

The End of History Perhaps – But the End of the Beginning for the History of Sport! An Anglo-Saxon Autobiographical Perspective

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After some twenty years as a cultural historian with a profound interest in sport, several issues now seem especially relevant if the history of sport is to gain unqualified approval, win unequivocal admiration, and achieve unassailable recognition. The history of sport has developed from a seed into a sapling in some 25 years. While some leaves have fallen, while some branches have died or are dying, while some branches are weak and shrivelled, there are also glossy leaves, strong branches and a sturdy trunk. There should be cautious optimism balanced by careful realism among its practitioners.

Burckhardt on History

There is much to be said for close consideration of the words of this great nineteenth century historian, His recently reissued *The Greeks and Greek Civilisation*, with an introduction by Oswyn Murray, should be compulsory reading for all those engaged in the study of the history of sport. It is satisfying to read that Burckhardt saw the promise of a cultural approach to history. As Murray writes:

In the 1840s, while still a student, Burckhardt rebelled against the prevailing conception of history, 'the one-sidedness of the present that only wants to have a biased history ... For me the background is the chief consideration, and that is provided by cultural history, to which I intend to dedicate myself', Burckhardt wrote in 1842. From the start his conception of history was concerned, not with actions and events or the great men who appeared to have caused them, but with the cultural context in which such events occurred, a context which might explain the changes far more satisfactory

than by ascribing them to the actions of individuals or the workings of chance.¹

Burckhardt himself wrote that change was the essence of history, that it was the historian's most difficult and most interesting assignment to explain the causes of historical events, that the historian's task was to make sense of change by unravelling its causes, whether they came from the hand of God, the imperatives of technology, the conflict of classes, or the will of individuals. In short, Burckhardt had a subtlety that merits imitation. He was conscious of the fact that a historical event was invariably the product of multiple causes, immediate and remote, public and private, covert and overt.

Another who has much to offer the historian of sport is Peter Gay in his *Style in History* published in 1974. Gay abhors the pretentious, clumsy and unclear. He had the soundest view of the purpose of style. Of the historian, Gay comments:

He is a professional writer and a professional reader. As a writer he is under pressure to become a stylist while remaining a scientist; he must give pleasure without comprising truth. His style may be a conventional tool, an involuntary confession, or a striking illumination ... he prizes literary excellence, absorbs facts and interpretations, and explores the words before him for truths working beneath their surface; style may be, for him an object of gratification, a vehicle of knowledge, or an instrument of diagnosis.²

He is adamant, therefore, in asserting that

To say that style can be learned is therefore not precise enough. It is more accurate to say, rather, that style must be learned. It is only in part a gift of talent; beyond that it is an act of will and an exercise of intelligence. It is the tribute that expressiveness pays to discipline. Style is an instrument of the practical reason.³

Gay offers some marvellous aphorisms that could be put up to advantage, if not above the historian's bed then on his or her office wall. Three examples illustrate his capacity to educate through axiom:

- "Style, ... is the dress of thought and its sinews, its crowning glory and its expressive voice';
- 'Style is like Ranke's Venetian ambassadors: widely travelled; highly adaptable, superbly informed, and, if adroitly interrogated

splendidly indiscreet. For the historian, therefore, the evidential value of style — both in getting and in giving evidence — is enormous'; and,

- 'A mature literary style is a synthesis of all these elements, variously combined; it is, therefore, at once individual and social, private and public, a combination of inherited ways, borrowed elements, and unique qualities.'⁴

The responsibility of the historian, claims Gay, is 'to appreciate elegance and depreciate clumsiness, to decipher obscure passages, to expose verbal ambiguities ...'⁵ This claim should be noted carefully by contemporary historians of sport.

Like Burckhardt and Gay, Peter Vansittart could be read with profit by today's historians of sport. In his *In Memory of England: A Novelist's View of History* published last year, he has some harsh words to say about some modern users of the English language.

... the English language is now threatened less by foreign imports, often useful or stimulating, than from within, by slovenly chat-masters, ill-educated journalists, commercial fraudsters, literary pretenders with self indulgent verbal inflation, and self-appointed committees of public safety demanding political correctness. All share ignorance or contempt for the marvellous resources of English.⁶

He reminds his readers that

English is older than cathedrals, tougher than dragoons and commandos, as flexible as music; and it underpins every variety of English ... pugnacious, elegiac, lyrical, vindictive, ironic, subtle, hypocritical, unctuous, plain speaking, romantic and nonsensical.⁷

He argues further with more than little accuracy:

Language has its enemy within —jargon—which can easily become a political weapon. The Nazis called their murder squads 'Task Forces', Stalin's KGB was 'Certain Competent Organs', Heydrich's secret police were the 'Press and Information Service'. Allied prisoners-of-war and Asian conscripts, enslaved for the atrocious Siam-Burma railway, were performing what the Japanese termed 'Logistic Imperative', and the current Burmese military dictatorship of torture, murder, beatings, censorship entitles itself 'Infrastructure of the Modern State'. Jargon soon shades into

political correctness, the tyranny of mediocrities over each other, which revives the concept of heresy. Designed to enforce compassion, it invites ridicule.⁸

The final words on style in history belong to Peter Gay:

History is an art much of the time, and it is an art by virtue of being a branch of literature ... the widespread complaints against inartistic historical writing are perfectly justified. Clio, G. M. Tevelyan found it necessary to remind the public at the beginning of this century, is also a muse; history, H. R. Trevor-Roper found it necessary to insist more recently, no longer speaks to the general public because it has lost its grip on literature ... much historical work is innocent of even a nodding acquaintance with the writer's art. We have all encountered those dreary, dutiful chronicles piling up mounds of facts that everyone knows or nobody wants to know; those narrow, earnest monographs choking in their garlands of ibids ... We have wondered at those mountainous and learned French theses that ... founder in literary incoherence, with their style borrowed at once from the frenzy of Michelet and the ungainly informativeness of the railway timetable. Whatever else it may be, history is not an art all of the time.

Again:

The study of style ... suggests that the historian has not finished his work once he has understood the causes and the course of events. Historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete. Monographs need not be artistic, though in skilful hands they can have their own aesthetic quality, but the house of history, to which monographs are so indispensable, must be not only secure, but handsome as well.

And finally,

It is the historian's style that gives his map its distinct form. But the art of that style is of a very special kind. A few flourishes apart, it must not interfere with the historian's science. His literature devices are not separate from historical truth, *but the precise means of conveying it.*⁹

Burckhardt, Vansittart and Gay are worth heeding. Too much writing in the history of sport, as more than one journal editor can bear witness, is

clumsy, simplistic, turgid and unclear. It earns brickbats rather than wins esteem. Clarity of exposition, elegance of presentation, subtlety of perspective are worthy ambitions for the post-millennium.

Myths: Careless and Casual

It has been written that 'sports history should be no exception to the tenet that a major function of any history is to prevent the abuse and misuse of history. Setting the sports record straight, and thus preventing myths from becoming conventional wisdom, is a prime duty of all historians'.¹⁰ In recent years, regrettably, several myths have been put forward by British historians involved in the consideration of sport in society. They have involved confident, naive and inaccurate assertions about society, sport and militarism, the relationship between militarism, drill and education and the essence of the public school games cult.

There is only space here to consider the most inaccurate and unfortunate of these mythologies, that of the academic origins of the history of sport. The following passage was written recently to ensure that the mythology did not pass into history, that an accurate record of events was put *on* the record, that seminal academics were not written out of history, that justice was done to their efforts.

Comment: Making and Unmaking Mythologies in the History of sport

J. A. Mangan
The Metaphysical Paintings

The enigma of arrival

We are nude beneath our costumes
As in the false myths we have been forced
To memorize
And there is a mistake in your eyes

John Perreault, in Edward B. Germain, *Surrealist Poetry in English* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 253.

The Making of 'Tradition'!

The kilt: A salutary tale

Tradition, like patriotism, can often be the last refuge of the scoundrel. In a narrow sense, it can excuse a lot of silly things. It is the kind of thing invoked by lazy people in

authority, when they simply can't be bothered to justify some absurd practice. More remarkably, a lot of these 'traditions' are self-conscious inventions, often very recent. The most obvious example of this sort of myth-making is the kilt.

The kilt, as we ought to know, was invented by an Englishman. Thomas Rawlinson, a Quaker ironmonger from Lancashire, devised it because the traditional dress of his Highland factory workers got in the way. It was a cumbersome, unwieldy habit. He sent for a tailor to abridge the dress and make it handy and convenient for his workmen: thus the kilt was born. All this, Hugh Trevor-Roper tells us, happened in 1727. It is, therefore, mildly irritating to see films such as *Braveheart*, in which 13th century warriors are clad in an 18th century piece of folly. Kwasi Kwarteng, *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 October, 1997, p. 7.

The presence of this cautionary story above, which piles myth upon myth, is explained by the odd and inexplicable omission of the *Coda* reproduced below, from the Series Editor's Foreword to the M. Cronin and D. Mayall recent volume in the Cass Series: *Sport in the Global Society* entitled *Sporting Nationalisms* which drew attention to the supposedly pre-eminent role of a handful of academics, mostly now in 'Central England', in the creation of the sub-discipline of the History of Sport. Due, no doubt to pressure of space, unfortunately and unhappily, too many notable contributors both in Britain and around the Globe were left 'on the sidelines'.

Of course, 'Central England' was simply one location for innovatory effort in the creation of historical sports studies. Those who have been about long enough know this all too well. Newcomers may not — hence this Comment. Other locations were involved across the world, and other pioneers fought the good fight against academic myopia, prejudice and inflexibility. Ingentle justice to them, their praises should be sweetly sung. Below is the appreciative paean which somehow failed to appear in *Sporting Nationalisms!*

Coda

'One of the paradoxes of historical writing is that even its ablest practitioners are soon neglected. Indeed, where their ability has been literary they suffer at the hands of posterity

even more than their fair share of oblivion ... Yet, even unread, certain historians exert an influence over later ages which ensures them a kind of anonymous immortality. Their immediate successors transmit an interpretation which, in the hands of later exponents, is divorced from its first begetters'. Denys Hay, 'Flavio Biondo and the Middle Ages', in *Art and Politics in Renaissance Italy*, 1993.

A necessary tailpiece. Specific mention is made in the Introductory Remarks to *Sporting Nationalisms* to the mostly British 'few' who gave slow but sure birth in recent decades to the history of sport. Space in Introductions is always in short supply and much has to be compressed into little. Nevertheless there is a danger, unconsciously and accidentally, that Cronin and Mayall only recently on the scene and now writing enthusiastically, and certainly attractively, about the history of sport, unwittingly create academic Trotskys in their pithy historical reconstruction. To offer a fresh metaphor, those who come late to the dinner often miss the *hors d'oeuvre* if not the whole meal. Furthermore, a consequent unsatisfying *bonne bouche* is no substitute for a satisfying *entrée*.

In the interests of historical accuracy, therefore, for those who come even later to the 'table' laid by the earliest academic arrivals and served by the earliest intellectual dapifers, mention should be made of the truly seminal works of the educational historians Peter McIntosh and Sheila Fletcher who *inter alia* prepared the way for later acclaimed studies of ideology, sport and society, of John Lowerson who demonstrated so impressively that in the historical study of sport there was more to social class than simply the working class, of the 'few' who pioneered the first British Society of Sports History Conference at Keele University in the early-80s on the back of impressive and well received academic publications, of Frank Cass who offered immediate and active support to the Conference Chairman and launched *The British Journal of Sports History* — and still the list is far from complete. And that is just in Britain! In the wider world there is Roberta Park, Gerry Redmond, Katherine McCrone, William Baker and Patricia Vertinsky and still the list is far from complete. And that is just in the English-speaking world! There is insufficient space to mention every aspect of the successful evolution of the subject but mention should be made of not

merely the British Society of Sports History but also of the parallel growth from sturdy childhood to robust adulthood of sports history societies across the world — in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Brazil, South Korea and Japan, to name but a handful of nations. Such developments, incidentally, bode well in the future for studies of sport, nationalism and ethnicity *beyond* Europe and this volume — a welcome state of affairs.

If one swallow does not make a summer, one location most emphatically did not make a discipline. Sports History is polyphyletic. Subtle reality must prevail over simplistic myth; careful inquiry must prevail over casual assertion. Scholastic integrity requires it. The philosopher, politician and essayist Francis Bacon had the answer a long time ago — ‘He that questioneth much shall learn much ... but especially if he apply his questions to the skill of the persons whom he asketh!’¹¹

With regard to the other mythologies mentioned above, space does not permit their full consideration but for a discussion of myths in the making in the history of sport, especially those associated with the public school games cult, militarism in the Age of the New Imperialism, and the significance of drill in the Victorian and Edwardian Elementary School, see J. A. Mangan, ‘Sport in Society: The Nordic World and Their Worlds’, in Henrik Meinander and J. A. Mangan, eds., *The Nordic World: Sport in Society* (Frank Cass, London, 1998). In addition, regarding drill, a careful reading of Alan Penn’s invaluable *Targeting Schools* (Frank Cass, London, 1998) ‘reveals the full extent and intensity of the *fin de siècle* debate about the appropriateness of military drill in the British elementary school’. Penn corrects recent casual assertions in (sports) historical circles about the insignificance of this issue, records the considerable efforts of protagonists and antagonists to get their respective way, and establishes the long drawn-out nature of their confrontation (and) demonstrates that militarism, as a state of mind, was as prevalent in Britain as in France and Germany in the decades before the Great War’. In short, he demonstrates the sad fact that the sports historian can be marvellously confident in making assertions while carelessly casual in offering evidence.

As the Millennium looms, it is important that care rather than carelessness, and evidence rather than assertion characterises the work of the historian of sport. Otherwise the recent admonition of Peter Beck

will be as relevant to the future as it has been to the past.

My experience of service on the history panels for the 1992 and 1996 Research Assessment Exercises as well as for the Humanities Research Board, among other bodies, leads me to believe that the history of sport has yet to be fully accepted by all academic historians. Admittedly, there are still too many weakly-researched studies.¹²

Subtleties and Satisfaction

In the decades ahead the relationships between imperialism, colonialism and sport is certain to become an issue of close investigation as academics from former imperial territories — several are engaged in fascinating studies in my own research centre — consider from ‘underneath’, the past relationships between the imperial dominant and dominated, and the role of sport as an instrument of colonial purpose.

Four caveats are necessary to ensure that such studies are original, seminal and stimulating.

Caveat 1

All the subtleties of the relationship between imperial proselytiser and proselytised must be explored. A sustained attempt must be made to investigate the complexities of this relationship and to investigate modifications to, re-interpretations of, resistance to, and rejection of, the culture of *homo ludens imperiosus*.

Caveat 2

While we should fully recognise that dominant elites in the empire did seek ‘in purposive fashion to engineer the conformity of subordinate groups’ through sport, we should also recognise that sport was an area of negotiation. The tensions inherent in all hegemonic relations should not be overlooked.

Caveat 3

We should also be wary of carelessly patronising indigenous cultures and at least attempt to avoid the enormous condescension of posterity as well as attempt to be sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping, reductionism and global generalisation. Above all, we should be prepared to confront fully the possible disparities between ideological assertion,

intention and realisation.

Caveat 4

And in the imperial cultural setting of sport we should certainly appreciate the independent, creative capacities of politically inferior societies and individuals, while at the same time recognising the effectiveness, by virtue of the ideological and institutional advantages possessed by imperial agents and agencies, of hegemonic control.¹³

And finally, above all, we must pursue our studies of cultures in a full awareness of their sophistication:

It is wise to appreciate that there was no culturally monolithic response to attempts to utilise sport as an imperial bond. A major problem that the analyst of ideological proselytism and its cultural consequences should confront is the nature of interpretation, assimilation and adaptation and the extent of resistance and rejection by the proselytised — in a phrase, the extent and form of ideological implementation. Any analyst worth his salt should be aware of cultural *discontinuities* as well as *continuities*.¹⁴

Seed to Sapling

In the history of sport much remains to be done, much needs to be done better, but much has been done and much has been done well. This article is subtitled 'An Anglo-Saxon autobiographical perspective'. My brief is interpreted as just that. From this perspective there has been much that has been heartening. To take a single example — a literature establishes, asserts, and then consolidates an academic discipline. Optimism is in order in this regard as the future is considered. In Britain two series devoted in part or whole to the history of sport have appeared, the Manchester University Press Series International Studies in the History of Sport and the Cass Series, Sport in the Global Society, new journals have been launched through the vision, energy and initiative of Frank Cass, the London academic publisher — *The International Journal of the History of Sport; Culture, Sport and Society; The European Sports History Review, and now, Soccer and Society*.¹⁵

These academic innovations offer opportunities for academics across the world to further sport studies. They welcome the guru and the tyro. They offer opportunities to those seeking access through English to the

international academic community. They serve to advance, propagate and celebrate historical and other studies of sport.

Thus, while there is a great deal to do, a great deal has been done and there is cause for celebration. When *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, for example, was launched in 1987, the first number contained 104 pages; when *The International Journal of the History of Sport* was published in 1997, the first number contained 245 pages! Historians of all persuasions, interests and inclinations now grace its pages.

It was written recently:

Such is its contemporary power that sport beckons the historian more persuasively and compellingly than ever, to borrow an expression from the innovatory historian Peter Gay, 'to explore its familiar terrain and to rest new interpretations from its inexhaustible materials.' Its subject matter is replete with 'questions unanswered and for that matter, questions unasked ... It encompasses so many dimensions of experience involving politics, gender and class, that this is a 'resonant moment', as the Millennium approaches and sport seduces the modern world, for cultural historians as they consider the evolution of one of the most significant human experiences of the late twentieth century.¹⁶

The small seed *has* become a sturdy sapling. Moreover, it has borne fruit — and we can all enjoy it.

Notes

- 1 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilisation*, translated by Sheila Stern and edited by Oswyn Murray, St Martin's Press, London, 1998, p. xiv.
- 2 Peter Gay, *Style in History*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1974, p. 4.
- 3 Gay, *Style in History*, p. 12.
- 4 Gay, *Style in History*, p. 3, 4 and 11.
- 5 Gay, *Style in History*, p. 4.
- 6 Peter Vansittart, *In Memory of England: A Novelist's View of History*, Trafalgar Square, London, 1998, p. 5.
- 7 Vansittart, *In Memory of England*, p. 5.
- 8 Vansittart, *In Memory of England*, p. 12.
- 9 Gay, *Style in History*, pp. 166-7, 169-90 and (emphasis added) 216.
- 10 Wray Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 3.
- 11 This passage contains the original Coda to the Foreword by the Series Editor, of M. Cronin and D. Mayall, eds., *Sporting Nationalisms*, Frank Cass, London, 1998, which initially was oddly omitted from the Foreword but which has now been reinstated in an Erratum page by the publishers. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* will shortly include a series of evaluations of distinguished early pioneers in the history of sport by distinguished contemporary historians of sport to

ensure that these pioneers are not overlooked.

- 12 Peter J. Beck, *Scoring for Britain: International Football on International Politics*, Frank Cass, London, 1999, p. vii. Beck is at pains, happily, to point out nevertheless, that 'already a large number of sports history monographs, chapters and articles merit comparison with those found in any other field of history', p. viii.
- 13 See, J. A. Mangan, 'Prologue: Britain's Chief Spiritual Export: Imperial Sport as Moral Metaphor, Political Symbol and Cultural bond', in J. A. Mangan, ed., *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, Frank Cass, London, 1992, p. 7 where these points are raised in slightly different form.
- 14 Mangan, 'Britain's chief spiritual export', p. 8.
- 15 *Soccer and Society* will be launched in 2000 in recognition of the fact that soccer is the most played and talked and written about sport in the world.
- 16 J. A. Mangan, 'Foreword', in J. A. Mangan, ed., *Sport in Europe: Politics, Gender, Class*, Frank Cass, London, 1999.