

REVIEW ARTICLE

“Amateurs at Play”: Sport and the Making of the British Ruling Class¹

Bill Murray

Derek Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993, paperback 1996), 358pp, 15 illustrations (one at the head of each chapter), index, no bibliography, £...../£..... ISBN 0 7190 3758/07190 3758 X

Derek Birley, *Land of Sport and Glory. Sport and British Society, 1887-1910*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), 287pp, 9 illustrations, index, no bibliography, £40.00 hb; £12.99 pb ISBN 0 7190 4494 4/ 0 7190 4495 2

Derek Birley, *Playing the Game. Sport and British Society, 1910-45*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), 342pp, no illustrations, index, no bibliography, £44.95 pb ISBN 0 7190 4496 0/0 7190 4497 9

There was a time when the headline ‘Good year for partridges’ highlighted the abundance of birds destroyed by self-styled elite ‘sportsmen’. Since the works of E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and other historians whose concern for history is the view ‘from below’, a ‘good year for partridges’ (pheasants or whatever other wild fowl) would indicate that large numbers of innocent birds had escaped the hounds, beaters and pellets of their would-be tormentors. For (Sir²) Derek Birley, it has to be said, the work of historians tainted by Marxism would be seen as barely relevant, and perhaps worse, not in good taste. For this is a very aristocratic version of sport and British society, redolent of old world values and a golden age now gone if it ever existed. There is a suggestion that Birley might be writing a fourth volume to bring the story up to date, but it is hard to imagine that this genial writer’s heart could be in a volume where association football could not be so easily or slightly dismissed, and where it would be difficult to dilate at length on the pounding of the turf or the cries of tally-ho, the salt of the sea sniffed up the nostrils of millionaire yachtsmen, the grunts of amateur oarsmen heaving their way along the Thames, the puffing of amateur rugger chaps, their efforts

unsullied by vulgar spectators, and, where spectators are tolerated, restrain themselves with the gentle applause of dignified cricket enthusiasts.

Birley, it has to be said, is well aware of the hypocrisy of amateurism,³ and he writes well and with a sly sense of humour on a broad range of topics. For this his work will be a delight to the lay reader and a source of new discoveries for the specialist: the three volumes are filled with fascinating facts and a feast of stories told with an infectious love of the sports that Birley believes shaped the British nation from 43 AD to 1945. That these are the sports of the rich and privileged, or the 'better sort' as he would have it, gives the volumes their particular stamp; that he is allowed to ramble so freely along his chosen paths leaves even those of us who prefer good narrative to tortured theory calling out for some analysis. Birley has no overall argument, there is no development of themes, little serious comparison of sports, and alas, despite the stated aims, very little relationship of sport to society. Many sports are discussed, and Birley is free with his comments on politics and society, but the two are seldom integrated. Instead, non-sporting developments are dealt with in parallel with sport rather than in a complementary way. Similarly sports are dealt with one at a time and chopped up into chronological segments, the logic of which seems to have less to do with developments in sport than on the life and deaths of monarchs or others of those deemed to have proper 'breeding' - thus 1901 for the death of Victoria, 1910 for the death of Edward VII, when the most obvious cut-off point would have been 1914.⁴

To write a history of sport covering either a multitude of sports in one country, or a single sport in many countries,⁵ is not easy, and will inevitably tread on the prejudices of those who think their sport (or country) has been ignored, while specialists in a particular sport (or country or region) will react indignantly when one of their heroes is given the wrong familiar name and with scorn when a wrong score or performance is recorded. One solution to the problem of stretched knowledge is to have an editor call on the services of various specialists, but few edited histories are wholly satisfactory, and while they lend to greater accuracy, they lose in consistency of style and often too of argument. It is a courageous act, then, for Birley to attempt a comprehensive history of sport in Britain over a time period of nearly 2,000 years. Birley is at pains to point out that this is a history of the nations that make up (Great) Britain, but he tends to be dismissive of

what he calls the 'Celtic fringes' (which includes, apparently, all of Scotland as well as Ireland and Wales) and occasionally falls into that most common of errors, an error no less egregious for the number of times it is made, of equating England with Britain, even claiming that the Scots, Irish and Welsh should see this as a compliment.⁶

To write a history of a single sport in a single country is a much easier task, and easier still is to write the history of a single sport over a restricted time. There are some who would say that the latter are the only histories worth writing, and could point to Tony Mason's classic history of Association Football from 1863 to 1915 as a case in point;⁷ Wray Vamplew's prize-winning study of the economic history of selected sports in the key decades before the first World War is a model of its type,⁸ while Robert W. Malcolmson,⁹ John Lowerson¹⁰ and Stephen Jones,¹¹ have all written superb works based on a particular class or classes. Dennis Brailsford, a pioneer in the field of sports history, has moved from his absorbing study of sport in the time of Elizabeth through to Anne and a monograph on bare-knuckle boxing to an interpretive study of sport, time and the British at play;¹² Dick Holt's history of sport and the British, although essentially dealing with the modern period,¹³ remains perhaps the best book written not just on that subject, but on sport in general.

What all these works have in common is that they are written by professional historians, and while the word 'professional' is not one that Birley finds very congenial on the field of play, it implies qualities that could have improved his account of the history of sport in Britain:¹⁴ discipline in the development of issues and an argument and conclusion based on thorough analysis of all the relevant sources.

Birley's is an undisciplined work in the way it ranges from sport to sport, raising an issue here and coming back to it there, dropping it in one decade to come back to it in another because of the peculiar chronological sequence he (or his editor) has adopted. His bibliography includes some interesting primary sources and covers a wide range of secondary sources, but these are rather hit or miss. It would have been impossible to cover all the relevant sources, but Birley's choice is somewhat indiscriminate and some key works are paid scant attention.¹⁵

Birley, author of a much admired book on cricket, *The Willow Wand*, has a great knowledge of many sports, and writes with authority above all when he is discussing golf. It is apparent, however, that he has trouble

expressing more than a token interest in plebeian sports. This leads to the strange anomaly that while he admits soccer was 'the game of all British games that took firmest hold throughout the world' (ii, 168), and that the crowds watching it in Britain early in this century 'was the most remarkable phenomenon in sport' (ii, 229), references to the people's game are generally disdainful where they are not contemptuous. What Birley sees as roguish in rugger becomes sordid in soccer, and while he gives intricate and interesting details on this or that aristocratic roué or 'Varsity snob, dismissing their pranks as lovable eccentricities, his mind clouds over at the vulgar antics of the 'notoriously vulnerable lower orders' (ii,34) who are alternatively dismissed as beneath contempt for their envy and greed or praised for their subservience before their superiors. Birley is unable to capture the joys that made soccer the country's and then the world's most popular game: he seems to think the workers took it up because it was less dangerous than rugby (i, 260), claims that the 'all too successful' FA Cup 'turned into a monster' (ii, 20, 32), and that together with the Football League - two of the most honest and efficient organizations in the history of sport - 'debased soccer on and off the field' - at least so far as 'reputable circles' were concerned (ii, 54).

Happily the rugger chaps 'avoided the abyss into which soccer had fallen' (ii, 51) and followed the Honour Code where the 'working-class hirelings' of soccer succumbed to the 'greater regulation and industrial models of government' (ii, 32). The superior set running rugby also avoided the 'degrading development' in soccer where a majority of players in the Scottish national team played for English clubs (iii, 309-10). They were unable to avoid the split of 1895, however, following which the villains of the Northern Rugby Union were soon 'truly on the downward path' (ii, 52). In the Great War Birley claims that the 'the gallantry of the rugger men [in Scotland] was legendary' (iii, 87) - which was no doubt true - but in suggesting it was otherwise with the soccer men, he seems to be unaware of the enormous efforts made by many professional soccer clubs, in Scotland and elsewhere in Britain, and is wrong to say that only one professional soccer player won a Victoria Cross¹⁶(iii, 99). In fact Birley is hazy in most of what he has to say on soccer, confuses the roles of the League and the FA, makes several mistakes, above all when he crosses the border into Scotland,¹⁷ and when he discusses it in any detail it is to dwell, not on the joys that made it the

popular passion, but topics such as the Meredith and Manchester City scandals before the War and the Leeds United scandals during it. He spends several pages on the Amateur Football Association breakaway, and while recognising that the 6,000 professionals in Britain represented only 1% of those playing soccer in Britain, suggests that these were not real amateurs and certainly would not have fitted the higher standards of entry demanded by the Amateur Rowing Association (ARA) or the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) (iii, 180). He sees spectators as debauching sport, but while he recognises in other sports that many great players took up the game after watching a particular hero in action he seems unwilling to recognize that the vast majority of spectators at soccer matches were either still playing the game or had played it.¹⁸ Similarly, while he spends five full pages on the *Bodyline* series in Australia in the 1930s he makes little more than passing reference to soccer international and club matches played in Europe and elsewhere in the world at this time.

Always Birley brings his narrative back to the more wholesome sports, to the MCC, Newmarket, Ascot, the Leander Rowing Club and Henley. He gives, not without his own ironical comments, mind-boggling figures on the money wasted in aristocratic gambling, even more mind-boggling figures (complete with tables) of the number of birds, foxes or other unfortunate animals carefully protected or reared and then released to be slaughtered for aristocratic delight; the Leander club and Henley get more space than all of the top football teams put together, and the Jockey Club has precedence over the FA. The participation of women is included in a gentlemanly way, and boxing, cricket, golf, athletics and tennis are all given fair space, while croquet, fives, squash and other minor sports are given a guernsey. However, when Birley pleasantly complains (ii, 205) that he does not have the space to cover the vast range of pastimes that captured the interests of their enthusiasts, the answer is simple: cut back on some of the sports that are overdone. Indeed this work could have been substantially improved with rigorous editing, the captions to the sub-heads are often highly contrived and the straining for alliteration smacks at times of mangled manganisms.¹⁹

The most frustrating aspect of the three volumes, however, is that there is no development of issues; Birley's history verges on a story of one damn thing after another, and although much of this is interesting in itself and is always told in an engaging style, it tends to get tedious for the

conscientious reader who is not skipping or picking out selected information. Bar-room stories can be captivating in their place, but they are ultimately frivolous unless linked to bigger issues. Birley makes many references to amateurism and professionalism in his three volumes, but there is no overall discussion of the issue; similarly there is no discussion of the development of the rules, except as this applies to particular sports at particular times: gambling, corruption, commercialism, violence and the ambivalence of the men of the cloth keep cropping up, but none of these are discussed as issues. Virtually nowhere is there a discussion of the impact of technology on sport, or of the role and development of the media in its various forms. Because there is little argument, there are no conclusions at the end of many chapters, confirming the suspicion that each sport was written about separately and then chopped into chronological pieces.

Ultimately the big issues in sport are those that relate to society, whether this be developments in technology, commercialism, politics and relations between the classes. On technology, that is to say the developments that took sport from a local interest involving a few villagers to the broader passions of the four nations making up Great Britain, in the transport of bodies to watch or play and in the exchange of ideas with the revolutions in the media, Birley has almost nothing to say. On politics he often makes interesting points, but these are not always relevant to sport, although they could have been made so. Again he exposes his particular bias, regretting the days when the rich were untroubled by taxation and could dispose of their income (or inheritance) as they wished (ii, 11); expressing the belief that most Britons accepted inequality 'as part of the price of living in a free society' (ii, 14) and judging as 'sophisticated' the idea that the allies should have made peace with Germany in 1917 in order to go to war with the Bolsheviks (iii, 94). For the crofters driven from their living by the inhumane clearances he describes their forced emigration as 'popular' (i, 224).²⁰

When it comes to the 'classes' Birley again has some very acute remarks to make, and if he is not always serious about his division of society into a descending order from 'superior' to 'lower', the frequency of such references can be grating. It is clear, too, that so far as Birley has an overall argument, it is that all good things in society begin at the top and trickle down, and he even seems to give credence to Trevelyan's amusing, but ultimately stupid remark, that if only the French aristocracy

had been as sensible as the British and allowed their peasants to play cricket with them, they would have avoided the Revolution.(i, 6). Birley can be pungently critical of the asinine behaviour of the rich and privileged, and he gives full accounts of the ineffable behaviour of the huntsmen, the poor sportsmanship on the turf or cricket field, the cheating among those who ran boxing and athletics, and the superficial behaviour at large of the aristocracy (royalty itself religiously excluded from any criticism, King and Queen always, bar a couple of typos, in upper case) - but for the most part these tend to be treated as the peccadilloes of the ruling class. There is very little in Birley on the pubs, the pigeons, the brass bands and the passions of the cloth caps who followed more plebeian pursuits. Indeed the subject matter of these books is not so much Sport and the Making of Britain, as the first volume is called, as one man's view of Sport and the Making of the British Ruling Class: indeed many of the above criticisms would disappear if this had been the stated theme.

In the final analysis this is an amateur book, albeit in the best sense of the word; that is to say it is written by someone who loves what he does, does not have to depend on it for a living and so is free from commercial and other pressures to follow his own whims. Birley loves his sport and this gloriously illuminates his writing, as does his desire to share his passions with fellow aficionados. Nor is he wrong, especially in his accounts of the earlier days, to stress the role of the aristocracy in sport, and that of the rich and privileged in general in the codifying and spread of sport in Britain and then around the world. The aristocratic Lord Kinnaird may have had too much Celtic coarseness for Birley and certainly he would have been tainted by his love of soccer, while C.W. Alcock's role in cricket would have been nullified for his role in founding the FA Cup: but so, too, would Birley have dismissed the ineffable N.L. Jackson for his arrant snobbery. Tom Hughes and his creation Tom Brown represent much of the best of sporting values, most of which are as valid today as they were over a century ago, and maybe this is where most of Birley's philosophy lies. But bowing to no mortal being (or to use a more appropriate contemporary allusion, grant-gifting committee) is a quality of the true amateur, and Birley is his own man. He does, however, single out two heroes in the dedication to the third volume, both men who died in war: Edgar Mobbs who was killed in a 'futile' gesture in the first World War, and Hedley Verity who died bravely in the second World War - one was a rugger man, the other a cricketer.

Notes

- 1 This article was originally commissioned by Richard Giulianotti for *Culture, Sport and Society*, but its publication was blocked by the general editor.
- 2 The title 'Sir' does not appear on the outside cover, but does on the inside title pages. I have a peculiar aversion to titles applied to sports people, and they certainly do nothing to add to their reputation: much the same applies to writers. For some people 'sir' is an old-fashioned appellation more likely to inspire dismay than respect, and for such reasons I have omitted such titles in my histories of soccer: it is not a trend that has gained a wide following.
- 3 For a summary of his views, drawn mainly from the volumes under discussion here, see "The Primrose Path", *The Sports Historian*, No. 16 (May 1996), pp. 1-15. My thanks once more to Roy Hay for bringing this article to my attention.
- 4 B. Dobbs in *The Edwardians at play: sports 1890-1914*, London, 1973, did not see sport stopping with the death of the monarch, but took his study on to the outbreak of war.
- 5 Not to mention a global history of all sports, as Bill Baker and Richard Mandell have done admirably. Two histories of sport in Britain before Birley are Peter McIntosh, *Sport and Society*, C.A. Watts. London, 1963, a short pioneering work with a British emphasis, and H.A. Harris, *Sport in Britain. Its origins and development*, Stanley Paul, London, 1975, an interesting work by a writer more at home in ancient Greece and Rome, but who comes from a similar background to Birley: his approach, however, is to deal with specific sports in isolation with a few thematic chapters added. Two shorter books which give a masterly analysis of sport in Britain, both based on impressive use of primary sources, are: Neil Wigglesworth, *The Evolution of English Sport*, Frank Cass, London, 1996; Neil Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain, 1750-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998. Having tried to write a history of the spread of Association Football throughout the world I am well aware of the pitfalls of wide-ranging themes. I had the advantage of trying out two approaches: in the first, more weighty volume, I tried to cover the spread of football from the mists of time, through its codification by the British to its spread mainly by Scots and English around the world, but trying to see the arrival of the game outside Britain from the point of view of those adopting it. This involved help with various languages, detailed discussion of the game in Latin America and two large chapters on Asia and Africa: *Football: a history of the world's game*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1994. Having explained to myself many of the mysteries of the spread of the game throughout the world, this allowed my second history to adopt a simpler chronological survey of the modern game, using mainly different materials and clearing up any mistakes that had crept into the first: *The World's Game. A history of soccer*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1996. Despite the similarity of titles, these are two quite different books
- 6 He claims that the word 'English' to denote all non-English British was 'used indiscriminately by almost all until comparatively recently' (iii, 26 fn; see also ii, 234). However true this may have been, it simply reveals ignorance or arrogance. The English monarchy ceased to exist in 1603, the English parliament in 1707; thus talk of an English monarchy after 1603 or an English parliament or anything to do with foreign affairs after 1707 is historically wrong. Scotland and Ireland. Wales to a lesser extent, retained many national institutions, cultural and other, none less than in sport. Other examples of Birley's lapses in this regard is where he claims cricket as the British national game (1, 1) or 'emblematic of what Britain believed she stood for' (ii, 258): try telling that to a rugby follower from Wales, a footballer or hurler from Ireland, or any Scot. I would also strongly disagree with the claim that cricket was the 'citadel of true sporting values' (ii, 16), - a statement made in a sub-section on

one of the game's greatest amateur charlatans, W.G. Grace. Birley also suggests that it was cricket that epitomised 'fair play' to the world: not only was cricket barely known in parts of the former colonies (United States and Canada), but it was totally unknown throughout most of the world - for those who adopted soccer, and who might have hated the commercial colonisers, they still retained a respect for the way British soccer players played the game.

- 7 Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society. 1863-1915*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1980. For a very good follow-up, see Nicholas Fishwick, *English football and society, 1910-1950*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1989. For a discussion of works on football see the bibliographies in my two world histories. Many of the best of these works came out after Birley had written the three volumes under discussion here, and since then many other significant works have appeared. Indeed the plethora of works on Association Football is one of the most noteworthy developments in recent sports history. There are, of course, a multitude of excellent monographs on individual sports and biographies of individual sports people.
- 8 Wray Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game. Professional sport in Britain, 1875-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988. In this work, the culmination of a series of articles on the subject, and following his much-quoted earlier history of the turf, Vamplew concentrates on football in Scotland and England, county cricket, horse-racing and Rugby League.
- 9 Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society. 1700-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973
- 10 John Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes. 1870-1914*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993
- 11 In addition to several excellent articles before his untimely death, Stephen G. Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: organised labour and sport in inter-war Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991.
- 12 Dennis Brailsford, *Sport and Society. Elizabeth to Anne*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Bristol, 1969; *Bareknuckles: a social history of prize-fighting*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988; *Sport, time and society. The British at play*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1991
- 13 Richard Holt, *Sport and the British. A modern history*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989. Tony Mason has been involved in two interpretative studies of sport in Britain, one as editor, the other a short, analytical survey: Tony Mason, *Sport in Britain*, Faber and Faber, London, 1988; Tony Mason (ed.) *Sport in Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989. For an excellent edited work on a particular aspect of sport, Richard Holt (ed.) *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, while for an assortment of articles on mainly British themes, see the various works under the general editorship of Tony Mangan, who has done a marvellous job in bringing together such works not only in book form, but in his *International Journal of the History of Sport*.
- 14 Although I refer to Birley's work as a three volume study, it would appear that the first was published without the intention of two follow-up works.
- 15 Again the most glaring examples are in soccer, which represents perhaps my own prejudice or specialist knowledge, but key works by Holt, Brailsford and others listed above are given inadequate prominence.
- 16 Celtic's William Angus, who lost an eye saving his commanding officer under heavy fire in France, received a VC from the king in August 1915. Glasgow's 'Irish' club, like others in Scotland, may have refused to abandon the league programme, but they made significant contributions to the war effort, in recruitment, in morale and in contributions of footballs and donations, not to mention the loss of life, careers and livelihood of young players.

- 17 His geography, too, is occasionally suspect, even when it comes to placing golf courses. Among the more glaring errors is to place Third Lanark in Edinburgh, although he can be excused for saying Rangers FC was founded in 1871. It was in fact 1872 although the club thinks it was 1873. Some of Birley's mistakes in the first volume were corrected by the second, such as relocating Third Lanark and translating the FA in FIFA correctly as Association Football and not Football Associations. In a book remarkably free from typos, the errors are mainly trivial: for instance, it was Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, not Johann Jahn; Arsenal did not go to Hollywood to make 'The Arsenal Stadium Mystery' but, sensibly, stayed at home where the stadium was located to do so; like many others he mis-spells Middlesbrough FC and misses the comma that indicates that Dick, Kerr's Ladies XI was named after a factory owned by two people, not one. Duff (not W.) Hart-Davis's book on the 1936 Olympic Games was called *Hitler's Games*, not *The Berlin Games*.
- 18 One of these was Neville Cardus, of lowly origins, but who came to be one of the great writers on cricket, absorbing all the snobbery that went with it. Cardus occupies a strange position in Birley's narrative, being one of the few people he seems actually to dislike, perhaps, among other things, for his conduct (or lack of it) in two world wars.
- 19 As noted above, Tony Mangan has done a magnificent job in bringing to a wide audience the work of sports historians, and himself has written two noteworthy books his is a contribution to sports history surpassed by few and for this the discipline will always be in Mangan's debt. In more recent times, however, Mangan seems to have developed an obsession to remind everyone of this. In his comments as series editor of Birley's work (and that of others), his often irrelevant and occasionally wooden observations show symptoms of him having developed a case of severe clichéitis. For a recent example see Mangan's article in *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 16, No. 1, November 1999: 'The End of History Perhaps - But the End of the Beginning for the History of Sport! (sic) An Anglo-Saxon Autobiographical Perspective', pp. 61-72. In a mere 11 pages in addition to overlong quotations, mainly from Mangan or Mangan quoting Mangan and a ludicrous/weird/strange Coda, Mangan manages to demonstrate in his own writing style the faults he is claiming to expose in others.
- 20 He is also prone to error in discussing European politics. Britain was not brought into the first World War because of treaties with France and Russia, but because of the invasion of Belgium; the Abyssinian question was resolved in Mussolini's favour in 1936, not 1938, by which time the Spanish Civil War was almost over. It is ridiculous to say that mob rule was sweeping Europe in the late 1820s, or to describe the IRA as Bolshevik, while few would agree that philanthropists, for all their good work, did more for the 'lower' classes than trade-unions. He is surprisingly weak, for someone who has lived in Ireland, on the politics of sport and the Irish (or English) problem, and few people would agree that Scotland in the 1920s 'lost its distinctively ethnic and religious edges' (iii, 175). The 1918 Education Act that gave full funding to Scottish catholic schools, however just socially, did nothing to ease the tensions between Scotland's two main religious communities, while its two major football teams continued to take full advantage of this.