THE REGULAR RE-INVENTION OF SPORTING TRADITION AND IDENTITY: CUMBERLAND AND WESTMORLAND WRESTLING c.1800-20001

Mike Huggins

St Martin's College, Ambleside

One of the formerly major spectator sports which has been relatively and surprisingly neglected in British sports historiography is wrestling, a sport with many varieties. These include its 'all-in' dramatic entertainment form, with its good guy 'faces' such as Danny 'Boy' Collins or Billy Two Rivers, and 'heel' baddies like Mick McManus or Hulk Hogan, found in spectator contexts from British city halls to the more mediated and Americanised events regularly broadcast on both satellite and terrestrial television. They also include the freestyle and Graeco-Roman styles of those more amateur British clubs aiming at Olympic representation, and the exotic subtleties of regional variations. These range from 'traditional' Cornish wrestling to ethnic varieties such as Sikh and Indian wrestling in the Midlands or Turkish wrestling in London. Globally there is huge interest in wrestling, especially in the USA where it is a major commercial entertainment form, attracting larger TV audiences than professional American football.

Most research has focused on professional wrestling. Its participatory and media-constructed rituals have been examined using the critical dramaturgical approaches adopted by ritual theorists such as Turner, Goffman, and Ball.2 It can also be examined through performance theory.3 Equally we could use the interpretative frameworks provided by Baudrillard, or Rojek, to see such wrestling as emblematic of post-modernity. Wrestling in such a perspective has moved from a quest for authenticity and self-realisation, to forms of (in this case sporting) identity, practice, and association organised round forms of simulation, hyper-reality, celebrations of fictive and dramaturgical values, and preoccupied with spectacle and sensation. Audiences watch, recognising the pleasure and excitement, but also the unreality. After all, such wrestling is an extreme form of simulated sporting activity.4 As Umberto Eco pointed out, 'imagination demands the real thing, and to attain it must fabricate the absolute fake'.5

However there is growing British academic interest in wrestling. Two

current Ph.D. students, Trevor Hill and Mike Tripp, are working on Macedonian wrestling and Cornish wrestling respectively, and I am currently working on a history of British wrestling from c.1800 to the present which should help put it back on the agenda. Wrestling's commercial setting, the large crowds it has regularly attracted through the nineteenth and twentieth century, its huge audience on Saturday afternoon ITV in the 1960s and 1970s, its current popularity on both Sky and Channel 4, the class relationships which it articulated, and its links with the cult of the body, gender, race, and regional identity all make the case for its serious treatment.

As a spin-off from the larger project, this paper explores the way issues of regional identity and modernity are linked with the constant need to reinvent and re-launch regional forms of wrestling in order to maintain their existence whilst competing with national sports more appealing to the wider public. The example chosen is Cumberland and Westmorland (C&W) wrestling, a semi-professional style competed in largely for money prizes, and still alive today in its Cumbrian heartland, together with some more limited support in Northumberland, Durham, Scotland, and Lancashire. The style is a back-hold style that is now relatively little known, and is one of the few regional forms of European field sports to cope with and survive the onslaught of Olympism, commercialism, and other aspects of modernity.6 In its traditional form it reflected a pre-industrial, ritualistic pattern of life in rural Cumbria, an area often viewed as struggling or marginal but one which had a thriving leisure and sporting culture of a distinctively regional type in the early nineteenth century.

Cumbria comprises the old counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, and the former area of Lancashire 'north of the sands'. It has a geographical unity, and has always possessed a significant degree of cultural homogeneity. It has a mountainous centre surrounded by a coastal plain, where its major heavy industries and its larger towns, including Carlisle (the county town), Workington, Whitehaven, and the late Victorian town of Barrow, were concentrated. There was also some mining in the Lake District and Pennines, as well as other small-scale industries such as bobbin-making scattered across the region. C&W wrestling had its firmest hold in the more rural sheep-rearing, mixed farming and dairying areas, together with those towns such as Carlisle, or the market towns of Kendal, Penrith, and Keswick, to which such areas were most economically linked. The size of the region's population has varied little for much of the period, despite

significant out-migration and in-migration. Over the nineteenth and twentieth century, increased leisure time, rising real wages, the arrival of migrants from outside Cumbria with different tastes in sport, the increased importance of sport in popular culture, and the boost in tourist numbers through rises in car numbers all impacted in their separate and distinctive ways on Cumbrian sports. The late nineteenth century arrival of such new sports as rugby and association football, boxing, tennis, and golf seemed initially to have had little impact on such specifically Cumbrian sports as wrestling, hunting on foot, hound trailing, or fell racing, which brought different classes together. But in the towns the new sports more suited to urban life soon dominated the older Cumbrian forms, with boxing being perhaps particularly instrumental in the decline of wrestling. A growing regional consciousness helped to ensure that local sports were not completely rejected, but even by the 1930s the sporting interests of many Cumbrians were being absorbed into the northern and national pattern of sport, especially in the larger towns.

In coping with the ever-changing pressures of sporting modernity, C&W wrestling became increasingly linked to the maintenance and promotion of a specifically Cumbrian identity and cultural heritage within those rural communities where it survived best. It is significant that it failed ever to take hold in Barrow, a town built through in-migration, and with little understanding of its traditions. To Cumbrian rural spectators at 'traditional' sports, galas, and similar events their wrestling brought both identity and solidarity, a form of resistance to the cultural dominance of wider British society. By the late twentieth century it was also being seen by tourists and middle-class second home owners, who were moving into south Lakeland and the Lakes, as an interesting survival, and emblematic of Cumbrian traditional sports.

For the wrestlers themselves, for much of the period, wrestling facilitated a quest for community status through championship winning or high position, or through participation in the various wrestling training academies. Wrestling brought prestige, rank and status to participants, and up to the Second World War was a means of limited upward mobility in terms of income. Top wrestlers, unlike other elite sportsmen, could often compete effectively until their late 40s, and in the nineteenth century, when its status was highest, many took public houses either before or on retirement. Oral interviews with a number of those currently or formerly involved with the sport stress its long traditions, its preservation of

'traditional values', and its role in perpetuating regional pride. Such views were shaped through the public rhetoric of both working-class and middle-class supporters and organisers, and through the writers in the regional press, who consistently stressed 'traditional' features even where certain aspects were only of recent invention.

Shifts in the popularity of C&W wrestling

Right through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this regional sport has been under great and continued pressure, as the marginal, largely upland counties have become increasingly integrated into national sporting culture. The attractions of modernity, social changes, growing urbanisation and industrialisation, or attractive alternative new forms of commercial leisure (from the cinema to television), coupled with economic depressions and out-migration, all made it difficult for this form of wrestling to survive. It was hard to attract youngsters into the sport. It was rarely taught in schools, usually only when a particular teacher was very enthusiastic. It had to compete with the attractions of such sports as boxing and football. Football, although late in taking off in Cumbria, was, like cricket, becoming popular at the end of the nineteenth century, and the attractions of such sports as football certainly drew some youths away.7 More recently youngsters have been drawn to the American form of freestyle wrestling on TV.

C&W wrestling has regularly suffered periods of decline and periods of reinvention, re-marketing, and revival. Indeed it was seen as being in decline in its pre-industrial form as early as the late 1700s, when prizes were composed of belts, and local status was conferred on the winner. There was then some concern that the sport was dying out after a peak in the 1770s.8 Thereafter a recurrent product cycle of boom and decline set in, with efforts to raise levels of participation and/or spectatorship being followed by a subsequent falling off of interest.

A first new major peak of its attraction in terms of crowd numbers and press interest came at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when over 12,000 spectators were attracted to the Carlisle ring, and the press were talking of 'the revival of this truly British amusement'.9 But by the late 1820s, although wrestling was still associated with a range of established small-scale sporting events right across Cumbria, at many of these it was becoming totally overshadowed. From the late 1830s some larger sports

meetings began growing in size, with fashionable attendance, and increases in prize money and a renewed boom in wrestling followed which lasted until the 1870s, despite temporary decline in the early 1850s. Spread largely by Cumbrian exiles, C&W wrestling could then also be found as a spectator sport in urban areas throughout northern England. Substantial prizes were being offered at major sports events at larger towns and cities such as Newcastle, Liverpool, Burnley, Manchester, and Stockton at Whitsuntide and Easter. Wrestling also developed deep-rooted connections with local Cumbrian life and sports galas.

A worse decline set in from c.1878, and by the early 1880s crowd sizes were almost half those of the previous decade at Carlisle. Indeed, the wrestler Ben Cooper was then of the view that 'the taste or inclination for wrestling is dying outa few more years will make the Cumberland style a thing of the past'.10 The decline was largely blamed by the press on competition from new sports, with athletics and football attracting young wrestlers and better crowds. Now less attractive to those in the towns, wrestling's survival was largely in rural areas, or in venues such as Grasmere, Kirkby Lonsdale, Ullswater, or Bowness where galas, including wrestling, were held during the late spring and summer as an added tourist attraction, and this was a critical feature in its survival. The 'traditional' sports at Lakeland towns such as Grasmere or Keswick became fashionable events attended by tourists and those who had bought up villa residences in the Lakes. Grasmere received the ultimate sign of middle-class recognition by gaining coverage in *The Times* from the 1890s, and by early in the twentieth century the Show was attracting some 16,000 spectators. In West Cumberland decline was met by renewed attempts to revive the sport at the end of the nineteenth century by interested individuals.11 The autonomy of each local wrestling ring was broken when C&W wrestling finally, and belatedly, came under the control of a regional governing body in 1906, although this body itself had no connection with the more purely amateur national body. This regional committee made great efforts to revive the sport, and this, together with the opening of new wrestling academies to train youngsters, gave another boost to wrestling up to 1914. Webster, a journalist on the *Carlisle Patriot*, was a leading figure on the committee, and well-known for his 'bold attempt to revive the old Cumbrian sport'.12

C&W's popularity was initially maintained after the 1914-18 war, although by the 1930s leisure alternatives, including the growing attractions

of boxing in Carlisle, put the sport slowly into a further decline outside the major meetings. C&W wrestling was beginning to be seen as 'old-fashioned' or 'decadent', and those galas and sports which supported it saw a decline in terms of numbers of spectators and participants by 1939.13 Immediately after the Second World War there was yet another revival. Some eight or nine areas put renewed efforts into training 'academies' for aspiring wrestlers and these, together with press coverage, including a regular newspaper column by Bob Horsley ('Cross-buttocker') from 1946, led to what the *Carlisle Journal* celebrated as a 'wrestling boom' in the late 1940s.14 The later 1950s saw renewed and rapid decline in the number of wrestling events in Cumbria, but the last decade has seen a rise in terms of numbers of events where wrestling has been a feature. There are currently between sixty and seventy different C&W wrestling events each year, now often self-consciously presented as an important 'retro', post-modernist historical Cumbrian tradition and (in part) put on as a tourist attraction. The bulk of these are at shows, such as Ribblehead sheep show, or Broughton agricultural show, together with carnivals and Lakeland sports events such as Grasmere Lakeland Sports and Show. Crowds at such events are, however, drastically reduced. Grasmere, which attracted crowds of over 16,000 before the First World War, now attracts only some 5,000, and is as dependent on backpackers and tourists as on local people and families.

A better index of declining popularity than audiences is participant entries at major wrestling sports. While these have fluctuated, they were regularly well over a hundred for the heavyweight division at the major events throughout the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. The largest number of entries for any all-weight event was at Wigton in 1839, when 256 entered, and as late as 1950 Grasmere Sports could still attract 124 heavyweight entries. Over the next decade there was a rapid decline in the number of entries, even for the heavyweights, always the most popular competition. By 1958 entries in lightweight, middleweight and heavyweight categories were all less than half those of a decade earlier. The decline accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, and only three of the training academies now survive.

The future of the sport is still precarious. Through the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century wrestling was also a leisure tradition, a pastime in the community, with young lads wrestling for fun after school. When in 1907 Grasmere sports failed to join the newly created Wrestling Association, and all those top wrestlers who had wrestled there were banned from

entering other events, this had no deleterious effects. A week later at Ullswater, for example, there were more entries 'than for any previous year'.15 The pool of potential wrestlers was large and less able wrestlers, recognising that top wrestlers were absent, were now encouraged to enter. Oral evidence suggests youngsters were still wrestling for fun in many long-standing wrestling communities after the Second World War, but that such activity was disappearing by the late 1950s and no longer occurs. The number of active wrestlers is now few, and centred round the activity of the three surviving wrestling academies. C&W wrestling is now largely the preserve of long-standing Cumbrian wrestling families, many from a farming background. Paradoxically, as it has declined as a participant sport it has increasingly delineated and confirmed a sense of place, the Lake District as both a geographical entity and an 'imagined community', to modern Cumbrians and to visiting tourists.16 Wrestling helps to narrate the region, and establish sporting status, horizontal comradeship and regional identity. There are 'world championships', and international matches against wrestlers elsewhere.

The regular reinvention of wrestling

From the foregoing discussion it should be clear that to survive and compete with leisure alternatives wrestling has needed constantly to change and adapt, and represent itself to new audiences in new ways, re-launching and re-marketing the sport for the public. Those involved in wrestling did this in a number of ways. Firstly they used well-publicised reorganisation of ruling bodies. Since some wrestlers regularly tried to arrange results amongst themselves for a mixture of betting and friendship reasons, there were also quite regular attempts by committees to eliminate this 'barneying' through rule-making and a firmer stand, always implying its 'recent' adverse effects, and inventing a tradition of 'honest', 'pure' wrestling which had never existed. A second way of relaunching the sport was through altering presentational aspects to make the event more appealing to the uncommitted spectator. Such alterations included moves to shorten the time allowed in which to take hold, a shift in the timing of the events from the traditional weekday first to the industrial Saturday afternoon, and then to Sunday. The role of costume and ritual in the sport was upgraded to make events more visually interesting. Finally, and most recently, the sport has been redefined and rhetorically relocated in a Celtic cultural context, linked firmly to sporting traditions of wrestling in Brittany, Cornwall and Devon, and/or Scotland. At the same time, how-

ever, Scottish wrestlers, with their different traditions, have been encouraged to come down, and the sport has been presented as a new form of traditional border warfare. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Organisational Features

The setting up of a rule-making body is an important aspect of the public face of any sport, making the transition from a more informal pastime to the status of an institutionalised and more organised sport. Even though wrestling has its roots in rural life, Carlisle, the major Cumbrian urban centre, has generally played a key role and it was here that the first formally constituted body laying down rules emerged, although informal rules for C&W wrestling were well known throughout the region even in the early eighteenth century. The organisation was the Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association (a.k.a. Carlisle Wrestling Society or Committee), first established in 1809. It moved a step further along the continuum of permanency with the publication of annual reports in 1859. Elsewhere there was no formal organisation overseeing wrestling, and each event depended on local individuals. A wrestler banned at one event could therefore still compete elsewhere. Societies were occasionally referred to in the press, but appear to have formed and disbanded depending upon individual enthusiasm. Societies formed in the 1840s, for example, included Kendal Wrestling Union Society, Kendal Operatives' Wrestling Society, Kirkby Lonsdale Wrestling Association, and Penrith Association.17 When Grasmere sports became more of a tourist attraction in the second half of the century a separate organisation, the Grasmere and Lake District Wrestling Society, emerged there.

By the 1870s the Carlisle-based organisation clearly felt that its name needed a wider appeal, and began describing itself as the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association, thus suggesting a broader regional remit, although membership was still largely Carlisle-based. When it was finally forced to put on athletics with wrestling in the 1890s to boost declining attendance, it made yet another change of name to the Northern Counties Wrestling and Athletic Association, claiming yet wider representation. This seems to have had a mixed reception and the organisation was calling itself the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling and Athletic Association from the early 1900s. To boost declining popularity it even changed the date of its sports to a Saturday August Bank holiday and added a cycle race in 1909. In 1914 it also added a band contest which helped

boost attendance to record levels.

But despite its titular claims to geographic spread it had had little power outside Carlisle, and a renewed and successful attempt to form an association governing C&W wrestling with wider geographical appeal and powers, and more middle-class membership, was made in 1906. Despite its middle-class membership, the semi-professional nature of the sport meant that the body had little in common with the London-based National Amateur Wrestling Association. The new Cumbrian Association was intended to control all C&W wrestling, although this depended on its membership which was composed of both registered private members and representatives of affiliated galas and sports days who could each send one voting member to AGMs to elect a committee. Wrestlers who wrestled at unaffiliated events were banned from competing at its events, a powerful sanction. It had just under 400 registered members in 1910-11. This association still runs C&W wrestling today, although with significantly reduced membership.

The changes of name of organisation often reflected changing attitudes to the sport and the extent to which it could also be found outside Cumbria. Out-migration was common in the region,18 and nostalgic exiled Cumbrians took their culture and wrestling with them to a number of English cities, including Newcastle, Manchester, and Liverpool. London, for example, had a flourishing Westmorland Society from the eighteenth century, and a C&W Wrestling Society organised annual Good Friday wrestling from the beginning of the nineteenth century, with a code of rules and staff of officials from 1824. Like the overseas Scottish Caledonian Clubs,19 London wrestling served important enculturalising functions, helping those who had moved to London maintain their link with Cumbria, maintain their heritage, or pass it on to subsequent generations. The extension of the railway north from London in the 1840s first to Lancaster, then to Carlisle and Scotland, brought down wrestlers from Cumbria to compete at its competitions, and attempts were temporarily made in the 1850s to restrict entries to those resident in London.20 The organisation continued to run annual Easter events through the century, usually with some open events and some for London men, although the professionals were banned from competing in the 1870s. Those metropolitans keen on inventing more amateur sports created a rival Cumberland and Westmorland Amateur Wrestling Society which also held annual summer sports in the late 1880s, with prizes presented by the Lord Mayor.21 But in the 1890s,

C&W wrestling's exclusion from London athletic club programmes, coupled with a greater range of leisure choices for potential participants, led to its decline.22 There had been no formalised structure of administration for events, which depended on the enthusiasm, dedication and hard work of individuals. As these grew older, or left, they were not replaced.

C&W wrestling was also exported into north-east England. In the second half of the nineteenth century there were regular prize-offering events in the eastern Pennine areas, Newcastle, Stockton, and elsewhere. The most extreme example of a name change there was at Morpeth, where there was C&W wrestling by the 1850s, and games were formally founded in 1873 as the Morpeth Wrestling and Athletic games. These games, which initially had C&W wrestling at their heart, were re-launched in 1881 as the Morpeth Olympic Games. The inclusion of the glowingly prestigious word 'Olympic' (the first 'modern' Athens games were held in 1896) increased crowds. There were all-weights world championships held there as late as the 1940s, and these games lasted until 1958.

However, by the twentieth century C&W had increasingly little impact outside its heartland, despite occasional attempts at re-launching elsewhere in towns with numbers of exiled Cumbrians. These were largely conscious antiquarianism, lacking community roots. In 1927, for instance, the Burnley and District C&W Association was founded to encourage the study and preservation of the antiquities, literature, folklore, natural history, dialects, and customs and sports such as C&W, but had little success in sporting terms.

Barneying

Within themselves the various wrestling organisations sought particularly to create an image of wrestling as historically a totally honest sport. Like their continued use of ceremonial conduct, and the arcane language of hipes, hanks, and chips employed by its participants, this was an attempt to create 'tradition' in the sense outlined by Hobsbawm, Ranger, and Cannadine, since in reality 'barneying', the fixing, buying and selling of matches for pecunary reward, was a constant threat.23 Robinson and Gilpin, writing in 1893, referred to rules as early as 1713 which already included that no wrestler 'shall have another to yield to him under any condition', with the penalty on discovery being that 'neither of them shall be capable of the prize'.24 To stop 'barneying' was difficult because

although prize money could be many weeks' wages, settling the result beforehand between two wrestlers meant that both could bet with certainty on the result. Strong competitors were also aware that they could also profit more certainly by betting against themselves through intermediaries and then losing rather than possibly winning important matches. 'Barneying' was a common feature until after the Second World War. Spectators were therefore sometimes unhappy at suspect results. Two tactics were usually employed in combination by defenders of wrestling to allay such concerns. The first and most commonly used tactic used by writers was to recognise some dishonesty but to imply that this was a recent phenomenon, and to refer back towards a (never existing) golden age of honest wrestling. For example, Machell, writing in 1911, felt that it was only in 1878 that complaints had been publicly made regarding 'apparent dishonesty prevalent in the ring'.25 Yet Lee, writing in 1953, felt that 'up to sixty years ago wrestlers would have scorned either to buy or sell a fall'.26 In order to deal with such dishonesty, the second tactic was the introduction of ever-new publicly proclaimed rules to avoid such barneying.

All associations' attempts to control barneying usually met with limited success. As early as 1815 the final at Carlisle was not fairly contested, and in 1816 universal disapprobation was expressed at the conduct of two or three of the last men 'owing to some previous agreement amongst them'.27 Rules were unavailing. The Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association Rules from 1859 laid down that any wrestler 'attempting sham wrestling, personation, buying or selling a fall, getting into any weight to which he is not entitled, or otherwise misconducting himself or in any way attempting a barney ... shall be at once expelled ... and debarred from again contending in the Carlisle ring.' Yet in 1875 a letter from an old wrestler claimed that the honesty of wrestling at Carlisle was in decline because of barneying.28 In 1884 'a more stringent set of rules ... to improve the tone of the ring and purify as far as possible the manly sport from any unfair or degrading influences' was introduced.29 But only fifteen years later it was claimed that the sport had been killed by 'other athletic games but more than all by the barneying so often practiced'.30 Wrestlers were disqualified for 'barneying' at Grasmere in 1903, 1904, and 1906.31 The C&W Wrestling Association was formed in 1906 with the professed aim to 'purge' the sport from the 'virus of dishonesty and gambling', and accepted that wrestling had not been altogether honest for some time. Previously, bans had been only for subsequent years at the meeting involved. The new Association introduced the opportunity to ban barneying

wrestlers not just at the event involved but at all affiliated sports.32 Yet it still had limited impact. In 1911 the executive reportedly still had to act with a firm hand for the suppression of 'barneying or other undesirable conduct' in the wrestling ring.33 The inter-war period had occasional examples, and even as late as 1949 'many board members were of the opinion that snapping (i.e. fixed matches) was on the increase'.34 Thereafter there were fewer benefits for the wrestler in barneying. From the 1950s prizes were increasingly relatively small, entries were fewer, and even more importantly it was now very difficult to place a bet on a wrestling bout. Consequently there was little incentive to fix a contest except to give a friend a chance.

Prize money

As the last paragraph implies, large sums of prize money have always attracted both participants and spectators. So another way of making the sport appealing following decline was its re-launching at new venues with greater prize money for the wrestlers involved. Especially in the nineteenth century, when prize money was much more significant in relation to the weekly earnings of wrestlers, increases in prize money always meant more entries, a better standard of entries, and an increase in spectator numbers. Finding wealthy sponsors lay at the heart of this move, and the boom of the early nineteenth century was due directly to an increase in sponsorship. In 1809 the offer of a prize of five guineas and a silver mounted belt at Ambleside attracted additional interest, since the prize was 'greater than had previously been known for some length of time'.35 Here the key figure was John Wilson Esq., who took a personal interest in the sport and obtained subscriptions from neighbouring gentry. The revival of wrestling at Carlisle races in 1809 was due to prize money provided by the lawyer Henry Pearson, whilst his brother, Dr. Pearson, offered a prize for wrestling at the subsequent Penrith races. The following year two purses of gold were offered at Penrith, and in 1811 a prize of twenty guineas was offered at Carlisle. This reawakened an interest in the sport, with large crowds drawn to the ring. Carlisle as the most prestigious venue thereafter offered largest prize totals, although prizes varied with interest in the sport, and the amount of sponsorship. By the 1860s Carlisle prizes reached over £100 per annum. There was a peak around the mid-1870s, with £137 offered in 1878, but the trend thereafter was downward for some time.

This was largely due to a decline in subscriptions. Through much of the

nineteenth century many sports, including horse-racing, boxing, rowing, and wrestling, attracted competitors through the offer of stakes or prize money based upon the collection of subscriptions from interested, largely upper-class supporters, or those likely to gain financially from the event. But by the 1870s there was an ever-increasing expectation that gate money should meet all the costs of the event. At Carlisle, although subscriptions still averaged nearly £60 per annum in the 1870s, they were around £50 in the 1880s. In the 1870s and early 1880s annual reports indicate that there were commonly between 135 and 150 individual subscribers, including the earls of Lonsdale, Bective, and Carlisle, Lord Muncaster and four to six members of Parliament, exercising gentlemanly patronage of a range of games and sports, as well as other gentry, brewers and publicans, industrialists, and businessmen. By 1906 only some £42 in subscriptions was collected from over 100 subscribers, but by 1914 subscriptions totaled £24 from only 36 subscribers. The decade 1875 to 1884 began with gate money around £250 each year but for the rest of the decade averaged £141, yet prize money initially maintained a level around £100 each year.36 This could not be maintained. By the years around 1900 prize money for wrestling at Carlisle had halved, as had competitor numbers, and although spectator numbers at the wrestling and athletic sports were more than had been attracted to the wrestling alone, extra gate money did not cover the prize money shortfall. The aristocratic patronage had been withdrawn by this time, and only two MPs now subscribed.

Yet the upper classes clearly wished still to be associated with 'traditional' rural sports. Political changes in the towns meant that they had lost their former political dominance there, but deference could be expected in the countryside, especially in places where they still held much of the land, and many of the local attenders were their tenantry. By the 1890s Grasmere Sports, with its hound trails, guides race, and wrestling, had become the most prestigious event for attendance by the elite, followed closely by Ullswater Sports. Grasmere, described locally as 'the Lakelanders' Derby', was seen as a local holiday and had £120 in wrestling prizes by 1899 thanks to wealthy subscribers.37 It had become a glittering social occasion, with 300 or more fashionable coaches and drags, attracting wealthy visitors as well as the older Lakeland gentry. The sports reflected a growing consciousness of regional culture, the need to erect cultural defences against outside influences, to emphasise local status against that of 'off-comers', and to maintain 'traditional' Lakeland sports. As such it continued to attract sponsorship from regional upper-class patrons. The famous Yellow

Earl, Lord Lonsdale, supported the event regularly until 1935 and the Lonsdale family, Lords of the Manor of Grasmere, has continued to be involved thereafter. Business sponsorship was largely limited to local publicans. Even in 1999 Jennings brewery at Cockermouth and The Village Inn, Bowness were the chief contributors at Grasmere.

The need to improve the presentation of the sport

Although the appeal of 'traditional' sports is often their apparent unchanging continuity in a rapidly changing world, in reality it is inevitable that presentation has to be modified to respond to the changing social, economic, and cultural expectations of the audience. A change of timing from weekday to the weekend was the most obvious modification of the late twentieth century. Although there were occasional matches between top wrestlers for large side stakes, most wrestling has traditionally taken place at open events at fairs, sports days, carnivals, galas, and agricultural shows. Almost all such events in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were annual events, occasions for local holidays, and thus held during the week, rather than at the weekend. Outside of the major cluster of Whitsuntide, Easter, and later August holiday events which were often held on the Saturday or Bank Holiday Monday, the most common days were in mid-week Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. This pattern held until the 1970s and then began to change, alongside the expansion of car ownership. Currently eighty per cent of events including wrestling are held on Saturdays and Sundays, leaving only some twenty per cent, including Langholm Common Riding and Ambleside Sports, determinedly maintaining their mid-week date.

Making the wrestling more visually appealing has been another approach which C&W organisers have considered. The embroidered costumes, now seen very much as a traditional feature, were in fact a Victorian invention. According to the evidence of both pictures and written descriptions, until the 1860s wrestlers simply stripped off to their shirts, breeches and stockings before competing. At Ulverston in 1840 they wrestled in 'shirt sleeves and trousers tucked up' and trousers were 'loose fitting', although the reporter felt the visual effect would be improved if wrestlers wore clothing 'closely fitting the form which could then be shown off'.38 Charles Dickens, in his visit to the Ferry Ring at Windermere in 1858, described in *Household Words* wrestlers as stripping to 'their drawers and flannel waistcoats'.39 The national popularity elsewhere of acrobatic and

pedestrian kit, white tights and shirt, with an ornate centrepiece, drawn round the waist and legs, led to their adoption by some wrestlers in the early 1860s. The better visual impact this made on spectators was soon recognised and prizes for neatest costume were being offered at Carlisle to improve the look of the sport by the later part of the decade.40 This led to 'marked improvements in the style of dress'. Photographs show that even less fashionable top wrestlers had adopted it by the mid-1870s, and by the mid-1880s most wrestlers had adopted it.41

Initially there had been little decoration on the costume but the prizes for best costume led to wrestlers' wives, mothers, sisters, or girlfriends spending time in decorative needlework and this decoration slowly grew more complex as time went on. At the end of the nineteenth century even tights were sometimes embroidered as well as singlets and centrepiece. By the mid-twentieth century, a Bootle seamstress could build a reputation as regularly embroidering costumes which won the best costume prize at Grasmere sports.42 Clothes rationing immediately after the Second World War led temporarily to less insistence on the rules, but by 1949 the Association was reminding wrestlers that 'more costumes would make a more colourful display' and stressing 'the desirability next season in turning out in becoming or traditional attire'.43 Until late Victorian times competitors undressed in public. After some complaints a covered tent in which the wrestlers undressed was introduced in 1884. This was 'found to be a very decided improvement'.44

Unlike the staged, rapid movement of professional wrestling, C&W wrestling is more static. Wrestlers usually want to win, and the way in which the initial taking hold is carried out can confer an advantage to one or other wrestler. The bout can be started only when both men have 'got to grips' by simultaneously linked fingers behind their opponent's back. As a result high stake matches in the mid-nineteenth century could take a long time for the wrestlers to 'tekk hod'. The numerous and eventually fruitless attempts to get hold by Thomas Longmire and Richard Wright of Longtown in September 1857 apparently 'occupied nearly five hours', since neither man was prepared to risk the £100 stake for less than an advantageous grip.45 In 1874 the lightweight finalists at Grasmere took 45 minutes. This forced the introduction of new rules at some venues. By 1876 in Carlisle ring Rule 10 stated that 'five minutes shall be allowed for taking hold and the end of which time the Sand Glass shall be held up and when run out either one or both wrestlers shall be blown out'. This sand glass,

measuring the time, became a visible signal of time running out. Despite this innovation, taking hold continued to be a problem throughout the twentieth century. As late as 1987 even more stress on taking hold had to be placed with new rules which would 'cut out time-wasting and other unpleasantness' and make 'tekkin hod' even quicker.46

Going Celtic

Throughout the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century C&W wrestling has portrayed itself as a 'fine', 'ancient', 'manly' Old English sport, very much a sport created and sustained in its Cumberland and Westmorland heartland. But its wrestlers have always traveled to compete with wrestlers elsewhere, wrestling in different styles. Most recently there have been attempts rhetorically to relocate C&W wrestling in a Celtic cultural context, linked firmly to sporting traditions of wrestling in Brittany, Cornwall and Devon, or Scotland.

Interest in Gaelic and Celtic sports has been a recent feature of both Scottish political movements and sports historiography, in some cases here too linked with myth making.47 Cumbrian links with wrestlers in Cornwall, Devon, and Scotland were relatively rare before the twentieth century, although wrestlers from Cumberland and Westmorland occasionally competed against Cornish wrestlers in London in the nineteenth century, wrestling in both styles.48 Scottish wrestlers competed in Cumbria from the nineteenth century, with the charismatic Donald Dinnie standing out as an early example. C&W wrestlers occasionally traveled to the highland games in the late nineteenth century, and the Inverness Gathering of 1889 introduced an exhibition of wrestling by athletes from Cumberland.

From the 1950s, with more leisure time and cheaper transport, there were attempts by C&W wrestlers to wrestle in Cornwall, and enter some of the Highland Games, often under assumed names. John Bland lost a borrowed kilt in front of the spectating royal family at Braemar in 1956. The heavyweight Ted Duglinson got to the semi-final of the Cornish style championships in 1970, and wrestled in Scotland under the name MacBride, while another heavyweight, Wilf Brocklebank, got to the Cornish final in 1973. More recently, with the decline in entries, Scottish wrestlers, with their different traditions, have been encouraged to compete in C&W events wearing kilts, although there has been some debate amongst Cumbrians about this. Clearly it offends tradition but attracts spectators.

New Celtic links were fostered in 1985 when the C&W Wrestling Association joined the International Federation of Celtic Wrestling, and teams began entering International Celtic wrestling championships in Brittany and Iceland. This may well mark a further stage in the reinvention of regional tradition, what Robertson has called 'wilful nostalgia', marginalising earlier differences, as links with Scottish wrestling associations began to be explored, and Cumbria began to 'rediscover' its long-lost Celtic heritage.49 Or it can be viewed more cynically and more simply as a way of expanding opportunities of sporting participation and status. By the 1990s the Celtic championship had some seven areas represented including Sardinia, Spain, Scotland, Brittany, Iceland, C&W, and Ireland, and the European Celtic Wrestling championship was a major event, held in Carlisle Sands Sports Centre in 1999.

Conclusion

Over the last two centuries, wrestling has experienced both change and continuity. In part, C&W wrestling has survived by adopting the public rituals, rhetoric, and symbolism of all modern sport, and by presenting itself in a form more calculated to appeal to spectators. The changes in Cumbria through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all had a powerful impact on some aspects of the sport. Pride continues to be taken in Cumbrian culture, although it is no longer a mainstay of recreation and sporting life. Yet a wrestler from the early nineteenth century would still recognise the moves: the buttock, hipe, and dog falls. He would still see the agony and the ecstacy, the joy and the heartache of what is still a fascinating physical and mental contest.

Over the last decades, there has been much historiographical interest in the ways in which the more commercialised, professionalised sports responded to changing economic and social imperatives, together with an examination of the new middle-class sports emerging in the late nineteenth century, and those working-class sports such as cockfighting or bull-baiting subject to attack. Those sports, such as coursing, wrestling, or hunting, which can be seen as 'traditional' survivals have received less critical attention, although historians of leisure and sport are now increasingly aware of the adaptability of so-called 'traditional' sports, and the way in which so many of their apparent traditions are of comparatively recent origin. Cornish wrestling may well have had similar responses to the demands of social and cultural change, although the chronology may be

different. This study has shown how changes in presentation, organisation, commercialisation and its perceived cultural identity apply even to a supposedly traditional sport.

References

Printed annual reports of the Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association and the Northern Counties Athletic and Wrestling Association 1876-1906 (Carlisle Library)

Minutes of Association Governing Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling from 1906 (Carlisle Library and Carlisle Record Office)

Interview with Tucker Mason, ex-Grasmere champion, 25.11.1999

Newspapers and magazines

Ambleside Herald and Lakes News

Bell's Life

Carlisle Journal

Cumberland News

East Cumberland News

Kendal Mercury

Lancaster Gazette

The Times

West Cumberland Times

Books and Articles

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

Armstrong , William, Wrestling, in W H Pollock et al, *Fencing, Boxing, Wrestling* (London: Longmans Green, 1901)

Ball, Michael R., *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (Lampeter: Mellen, 1990)

Barthes, Roland, The World of Wrestling, *Mythologies* (London: Cape, 1972)

Cooper, Ben, *The Science of Wrestling* (London: Marcus Ward, 1886)

Dickens, Charles, Feats at the Ferry, *Household Words,* 6 February 1858

Eco, Umberto, *Faith in Fakes* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986)

Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, T., (eds) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cam-

bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)

Jarvie, Grant, *Highland Games: The Making of a Myth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991)

Jarvie, Grant and Maguire, Joseph, *Sport and Leisure in Social Thought* (London: Routledge, 1994)

Jarvie, Grant and Reid, I. A., Sport, Nationalism and Culture in Scotland, *The Sports Historian*, 19, 1 (1999), pp. 97-124.

Lee, John, *Wrestling in the North Country* (Consett: Ramsden Williams, 1953)

Litt, William, *Wresliana or an historical Account of Ancient and Modern Wrestling* (Whitehaven: R. Gibson, 1823)

Machell, Hugh, *Some Records of the Annual Grasmere Sports* (Carlisle: Charles Thurman, 1911)

Marshall, J D and Walton, John K, *The Lake Counties from 1830 to the Mid-Twentieth Century: A Study in Regional Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981)

Mazer, Sharon, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998)

Murfin, Lyn, *Popular Leisure in the Lake Counties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990)

Page, W, *Victoria County History of Cumberland* Vol 2 (London: Constable, 1906)

Redmond, Gerry, *The Caledonian Games in Nineteenth Century America* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1971)

Robinson, J. and Gilpin, S., *Wrestling and Wrestlers* (London: Bemrose, 1893)

Rojek, Chris, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993)

Scott, D, *Byegone Cumberland and Westmorland* (London: W. Andrews, 1899)

Ward, Ian, 'Lakeland sport in the 19th Century', Liverpool University Ph. D. thesis (1985)

Notes

1 This is an expanded version of the paper, 'The regular reinvention of sporting tradition', presented at the British Society of Sports History

conference at the University of Liverpool, March 2000.

2 See Ball, 1990.

3 See Mazer, 1998.

4 See Rojek, 1993, pp. 127-35.

5 Eco, 1986, p.8. See also Barthes, 1972 on the 'fixed' nature of wrestling which he contrasts with its moral certainties and 'Justice which is at last intelligible'.

6 It receives attention in Ward, 1985 and Murfin, 1990.

7 Murfin, 1990, pp. 115-18.

8 Litt, 1823.

9 Page, 1906, p.485.

10 Cooper, 1886, p.1.

11 *West Cumberland Times*, 11 September 1899; *West Cumberland Times*, 7 September 1901.

12 *East Cumberland News*, 17 October 1913.

13 *Carlisle Journal*, 4 March 1938.

14 *Carlisle Journal*, 16 October 1949.

15 *Carlisle Journal*, 3 July 1907.

16 Anderson, 1972.

17 Ward, 1985, p.205. *Lancaster Guardian*, 23 January 1841.

18 Marshall and Walton, 1981, pp. 67-100.

19 See Redmond, 1971.

20 According to the *Lancaster Gazette*, 6 April 1850 it was because 'those who earn a living by traveling to various events to contest for prizes and who from being in continuous practice and rude health, from the nature of their rustic occupation are more than a match' for others.

21 *The Times*, 24 June 1889.

22 Armstrong , 1901, p.217.

23 See the papers by Cannadine and Hobsbawm in Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983.

24 Robinson and Gilpin, 1893, p. xxxii.

25 Machell, 1911, p. 34.

26 Lee, 1953, introduction.

27 Litt, 1823, p.27.

28 *Bells Life*, 24 July 1875.

29 Annual report of Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association 1884 (held at Carlisle library).

30 Scott, 1899, p. 188.

31 Machell, 1911, pp. 63, 64, 68.

32 *Carlisle Journal*, 24 July 1906.

33 Secretary's report Association Governing Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling AGM 1911.

34 Wrestling Governing Board Minutes, 15 October 1949.

35 Litt, 1823, p.25.

36 Printed annual reports of the Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association and the Northern Counties Athletic and Wrestling Association.

37 *Ambleside Herald and Lakes News*, 18 August 1899.

38 *Lancaster Guardian*, 15 August 1840.

39 Dickens, 6 February 1858.

40 *Carlisle Journal*, 22 June 1869.

41 Report of Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association for the Year 1884

42 Interview with Tucker Mason, ex-Grasmere champion, 25 November 1999.

43 Wrestling Governing Board Minutes 15 October 1949.

44 Report of the C&W Wrestling Association 1884

45 *Kendal Mercury*, September 1857

46 See *Cumberland News*, 16 April 1987.

47 Jarvie, 1991; Jarvie and Reid, 1999.

48 Armstrong, 1901, pp. 225-7.

49 Quoted in Jarvie and Maguire, 1994 p.263.