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The Beginning of Boxing in Britain, 1300—1700 by Arly Allen (review)

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

Mike Huggins

Allen, Arly. *The Beginning of Boxing in Britain, 1300—1700*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2020. Pp. 240. Appendices, endnotes, bibliography, index, and 17 photographs. \$39.95, pb.

Books about boxing, a form of competition based on blows with the fist, have been published regularly over the past two hundred years. The British Library, for example, currently lists over 1,400 works held there, including solid academic works by writers such as Kasia Boddy, Dennis Brailsford, Elliott Gorn, and Jeffrey Sammons. Boxing aficionados also have the International Boxing Research Organization, founded in 1982 with the hope of establishing a more accurate history of boxing by application of the rules of scholarly research. The vast bulk of this research focuses on

"modern" boxing, the history of "pugilism/ prizefighting," or fist fighting in the ancient world. Articles and book reviews referring to boxing in the *Journal of Sport History* have followed a similar pattern.

Arly Allen's book, however, tackles a very different and very challenging topic. He sets out to explore the beginnings of boxing in Britain over the period between 1300 and 1700 CE, although with some references forward and backward in time. Allen's background is in scholarly publishing, but, since retirement, he has turned to the study of boxing history, writing a 2017 book on heavyweight champion Jess Willard and several articles.

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Adopting this *longue durée* approach is challenging. Very little has been written on this topic in this way. Sources in print are fewer in number and need very careful handling. Conclusions and hypotheses can often only be tentative, given the limited previous research and the expertise in medieval life and textual criticism required. As Henning Eichberg and others have argued, sports such as boxing are all particular to a specific society and time, and so many apparent similarities are only superficial. Many activities are likely to have been in practice and in principle very different in their cultural meanings.

Despite such caveats, there is much that is useful in the book. It employs a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including material from medieval manuscripts. Allen has clearly read widely, including material in the leading sports history journals. His notes are detailed, and the bibliography includes around 400 items. In defining "sport," he draws partially on Norbert Elias, but more generally conceptualizes it as "play with rules" (43) and understands that the word meant different things in different times. He understands the limitations of his evidence. For example, he accepts that, in his discussions of how boxing might have emerged from activities such as wrestling, fencing, or disordered brawls, he can only offer hypotheses, although, as he points out, "until about 1550 boxing was viewed as a variant of wrestling" (10). His use of phrases such as "I believe," "we have indications," or "possible antecedents" help readers here. For example, he "suspects" that boxers were training for bouts as early as the 1300s (107). He is good on early boxing language and the meanings of terms such as "box," "cuff," "pommel," and "buffet," which were being used more commonly by the end of the sixteenth century. The term "buffet" was initially an early form of fist combat, where fighters stood toe to toe, each hitting the other savagely with the fist in ordered turn.

Allen is also good on the cultural meanings of early boxing's rituals and rules: the issues of challenges, establishing a location, the making of a ring, the formal parade to the ring, stripping before the fight, why the fighters shake hands, the establishment of rounds, and why a boxing match became called a "prize fight."

The book contains nine relatively short, very readable chapters. Overall, the first four chapters, which focus on the links with wrestling, the beginnings of boxing, early boxers, and early rules, are the strongest. Boxing began in a range of ways, initially closely tied to wrestling, sometimes linked to criminal activity or undertaken by peasants as fighting and assaults began to shift away from the use of weapons. Only later did it become a sport supported by...

and the "Sports-Media Complex" as a means of producing and disseminating a Canadian culture of "settler colonialism" (Chapter 12).

Chapters 10 and 11 offer a more inclusive reading of history with respect to race issues, while Chapter 14 looks at Canadian nongovernmental organizations involved in the promotion of sport both at home and abroad. Finally, Adams takes up the pen again, this time accompanied by Braden Te Hiwi, to offer a fifteenth and final chapter by way of conclusion. This chapter offers a general reflection on the need to set aside the colonial perspective of historical narratives to bring all the necessary nuances to a complex history.

While the approach taken by Adams and the seasoned contributors assembled here is not new in itself, one of the hallmarks of this book is a strong interest in all sports and recreational practices, not just hockey, which remains the subject of much work by Canadian sport historians. In addition, there is a strong focus on Aboriginal activities, practices, and athletes, who are still the most neglected in Canadian history despite significant efforts over the past two decades to include their past in the historical narrative. *Sport and Recreation in Canadian History*, thus, tries to establish a historical dialogue among the various ethnocultural communities that populate the Canadian territory around the issue of sport, which continues to create a very powerful social and community link. To do so, Adams and her collaborators undertake a rereading of the dominant narrative and propose a history of sport that is emancipatory and inclusive while being attentive to the mechanisms of power and exclusion inherited from a Canadian culture that has—and sometimes still does—defined itself, in large part, on the basis of colonial relationships.

—Etienne Lapointe
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