

Mike Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society 1790-1914*, Frank Cass, London, 2000, Pp. 288, tables, illus, index, £17.50 (Paperback).

This is a book which should be read by all scholars interested in the history of sport in the nineteenth century, perhaps especially by those who have previously ignored horseracing as a focus for the study of sport. As Huggins demonstrates, racing provides a perspective so different from most other organised sports that it questions many of the assumptions and accepted wisdoms which have developed over the last few decades.

The book's focus is on social issues, particularly the cross-class nature of race meeting attendances, on economic issues, particularly commercialisation, and on political matters, including a revisionist view of the role and importance of the jockey club and the politics of betting reform. As such it does not offer a descriptive narrative of the sport's development in terms of the horses, the great races or the characters of the sport. These, when they are mentioned, are almost incidental to the main issues. They are used to illustrate an argument rather than to tell the narrative story. This is apparent even from the book's structure.

The book begins with an overview of flat racing from 1800 to 1914, which focuses on three themes viz. change in the nature of betting over the period, the context of nineteenth-century technological change and its impact on the structure of racing and what Huggins sees as the key dimensions of the sport in the era. The latter includes discussion of the rise and fall in the number of race

meetings and courses, an increasing competition for racegoers, changes in race programming with more handicap races and races for younger horses and fewer events over staying distances. It then proceeds to the meat of the study.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are all concerned with questions of class relationships. Chapter 2 examines the nature of upper class involvement with racing and the complex reasons behind it. Chapter 3 offers a similar examination of the middle-class racegoers, claiming that historians have had an oversimplified view of the bourgeoisie's attitudes to leisure and offering an alternative which views the middle class as a more diversified group, including complexities such as the life cycle of the middle-class male to help explain apparent contradictions. Chapter 4 looks at racing as a key component of nineteenth-century popular culture. Again the emphasis is on the heterogeneity of working-class life and culture.

In Chapter 5 the race meeting itself becomes the focus of the discussion, which centres on issues such as the gradual change of the race meeting from an annual local festival or carnival catering for all groups (and both genders) within the local society to an enclosed event, both literally and metaphorically, catering for the 'racing man' who travelled to meetings across the country. The forces of change include the arrival of the railways, the telegraph and the sporting press. In Chapter 6 this analysis is carried further with a focus on commercialisation, concluding that racing was among the first of the highly commercialised sports and that the process of commercialisation in the nineteenth century changed the nature of the sport dramatically.

Chapter 7 offers a focus on the Jockey Club, challenging the view of earlier scholars that the Club was a dominant body throughout the century. Huggins argues that for most of the century it was ineffective outside Newmarket although it did hold considerable influence within the parliament, particularly when issues related to gambling reform were on the political agenda. He concludes that 'the Jockey Club's path to power was slower and much more problematic than has been generally thought.' (p.199).

The final chapter assesses the nature and effectiveness of the opposition to gambling, particularly in the second half of the century and beyond. In this discussion Huggins sees racing as 'a focus for the competition between two contrasting middle-class value systems, and was located on a major frontier of socio-economic change' (p.204). As was the case in Australia and elsewhere, the reformers 'had some victories, but they lost the war'. (p.225)

This is a book which is very well researched and carefully argued. It is grounded strongly in theory, which is explicit enough without ever interrupting the flow of the discussion. It is persuasive, particularly in its argument that horseracing offers a corrective for the interpretations of leisure culture offered by historians of other sports, especially in terms of their simplistic

understandings of the middle-class groups. Huggins succeeds in demonstrating that racing not only *included* but also *needed* the middle classes and that racing's success as a cultural practice also gained through its early adoption of modernising elements.

However, despite some valiant attempts to be more inclusive it is really a book about English racing rather than British racing and there little or no attempt to look beyond the boundaries of Britain for comparative or other purposes. This is perhaps a pity as the fact that racing in Australia, North America and elsewhere, faced similar challenges in the same period might have offered further insights.

Even within English racing history this is not a place to come to find the chronology of either particular clubs or racing as a whole. It is not a narrative descriptive history of the sport, its events and its characters. It is about the structure of the sport and its dependence on cross-class support, at least until the end of the nineteenth century. As such it is a successful and, I believe, an important book, although it is perhaps difficult for any work to live up to the rather 'over the top' assessment offered by the book's series editor.

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