

STUDIES IN PHYSICAL CULTURE AND TOURISM
Vol. 13, No. 2, 2006

BOOK REVIEWS

Tony Collins, John Martin & Wray Vamplew, eds, John Burnett & Emma Lile, assoc. eds, *Encyclopedia of Traditional British Rural Sports*, Routledge, London & New York 2005

The British tradition of sport lexicography is the oldest in the world. It begins with the famous and anonymous *Sportsman's Dictionary* published in 1735. No other nation enjoys the privilege of such ancient tradition. Since 1735 innumerable encyclopedias and dictionaries of sport have appeared in Britain. All these publications contain a number of entries devoted to traditional rural sports of Britain, and a substantial part of them gain nationwide and international popularity. It is no secret that numerous British sports such as football, curling or cricket, initially rural pastimes played by local communities, have vastly contributed to the general development of sport worldwide. Without Britain the world sport would not have been what it is today. The term *sport* itself originated in England (derived from Latin *disport* – recreation; *dis* – translocation, *porta* – city gate, i.e. recreational activities held beyond the city gate). The definition of “rural sport” is, however, disputable and raises several questions. Does this term cover sports and games played exclusively by rural communities? Can traditional or indigenous games be labeled “rural sports” if they have been played in towns? If so, how big these towns should be to define sports played in them as non-rural? These questions appear in connection with numerous entries in *Encyclopedia of Traditional British Rural Sports*.

One of them is the entry *Alnwick Football*. According to *Webster's Geographical Dictionary* Alnwick is an urban (not rural) district in Northumberland. I understand that the authors and editors of the *Encyclopedia* were primarily concerned with the origins of particular sports, as they rightly explain the etymology of “rural” in the introduction: “The word 'rural' stems from Latin *rus*, meaning the country, the field or a rural estate, and stands in contrast to *urbs*, the town”. Although they devoted more than three pages to explain the differences between “rural” and “urban” they were,

so to speak, unable to make a precise distinction between both terms. I think it would have been advisable to say simply that they understand 'rural sports' as country sports originated in small communities, regardless of being village or small town.

The entry *Alnwick Football* gives also an impulse to think about the cultural character of its contents as well of many other entries. Author of *Alnwick Football*, Tony Collins, concentrated on the technical character and description of the game, ignoring its significant cultural context. He rightly describes the sport as, “survivor of pre-industrial folk football played in Alnwick in Northumberland [...] played on Shrove Tuesday”. The entry also includes a mentioning that, “the ball is brought from Alnwick Castle by a piper in the service of the Duke of Northumberland”. Next a technical description of the game follows. Collins does not mention, however, in my opinion, a tremendously important historical aspect of that game, i.e. that the ball is brought by a piper playing the famous tune *Chevy Chase*. It is not just any tune. It was composed anonymously in the 15th century as a kind of mediaeval “protest song” against the atrocities and cruelties of the Hundred Years' War and its equally terrible aftermath, e.g. the bloody battle of Otterburn staged by two conflicting families: the Percys and the Douglasses. I own an old record titled *English Sporting Ballads* performed by Martin Wyndham Reed's High Level Kanthers (Broadside Records 128/1977), where *Chevy Chase* is played with the so-called Northumbrian small pipes. On my old record it was performed by Colin Rose playing small-pipes, preceding another tune associated with the same kind of football: *Alnwick Football Song*.

In this light, *Chevy Chase* as a symbolic anti-war tune has special significance when combined with sport. We frequently ascribe a peaceful message to sport, like Ancient Greek *ekecheiria*,

but at the same time we forget a similar symbolism of many less known sport events. Quite frequently, human play (of which every sport is a subdivision or subclass) represents not only technical or even ludic values, but also a certain other elements of culture. I cannot understand why such values of sport have been so neglected and why the rich musical heritage of Alnwick Football has not been properly treated by Collins. There have been also other numerous pieces of music associated with traditional sports. The record *English Sporting Ballads* alone provides us with such “classic” songs as *Bonny Beswing*, *The Great Foot Race*, or *Sayer's and Heenan's Great Fight*.

If alcohol as a “long-standing companion” of sport receives proper treatment in a separate entry (*Alcohol*, p. 21), why not music? I could not find any entry referring to the *English Sporting Ballads* or, more generally, any entry on *British Sporting Music*? Could it be that the authors of the *Encyclopedia* have been unaware of their own rich musical tradition of British sport? One of my Ph.D. students is currently writing her dissertation on Scottish ballads associated with just one sport – curling (by the way, also associated with alcohol and heavy drinking in its entire history as a winter game requiring something to warm up). If a single sport provides enough material for a longer study, what can we say about the rich treasures of music and folk literature connected with all traditional British sports? There is not a one, single entry in the encyclopedia on traditional sporting literature, including its written and oral traditions. Is alcohol more important than preservation of sporting traditions in poems, ballads and short stories? Why are the hundreds of folk pieces of sporting, especially football, poetry – not always of high artistic value, but certainly being an important social factor – not present in the book? They represent other dimensions of sport such as humor, for instance, in the case of Ashbourne football:

Shrove Tuesday, you know, is always the day,
When pancake's the prelude and Foot-Ball's the play
Where upwards and downwards men ready for fun,
Like the French at the battle of Waterloo run ...

In fact, both music and literature are mentioned occasionally in particular entries. For instance, in the entry on Cotswold Olympic Games we can read that “music was provided by a harpist dressed as Homer” and that, “the first anthology of sporting verse, *Annalia Dubrensis*” was published in 1636.

In the entry on the game of *Aunt Sally* (a wooden doll with a pipe in her mouth that is hit with wooden sticks) we find a reference to “The Times” article on exploits of the Duke of Beaufort while playing this game. Also a satire from the “Punch” is quoted, ridiculing playing such a plebeian sport unworthy of any higher, aristocratic interest:

Between her lips a pipe is set,
Stout sticks are thrown to break it,
The game is slightly vulgar, yet
E'en Dukes their pastime make it.

In some other entries the literary heritage of British traditional games is also mentioned or quoted in one way or another. But it is rather dispersed in *Encyclopedia*, and in my opinion, requires a more comprehensive, separate entry or entries. In my opinion *Alcohol* as a separate entry is more appreciated than the legacy of sporting poets and musicians. Is the art less important than many other secondary aspects of sports treated with more devotion?

Many entries have been written carelessly, assuming that the reader has already some wider knowledge of the subject, while many readers have no such knowledge at all. For instance, in many entries on folk ball-games there is no information about the definite purpose of the game. *Kirkwall Ba' Game* gives no information what the goal looks like: Is it a construction resembling a goal in modern association football, or is it any topographical point, e.g. a river bank? The same critical remarks we have about the linguistic side of the book: in some entries non-typical names are explained, in some they are not. It pertains first of all to the Celtic names of some games equivalent to English ones. Such entries as *Cwdwm Braich* or *Cwdwm Cefn* contain no etymological information. It is quite understandable that a reader who is not familiar with the Welsh language might be interested in the meaning of these terms. In some other entries of this kind their meanings have been explained, but inconsistency is clearly visible: sometimes a Welsh or Cornish name is treated as the main entry's name with its English equivalent as a supportive name in parenthesis, while it is precisely opposite in other entries. Also English names of games are frequently left without explanation leaving the reader, especially a foreign reader, uncertain about the meaning of *Dobblers*, *Copsole Pulling*, or its Welsh equivalent *Tynnu Copstol*. What does the word “Spell” mean in Knur

and Spell? Is it, as most desk dictionaries inform us just “a word supposed to have magic power” or “a continuous course of period of work or other activity”? How many even highly specialized dictionaries contain an information that “spell” in this case is a word which in its oldest Germanic meaning was equivalent to “play” similar to contemporary German “Spiele”? Should such an information be given to any reader? All these are rare words which cannot be found in desk dictionaries of English or Welsh. I was not able to find them even in the comprehensive Webster’s International or Random House Dictionary. And how many potential readers have Welsh dictionaries at their disposal? I would recommend more consistency and more care about the reader’s comprehension in the final edition of all these entries. By now they seem insufficiently prepared from the standpoint of professional lexicography. This is extremely expensive book especially in comparison with its rather poor editorial shape (no illustrations!). Its Editors should take into consideration that any reader paying several dozens pounds (in Polish circumstances nearly 100 pounds), can rightly expect much more from such renowned Authors like Wray Vamplew or such prestigious Publishing House like Routledge.

Significant omissions can be also found in the book. I can hardly understand why the game of *Shin-Kicks* (kicking one another with special shoes with nails projecting from the sides) has earned a special entry while similar sports performed without nails during the so-called Dover Olympics have not been discussed in separate entry. Perhaps a more general entry on shin-kicking should be written.

A number of entries are irritatingly outdated. For instance, fox-hunting is covered in three entries (general entry, “alternative history”, and a separate entry on Welsh fox-hunting). None of these entries includes any information about the recent Parliamentary Acts concerning hunting in general and fox hunting in particular. These acts were issued first in Scotland (*Protection of Wild Mammals Act*, 2002), then in England and Wales (*The Hunting Act*, 2004). The Encyclopedia was published in 2005 and there was enough time to include proper information, so crucial for this sport. This is why I cannot understand why the widely discussed controversy concerning fox-hunting is limited to the mere statement that, “there has been a great deal of debate in recent years about the place of fox-hunting in English society” (p. 124).

What this encyclopedia unquestionably lacks, however, are illustrations. Traditional sports are frequently associated with colorful rituals; they are often depicted in old prints and paintings. In addition, the rules of particular games are not always understood without playing schemes. Therefore particular entries may not be properly understood without explanatory pictures, diagrams or, say, maps of the regional range of particular games. If the authors of *Encyclopedia* write about a “taut spring” in *Arrow Throwing*, I could only ask how this “taut spring” is attached to the shaft, what it looks like, and how it is operated? We are informed that the ball in *Atherstone Shrovetide Football* is filled with water and decorated with colorful ribbons. But how is this ball constructed to be waterproof, especially when the sport originated before the age of vulcanization. A simple drawing, let alone a photograph, could provide a valuable explanation to the text of numerous entries. The pure text of this *Encyclopedia*, deprived of any illustrations makes me wonder why the Authors have not decided to include illustrations in their work? Was the well-known Publishing House so parsimonious as not to afford them? Or, perhaps, the authors and editors were not energetic enough to include pictures taken during their ethnographic research, or, to find sponsors to pay for the usually expensive copyrights of pictures and prints from different museums and archives? Many international encyclopedias provide good examples what the pictorial side of such publications should look like, i.e. my own *World Sport Encyclopedia* (mentioned to my satisfaction in the references section of *Encyclopedia of Traditional British Rural Sports*), including some 300 entries devoted to British sports and traditional games. Of course, not all of them are provided with proper illustrations. Illustrations to each entry in any encyclopedia are hardly possible. But it does not mean that we should ignore or diminish the role of pictorial side of the book. *Encyclopedia of Traditional British Rural Sports* has no illustrations at all, whereas the black and white pictures in *Encyclopedia of British Sport* are rather spare.

To some extent the title of *Encyclopedia* is misleading although this fact should by no means be criticized. The *Encyclopedia* contains not only entries devoted to rural sports but also includes a number of more general entries, such as *Alcohol*, *Places for Sport*, or entries on some personalities associated with British sporting traditions in one way or another. I noted with satisfaction an entry

devoted to Joseph Strutt, so unjustly ignored in many recent encyclopedias and monographs on British sport (including *Encyclopedia of British Sport*, 2000). Two years ago I was very critical about such treatment of Strutt in my review of that publication. Wray Vamplew is the co-author and co-editor of both encyclopedias. Can it be that due to my criticism about exclusion of Strutt in those encyclopedias, an entry devoted to him was included in the present volume? If so, I could only congratulate on Vamplew's open-mindedness toward constructive criticism. I cannot say the same about many other writers and scholars, who after publication of a critical review did not consider corrections in the following editions, and quite frequently feel abused instead of being grateful.

Regardless of numerous omissions, always debatable, I would like to emphasize also the indisputably positive sides of *Encyclopedia of Tra-*

ditional British Rural Sports. The work is, first of all, an extremely valuable source of information on British sporting traditions. Entries on sports hitherto unknown or hardly known have appeared in some specialist publications, but with this publication these sports have a chance to gain more appreciation from general public to which *Encyclopedia* is addressed. Every reader will find there at least some basic information about almost any aspect of the sporting heritage of England, Cornwall, Wales and Scotland. An interesting introduction provides us with important information on traditional and indigenous sports in Britain as well as a classification of particular types of games. The rich general references section and smaller reference sections following particular entries deserve praise and appreciation.

Wojciech Lipoński