultural turns' that have resulted in a shift in some works from the social history pursuits of causality and context to the cultural history pursuits of analysing meaning.<sup>32</sup> Parratt refers to Vertinsky's *The Eternally Wounded Woman* and Calm's *Coming on Strong* as examples of postmodern concepts of representation, discourse and language in sports history. But Parratt also foresees potential losses in the shift toward representation, discourse and language which may mean the obliteration of some interests, like hers in women's histories. This point can be made with reference to any part of historical study like sport where there are huge voids in reconstructions.<sup>33</sup> Where would Australian sports history be without Colin Tatz's masterly history of Aboriginal sport, or similar work on women's sports and ethnic sports that have effectively challenged the male, white, Anglo-Celtic versions of our sporting past.<sup>34</sup> This type of approach fuels much of the concerns expressed by narrative and empiricist historians as expressed in the *Victorian Bulletin of Culture and Sport*. Parratt contends that postmodern history should travel alongside reconstruction no matter how 'partial, incomplete and inaccurate'.<sup>35</sup>

The final category is those historians who have discarded the modernist versions of traditional historical approaches and have fully applied postmodern historical endeavours. There are several examples in mainstream history, and a growing list in sports history. The example with which I am most familiar is Synthia Syndor's 'A History of Synchronised Swimming'.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Syndor stresses that 'the author has nothing to say only to show'.<sup>37</sup> Syndor's work is structured in a modernist framework with traditional headings such as origins, definition, literature review, scoring, type of meets and so on. Beyond this framework, however, it is postmodern history: the reader is provided with fragments, snapshots and montages, there are no explanations, no analysis. As she states: 'you can swim in circles, above and below, without having to gulp a linear argument'.<sup>38</sup> Syndor completes her piece by stating: 'In writing my history of synchronised swimming, I was loyal to the canon of historical methodology and theory, I was true to my grounding in classical source use, I was faithful to observing continuity and change, I was conscious of the complex problems concerning truth,

relativism and representation that are entangled in the practices of being a historian'.<sup>39</sup> Having said that, what she has cleverly shown is the constructed nature of history, particularly the realist, empiricist and objectivist versions of history outlined above.

## Conclusion

Sports historians need to be aware of, and to take seriously, postmodern critiques of history. They must respond to the rejection of the Enlightenment's scientific method; they must respond to the rejection of absolute concepts of truth and knowledge; they must respond to the rejection of humanism; and they must respond to the rejection of the neutrality claims of language. The future of sports history (in lower case) will depend on sports historians becoming reflective practitioners who gain some semantic control over their work and some measure of authority over their own discourses.<sup>40</sup> The strength of the discipline will depend on how we individually and collectively meet the postmodern challenges to history.

## Notes

- 1 D. Booth, 'Sports History: What Can Be Done?', *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1998, pp. 189-204.
- 2 D. Kirk, 'Knowledge, Science and the Rise and Rise of Human Movement Studies', *ACIPHER National Journal*, vol. 127, 1990, pp. 25-27; D. Kirk, 'Science as Myth in Physical Education', paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1992; J. Maguire, 'Human Sciences, Sport Sciences, and the Need to Study People "in the Round"', *Quest*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1991, pp. 190-208; J. McKay, J. Gore, and D. Kirk, 'Beyond the Limits of Technocratic Physical Education', *Quest*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1990, pp. 52-76; R. Tinning, 'Physical Education and the Sciences of Physical Activity and Sport: Symbiotic or Adversarial Knowledge Fields', paper presented at the Congreso Mundial de Ciencias de la Actividad Física y el Desporte, Grandala, Espana, November 1993; D. Whitson and D. Macintosh, 'The Scientisation of Physical Education: Discourses of Performance', *Quest*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1990, pp. 40-51.
- 3 This section draws heavily on the introduction to K. Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 9-21.
- 4 Cambridge, 1995.
- 5 Cited in Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 20.
- 6 D. Booth, 'Response to Bernard Wimpres', *The Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 6, 1996, p. 13.
- 7 P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession, Ideas in Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.
- 8 Cited in Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 11.
- 9 M. Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1993.
- 10 R. Hay, 'Sporting Traditions X – Another viewpoint', *The Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 5, 1995, p. 14.

- 11 Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 16.
- 12 Hay, 'Sporting Traditions x', p. 14.
- 13 For a recent summary of White's work see K. Jenkins, *On What is History? From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 134-179.
- 14 S. Syndor, 'A History of Synchronised Swimming', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, pp. 252-267.
- 15 Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 16.
- 16 Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, pp. 9-21.
- 17 S. Pope, 'Sport History: Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, p. iii.
- 18 B. Southgate, *History, What and Why?: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 59.
- 19 Southgate, *History, What and Why?*, pp.59-70.
- 20 S. Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991.
- 21 For a critique of Schama's work see K. Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 1994, pp. 227-232.
- 22 Cited in Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 230.
- 23 Greg Denning, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the Bounty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.
- 24 Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, pp. 69-75 stresses this dimension of *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*, but this book is often held up as an excellent example of the postmodern influence in history.
- 25 Southgate, *History, What and Why?*, p. 73 for the key issue of debate about language and pp. 70-76 for related arguments.
- 26 See H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973. For his initial thoughts and more recent developments in poetics see Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*.
- 27 Southgate, *History, What and Why?*, pp. 76-85.
- 28 Southgate, *History, What and Why?*, pp. 85.
- 29 For a detailed discussion of the past-history distinction see D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985. For a more recent synoptic discussion of this issue see Jenkins, *On What is History?* pp. 16-21.
- 30 B. D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History, Critical Perspectives on the Past*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990; and Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*.
- 31 R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, Granta, London, 1997, p. 184.
- 32 C. M. Parratt, 'About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s', *Sport History Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1998, p. 4.
- 33 Parratt, 'About Turns', pp. 4-17.
- 34 P. A. Mosely, *Spotting Immigrants: Sport and Ethnicity in Australia*, Walla Walla Press, Crows Nest, 1997; M. K. Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport*, Collins Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1991; and C. Tatz, *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995.
- 35 Parratt, 'About Turns', p. 9.
- 36 Syndor, 'Synchronised Swimming', pp. 252-267.
- 37 Benjamin cited in Syndor, 'Synchronised Swimming', p. 252.
- 38 Syndor, 'Synchronised Swimming', p. 254.
- 39 Syndor, 'Synchronised Swimming', p. 260.
- 40 See Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 21 for an amplification of these points.