Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology


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First published in 1981 by Cambridge University Press, Athleticism quickly established its importance as a major contribution to the understanding of the growth and, later, the pervasive influence of the cult of games playing in the public schools of Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Mangan’s focus on six schools of varying types and geographical locations was supplemented by extensive evidence drawn from other schools and a wide range of individual commentators. Mangan’s explanation for the increasing emphasis on athleticism that developed from the mid-century gave due place to a number of participating groups including headmasters, housemasters, boys, and parents. He also reviewed the motivations of such participants ranging through the desire for social control, financial needs, the drive to improve the status of a school, and the widely held conviction as to the moral value of games playing in developing character, leadership, and team spirit.

In the later decades of Victoria’s reign and through to the First World War, compulsory participation and, on occasion, spectatorship imposed conformity and supposedly consolidated allegiance to house and school. As the cult of athleticism grew stronger, so more and more resources were devoted to athletic facilities and equipment, sporting symbols and rituals were developed, and the prestige and power of an athletic elite came to dominate within the school communities. Beyond the schools themselves, the popularity of games playing was evident at Oxford and Cambridge and in the proliferation of Old Boys teams. Even more broadly, the sporting experience was believed to benefit the staffing of the Empire and the manning of its military forces. In developing these themes, Mangan drew heavily on the writings of those who viewed the cult of athleticism in a positive light. However, he also drew attention to the anti-intellectualism fostered by an emphasis on athleticism and the exclusion and/or denigration of those who tried to avoid participation, did not comply with the
related rituals, or did not honor the symbols of sporting achievement. Mangan gives considerable space to the voices of those who were critics of the cult of athleticism. Thus a fine balance of judgment capped off the extensive scholarship on which Athleticism rested—a recognition, in Mangan’s own words, that “there was virtue as well as vice in the ideology” (p. 205).

Many scholars would relish the opportunity, after twenty years, to revise their published work by incorporating elements of subsequent scholarship, including their own, and perhaps expanding on some of the themes of the original edition. Presumably with the approval of the series editor, Mangan has chosen largely to eschew such an opportunity. The 1981 edition is reprinted exactly in its original form. There are no alterations to the text and no additions to the bibliography, notes, or acknowledgments.

Other than a brief forward by Sheldon Rothblatt and an introduction by Jeffrey Richards, what is new in the Cass edition of Athleticism is a twenty-two-page introduction by Mangan himself. Here he abandons the balanced judgment of the 1981 edition and lays an overwhelming emphasis on the abuses and excesses of athleticism, including its role in buttressing militarism and a narrow neo-fascist perception of masculinity. This approach reflects the subsequent work of Mangan himself and others who have published in journals or book series he edits. Such work is extensively cited in numerous footnotes that constitute a valuable bibliographic guide for those wishing to deepen their knowledge of these themes. The value of this portion of the introduction is enhanced if one has read Athleticism first, and thus it is more suited to an epilogue.

According to Mangan, this critique of athleticism is advanced to repulse the “misconceived mythology” (p. xxix) of an idealistic games ethos revived after 1981, most particularly by Richard Holt in his Sport and the British: A Modern History published in 1988. At several points, Mangan accounts for Holt’s “errors” on the grounds of inadequate scholarship and particularly a disregard of much available evidence, “trawling a shallow catch of sources instead of hauling out a deep catch of books and articles” (p. xl). This opening section of the introduction is disturbing and somewhat mystifying. The attack on Holt is focussed on a five-line quotation from Sport and the British, which Mangan cites as being taken from p. 9 of that work when, in fact, it is found on p. 97. What Holt has to say in that brief passage is taken out of the context of a chapter on amateurism and a section on the public schools, which frequently cites Mangan himself and reflects the balance of virtue and vice in the cult of athleticism. Further, Mangan chooses to ignore the fact that the author of Sport and the British did not claim the book to be the product of detailed original research but a broad analysis of the main themes of modern British sport history. The fact that many of the books and articles that Mangan cites in his introduction, and implies that Holt failed to “trawl,” were published after 1988
significantly undermines that scholarly indictment. What is particularly perplexing, given his attack on Holt's scholarly standards, is the fact that Mangan continued to collaborate as a joint editor with the author of Sport and the British for at least eight years after the publication of that supposedly flawed work (n. 84, p. liii).

The reprinting of this important work in paperback has to be welcomed. However, the author has missed the opportunity to incorporate his own work, and that of other scholars, into a truly revised edition. Finally, the motivation for the attack on a widely respected sports historian is a mystery to this reviewer.