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Book review:

This Sporting Life: Sport and Liberty in England, 1760–1960

by Robert Colls, Oxford, University of Cumbria, Oxford University Press, 2020, 391 pp., £22.99 (hardback), ISBN 978019808334

Mike Huggins

Robert Colls has always been an outstanding historian, most especially of English working-class life. I should declare a personal bias here, since coming from a County Durham pit village background myself, two of his earlier books, *The Collier's Rant* (1977) and *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield* (1987), were seminal in shaping my own thinking about the complexity of working-class identities and encouraging my slowly-emerging interest in social and cultural history. His latest book, *This Sporting Life*, offers a highly original, personal yet deeply accomplished, history of sporting pastimes and embodiment over the past two centuries or so, and the people of England's attachment to them.

The cornerstone of Colls' approach is on sport's role as one of the most powerful of the nation's civic cultures, sporting life as it was lived and played in English society, and its multiple linkages to liberty and custom. The book ends circa 1960, after which, as Colls argues, 'the sporting life, like life in general, has become more global and money centred' (p. 280). Some readers will recognise the earlier literary and visual cultural resonances associated with his chosen title, from early silent films in 1918 and 1925 to the famous 1963 kitchen-sink screenplay directed by Lindsay Anderson based on David Storey's brilliantly uncompromising 1960 novel about Wakefield miner and rugby player Frank Machin. But while these stories focused upon fictional individuals, Colls' focus is on the sporting lives of Englishmen and women across the class system, but most often 'ordinary' people in 'ordinary' places, helping to define their identities and sense of place, even if sport itself, in all its complexity, may be more difficult to define. Their voices resonate throughout the book. The bibliography, occupying almost 25 per cent of the pages, includes an enormous variety of primary sources, including Blackstone's Commentaries, *The Roof Climber's Guide to Trinity* (1899), Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes*, long lists of newspaper titles, and collections and manuscript sources from across Britain and beyond. There are six pages of books on school life alone.

Colls argues here, as he has elsewhere, that the liberty of the individual has been a national impulse. A first chapter, 'Land of Liberty' takes the reader into the fields of the five great midland fox-hunting 'countries' via Minna Burnaby's hunting diary of 1909–10 and what she perceived as the (sometimes) fun-filled but equally often risky pleasures of the chase, the 'peculiar privilege' as it has been described. Fox-killing was a liberty founded on land ownership. Huntsmen needed sufficient power, wealth and influence to gain access to hunting grounds, as well as expensive horses, packs of hounds, free time, and the ability to meet their burgeoning costs, all things which the rural poor, who sometimes turned to poaching, lacked. Hunting's literature and sporting art celebrated its mythology, while showing a keen sense of place, and the joys, chaffing and disputations of associativity, as it represented the politically-powerful 'county set' to itself.

The book's theme is then explored in five further extremely wide-ranging chapters, essentially themed essays conveying a sense of how sporting lives have encompassed tradition and modernity, playing and watching, power and privilege, customs and constitutionality, freedom and resistance, defiance and deference, courage and custom across multiple identities. Along the way the book's broad canvas weaves sport through the sounds, smells and sights of varied activities, including the

locally-popular Stamford custom of bull-running, eventually brought to an end after repeated annual standoffs between local crowds and magistrates, the NSPCA, courts, police, and the military. Colls also provides a beautifully-contextualised account of the 1860 pugilistic championship between Tom Sayers and American John Heenan. These were men glorified by boxing's violence and the 'claret' they spilled, and raised up by the gambling that drove pugilism, as it drove many other sports, while having their brutality celebrated by the press and the cultural networks that supported them. One chapter covers the ways in which urbanisation and industrialisation affected how urban men and women felt about themselves and their localities, and tried to assert their play, freedom and customary rights in the face of authority, Methodism, and respectable society. Other chapters focus on sport in the new moral worlds of public schools, the teachers and 'bloods' who inhabited them, and the rise of the sporting hero, male and female. It finishes, as one might perhaps expect, with the 'moderns', such as the football play and practice of youngsters in their back-lanes, the fictional heroines of Bend it Like Beckham, or professional footballers (he's read over forty footballer autobiographies).

This is a book which kept making me think again, and reassess what I thought I knew. It is simultaneously insightful, beguiling and accomplished. It is not a conventional social, cultural, or narrative history of sport nor yet another synthesis of existing historiography. It is not always useful as a guide to the secondary literature, where the citations can occasionally be quite idiosyncratic. Students cannot quarry it for key references, as many are missing. It's not about the slow development of sporting rules and governing bodies. None of that matters. It is a tour de force, a playful and occasionally bawdy account of the how the love affair with liberty and a long-standing stubborn resistance to authority and conformity had a profound influence on the English and their sporting lives.