

Britain's Chief Spiritual Export: Imperial Sport as Moral Metaphor, Political Symbol and Cultural Bond [1]

In a now famous discussion of 'culture', A.L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn suggested that its core consisted of historically derived and selected ideas *and* their attached values. Cultural systems, they added, were products of social action and determinants of further social action. In short, culture is essentially a set of potent and dynamic normative ideas, beliefs and actions. [2]

More recently, in the foreword to his innovatory series 'Studies in Imperialism', John M. MacKenzie asserted that in the era of European world supremacy British imperialism was as much a dominant idea with intellectual, cultural and technical facets as it was a set of economic, political and military imperatives. [3] And with equal relevance Patrick Brantlinger argued a little earlier that, just as it is impossible to write an adequate history of British culture without considering its social and political ramifications in country and city, so it is impossible to understand that culture without embracing colony and dominion. [4]

It is time that it was more widely recognized that by the late nineteenth century sport lay close to the heart of Britain imperial culture. It formed a distinct, persistent and significant cluster of cultural traits isolated in time and space, possessing a coherent structure and definite purpose. While it had many cultural functions, it had certainly become a means of propagating imperial sentiments. [5]

Arguably, the *genus Britannicus*, to differ slightly from C.L.R. James, was more than a fine batsman; he was a committed sportsman. And more often than not his was a moral commitment and an integral part of his imperial 'civilizing' purpose. Sport was the more pleasant part of this melioristic purpose and as real to him as a 'civilizing' medium as British law, religion and education. In his imperial role of man of firm duty, confident ambition, moral intention *and* applied athletics he might appropriately be labelled *homo ludens imperiosus*! To a great extent, of course, the English games field had provided, through the medium of the public-school system and ancient universities, 'a meeting place for the moral outlook of the dissenting middle classes and the athletic instincts of the aristocracy'. [6] Much more than this, however, the middle classes with a strong tendency to serious ethical commitment 'colonized' the upper classes. Late Victorian society witnessed *in reverse* a deliberate and purposeful hegemonic effort. Games, especially cricket, were elevated by the middle classes to the status of a moral discipline. C.L.R. James is correct.

The Victorians did make the game compulsory for their children and all the evidence points to the fact that 'they valued competence in it and respect for what it came to signify more than they did intellectual accomplishment of any kind'. [7] Eventually cricket became the symbol *par excellence* of imperial solidarity and superiority, epitomizing a set of consolidatory moral imperatives that both exemplified and explained imperial ambition and achievement. It became a political metaphor as much as an imperial game:

The greatest game in the world is played wherever the Union Jack is unfurled, and it has no small place in cementing the ties that bond together every part of the Empire. . . . On the cricket grounds of the Empire is fostered the spirit of never knowing when you are beaten, of playing for your side and not for yourself, and of never giving up a game as lost. This is as invaluable in Imperial matters as cricket. [8]

And, of course, for the imperialist adventurers the cricket bat in exotic settings had the further advantage of curing, or rather distracting from, almost every moral disease including that of enforced domination over others. Sport, when necessary, could prove a relaxing couch for a conscience. [9]

In John H. Field's *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life: The British Empire at the Turn of the Century*, 'character', both in late Victorian usage and in analytical perspective, is the organizing principle. 'Character,' he notes, 'was a highly charged term of portentous significance for the late Victorians.' [10] The historian of this period is struck by the high incidence of the term and its frequent use in explicitly imperial contexts. Lord Rosebery, for example, once introduced a school text book with the dictum: 'Influence is based on character, and it is on the character of each child that grows into manhood . . . that the future of our its Empire rests.' [11] Caught in this brief assertion, Field suggests, is the ethical preoccupation of late-Victorian society. At another level, Field's study is an attempt to locate a connection between Victorian conventional wisdom involving assumptions about individual, social, national and racial values and the groundswell of popular support for empire. A concern with 'character' stimulated enthusiasm for the idea of empire. [12] Late Victorians were committed to the Empire *primarily* because of the close association that it came to have with the inculcation, demonstration and transmission of valued 'Anglo-Saxon' qualities embodied in the concept of 'character'.

The inculcation of these 'Anglo-Saxon' qualities was attempted substantially on metropolitan and colonial playing fields. Sport was a major medium for the attempted development of 'character' particularly among those who by virtue of their position in elite society were destined to be the Empire's leaders. Of course, this is an assertion now well rehearsed elsewhere. A potent education ideology known as athleticism [13] evolved in response to a late-Victorian obsession with character and imperialism. The significance of this ideology in the context of the British Empire should never be underestimated, and it is questionable whether it has as yet been sufficiently appreciated. It is a vital element of British imperialism. Field and others

are concerned less with expansionist ambitions and anxieties, crises over the interference or encroachment of other powers, maintenance of economic interests and the organizational structure of imperial control than with the moral associations, symbolic interpretations and emotional meanings associated with the idea of empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to a certain extent, with subsequent consequences in the modern post-imperial period – concerned therefore with the axiology of imperialism. It remains simply to state that in imperial historiography, this dimension of imperialism is no less significant than others, despite its relative neglect by historians. Here we are dealing, in Keith Fieldhouse's perceptive phrase, with imperialism as 'a sociological phenomenon with roots in political facts, [14] and this in turn shifts the focus of imperial study, at least momentarily, from the decisions and policies of proponents and opponents of empire to general social values and to processes of imperial socialization. [15]

Late-Victorian, Edwardian and later imperialism now becomes a matter of English social history, [16] and in turn the task within a historical, anthropological and sociological framework becomes that of developing hypotheses about imperialism in relation to cultural ideals and processes. Consequently it also becomes an ethnological inquiry. Another way of setting out this task is to agree with Weber that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' and to search interpretively for their meaning [17] – in this instance within the wide 'web' of empire.

The cultural preoccupations of *homo ludens imperiosus* not only reflected an obsession with 'character' but also served as significant ritual manifestations of association, licensed and approved, banishing both difference and distance and manifesting commonness: [18]

Only in rites
Can we renounce our oddities
And be truly entired. [19]

His culture was an instrument of imperial bonding. To effect bonding, of necessity, all cultures contain in their repertoire of myth, symbol and ritual certain compelling images, narratives, actions and models which social actors, especially their chosen charismatic figures acting as culture heroes, re-enact again and again precisely because of the 'aura effect' of mythic, symbolic and ritual patterns. [20] Throughout the Empire sportsmen, and to a far lesser extent sportswomen, and sports fields were acknowledged agents and agencies respectively of this bonding process. Through this process by virtue of domination, control and contact cultural links were established between Great Britain, dominion and colony which affected irrevocably the nature of indigenous cultures, political relationships and subordinates' perceptions of superiors and vice versa.

The task of analysing the nature of the purposes, processes and significance of sport as a form of cultural association is a complex one. The phenomenon itself was complex. It took many forms: intentional and unintentional, direct and indirect,

accidental and incidental, formal and informal. The point is that sport was a significant part of imperial culture, and an important instrument of imperial cultural association and subsequent cultural change, promoting at various times in various localities imperial union, national identity, social reform, recreational development and post-imperial goodwill. These imperial and post-imperial outcomes of sport constitute a missing dimension of the historiography of imperialism.

In the late Victorian period the unifying force of sport, for the privileged of the Empire, was seldom in question. And compelling incantations of imperial solidarity through sport were recited endlessly by the young and the old, but more especially by the old to the young. Some of these enthusiasts of sport in the imperial design of things demonstrate below the strength of their fervour, reveal the certainty of their convictions and indicate their full subscription to a belief in sport as the social cement of empire. Better illustrations of Semmel's 'rhetorical imperialism' would be hard to find: their purpose to transmit a sense of commitment to the uninitiated, unaware or indifferent all but leaps out of the quotations. [21]

From *Greater Britain* in 1891:

While Britons retain their national interest in sport the subjects which divide them into arid sects must necessarily be of only momentary concern. There will never be more than a formal disintegration of the Empire while we are subject to the bond of a common interest in arts which spring directly from the instincts of the national character. The common love of the chase in any of its forms, the common joy in a well-fought maul in the football field, satisfied our optimistic observers that, whatever may betide us in politics, our British spirit is a thing of permanence. [22]

From the *Cambridge University Magazine* in 1886:

Politicians work out grand schemes with treaties and conventions to bind us and our colonies ... but ... we may also venture to say that a visit of a Canadian crew to Henley ... will bind us and our cousins of the tongue far more closely than any amount of diplomacy and trade conventions. [23]

And these are the words of Sir Theodore Cook in *Character and Sportsmanship*:

English cricketers are playing against Parsees and Mohammedans at Karachi while a team of Maoris are testing the best of our Rugby footballers at home. By such threads are the best bonds of union woven. For the constitution of the British Empire, unexpressed and inexpressible, does not depend on force and cannot by the sword alone be guarded. It is the visible, intangible impersonation of spiritual sympathies and associations. It lives because the blood that is its life is pulsing from its heart in England through every tissue of the body politic in every quarter of the globe. [24]

There is no ambivalence here to confuse the reader. These voices were mostly those of a vociferous upper-middle-class chorus giving song to Lord Rosebery's 'greater pride in Empire which is called imperialism and which is a larger patriotism'. [25] They

uttered with confident resonance reverberating ideological statements – motivational, moralistic and emotional.

In his discussion of the development of imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, Field states that when ‘the general population began to identify itself with the wielding and witnessing of international power by the governing elite, the significance of the emotional element would be increased a hundred fold. . . . It was no vacuum in which the rationality of the Colonial Office worked.’ [26] The shibboleths from *Greater Britain*, *Cambridge University Magazine* and *Character and Sportsmanship* quoted above, heavy with metaphors of imperial conviction, helped transform ‘sentiment into significance’ and made ideological ambition widely available. Their purpose was to create imperial stability, integration and unity by means of shared enthusiasms. The sports these writers praised constituted a cultural symbol system offering ‘institutionalised guides for behaviour’. They were socio-logical and psychological ‘road maps’ permitting chosen inhabitants of empire to develop and maintain emotional ties within an ordered, secure environment.

Imperial sport in large measure comprised esemplastic symbolic actions representing in turn allegiance to a set of self-assumed responsibilities arising out of a particular view of social control, founded in turn on an unshakeable belief in racial supremacy and an associated moral superiority. Sport was part of a grand stewardship ‘to carry peace and order over the world that others may enter and enjoy’. [27] There was more than wishful jocularity in these lines by Norman Gale:

There will be a perfect planet
Only when the Game shall enter
Every country, teaching millions
How to ask for Leg or Centre.
Closely heed a level-headed
Sportsman far too grave to banter:
When the cricket bags are opened
Doves of Peace fly forth instanter! [28]

The imperial system of sport was a template ‘for the organisation of social and psychological processes much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organisation of organic processes’. [29] And in this way it was an instrument of what the anthropologist would call segmentation. It sustained solidarity as it successfully enlarged the social group. Social historians neglect to study the social meanings, purposes and consequences of sport at their professional peril. They should certainly make every effort in the period of the New Imperialism and after to make contact with a period attitude and to recover a past world that reveals sport as far more than an intellectually insignificant recreational pleasure. It was seen by many Victorians and Edwardians as an imperial umbilical cord. And in this role, arguably, it was far more meaningful at home and abroad than literature, music, art or religion.

The central popularity of cricket throughout the Empire, it has been suggested, brought in its wake illusions of social unity that implied that the game transcended

normal divisions of class, colour and status while clearly and carefully maintaining social distance within imperial social structures. [30] This is a point of substance. It puts proper stress on a complex reality. Not merely cricket but imperial sport, predominantly but not exclusively, was a cultural bond of a white imperial fraternity. Within imperial sport racism, sexism and imperialism were as valid a trinity as athleticism, militarism and imperialism. To a considerable extent imperial sport was a favoured means of creating, maintaining and ensuring the survival of dominant male elites. Athletic proselytism was a statement of masculine cultural superiority as much as a gesture of general benevolent altruism. It is absolutely true that 'even interventions which were of direct and unambiguous benefit ... almost always carried a broader cultural burden and ... were linked with ways of extending control and creating or redefining groups and boundaries in a manner consistent with colonial order and hierarchy'. [31] C.L.R. James, for one, had no doubt that cricket in the English-speaking Caribbean was a major bulwark against social and political change. [32] At the same time he viewed it as a reflection on the pitch of a wider manifestation – the stylized epitome of a moral order and the metaphoric essence of a cultured civilization.

With James's remark about imperial bulwarks against change in mind it must be made clear how difficult it is to explore all the subtleties of the relationship between imperial proselytizer and proselytized, [33] yet the attempt to investigate the complexities of this relationship and to explore modifications to, re-interpretations of, resistance to and rejection of some or even all of the culture of *homo ludens imperiosus* must be made. The trick is to weave a complex pattern while not losing individual threads. While we should fully recognize that dominant elites in empire did seek 'in purposive fashion to engineer the conformity of subordinate groups' [34] through sport, we should also recognize that sport was an area of negotiation. The tensions inherent in all hegemonic relations should not be overlooked. [35] We should also be wary of carelessly patronizing indigenous cultures and at least attempt to avoid 'the enormous condescension of posterity' [36] as well as attempt to be sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping, reductionism and global generalization. Above all, we should be prepared to confront fully the possible disparities between ideological assertion, intention and realization. And in the imperial cultural setting of sport we should certainly appreciate the independent, creative capacities of politically inferior societies and individuals, while at the same time recognizing the effectiveness, by virtue of the ideological and institutional advantages possessed by imperial agents and agencies, of hegemonic control. [37]

Finally, on this matter of analytical subtlety in response to cultural complexities, Richard Cashman has raised several pertinent questions in the specific context of imperial cricket that have equal pertinence in the wider context of imperial sport:

Where does the promoting hand of the colonial master stop and where does the adapting and assimilating indigenous tradition start? Is it merely adaptation and domestication or does it go beyond that to constitute resistance and even

subversion? And how far can the colonial acceptance of cricket be seen as superior colonial salesmanship or a successful exercise of social control using the highly developed and subtle ideology of games and colonialism? Or was it that many colonial subjects chose to pursue a game, because of the ideology, or even in spite of it, because it suited them to take up cricket for their own reasons? Or was the ideology of colonialism the starting point for the adoption of cricket but once the game was launched other factors came to bear which led to its spread and consolidation? [38]

It is wise to appreciate that there was no culturally monolithic response to attempts to utilize sport as an imperial bond. A major problem that the analyst of ideological proselytism and its cultural consequences should confront is the nature of interpretation, assimilation and adaptation and the extent of resistance and rejection by the proselytized – in a phrase, the extent and form of ideological implementation. Any analyst worth his salt should be aware of cultural discontinuities as well as continuities. The unanticipated consequences of stated intentions are neither unusual nor unreal. This state of affairs has been described rather well by Clifford Geertz:

a group of primitives sets out, in all honesty, to pray for rain and ends by strengthening its social solidarity; a ward politician sets out to get or remain near the trough and ends by mediating between unassimilated immigrant groups and an impersonal governmental bureaucracy; an ideologist sets out to air his grievances and finds himself contributing, through the very diversionary power of his illusions, to the viability of the very system that grieves him. [39]

The inclusion within our consideration of the nature of sport as an imperial bond of cultural encounters between dominant and subordinate groups certainly provides the opportunity ‘to place the grand and theatrical discourses of colonial knowledge and control in the context of their often partial and ironic realisations’. [40] Once again C.L.R. James pointed the way, providing a superb illustration of this process in action. Of his Caribbean school modelled on English public-school lines he wrote:

It was only long years after that I understood the limitation on spirit, vision and self-respect which was imposed on us by the fact that our masters, our curriculum, our core of morals, *everything* began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading, and our business was to admire, wonder, imitate, learn; our criterion of success was to have succeeded in approaching that distant ideal – to attain it was, of course, impossible. [41]

It is hoped that in the future the task, which Cashman rightly discerns has only recently begun, of analysing the colonial ‘domestication’ of British sport and determining how far the process represented cultural assimilation, adaptation and resistance, or indeed a mixture of all three elements, will continue apace. [42]

It has been claimed that cultural analysis ‘breaks up into a disconnected yet coherent sequence of bolder and bolder sorties’ [43] with studies building on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where others leave off but in the sense that,

stimulated by earlier stumbling, better informed and better conceptualized, they penetrate deeper into the same things. Rather than standing on the shoulders of earlier studies they run by their side – challenging and improving these earlier efforts. [44] Attempts to locate modern sport near to the centre of British imperial culture will be awaited by those already involved in this propaedeutic effort with eagerness and satisfaction.

Notes

- [1] This article was originally published in J. A. Mangan (ed.), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), 1–10.
- [2] A.L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, 'Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions', *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology*, 70 (1952), p.227.
- [3] See 'General Editor's Foreword' in Jeffrey Richards (ed.), *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (Manchester, 1989), p.vii.
- [4] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rites of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), p.15.
- [5] See J.A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (Harmondsworth, 1987) especially chs. 1 and 2.
- [6] C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London, 1969), p.164.
- [7] *Ibid.*
- [8] Ric Sissons and Brian Stoddart, *Cricket and Empire* (London, 1984), p.34.
- [9] Brantlinger, *Rites of Darkness*, p.11.
- [10] H. John Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life: The British Empire at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford, 1983), p.26.
- [11] Quoted in *ibid.*, p.30.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p.26.
- [13] See J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge, 1981), *passim*.
- [14] Quoted in Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life*, p.2.
- [15] See J.A. Mangan, *Making Imperial Mentalities* (Manchester, 1990), Introduction and *passim*.
- [16] Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life*, p.20.
- [17] See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p.5.
- [18] Bernice Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1981), p.49.
- [19] Quoted in *ibid.*, p.49.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p.50.
- [21] Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life*, p.22.
- [22] *Greater Britain*, 15 Aug. 1891, p.507.
- [23] *Cambridge University Magazine*, 20 June 1886, p.21.
- [24] Sir Theodore Cook, *Character and Sportsmanship* (London, 1927), p.321.
- [25] Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life*, p.5.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p.15.
- [27] From Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character* (London, 1893), quoted in Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life*, p.49.
- [28] Norman Gale, 'Pax Britannica' in *Messrs. Bat and Ball* (Rugby, 1930), p.4.
- [29] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p.218.
- [30] Brian Stoddart, 'Cricket and Colonialism in the English-Speaking Caribbean to 1914: Towards a Cultural Analysis', in J.A. Mangan (ed.), *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism: British Culture and Sport at Home and Abroad, 1700–1914* (London, 1988), p.326.

- [31] Nicholas Thomas, 'Hunting Heads: Colonialism as Culture', *Time Monthly Review*, Dec./Jan. 1989, p.31.
- [32] Stoddart, 'Cricket and Colonialism', p. 250.
- [33] For an interesting discussion of this issue see Richard Cashman, 'Cricket and Colonialism: Colonial Hegemony and Indigenous Subversion' in Mangan, *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism*, pp. 258–63.
- [34] Peter Bailey, 'Leisure, Culture and the Historian: Reviewing the First Generation of Leisure Historiography in Britain', *Leisure Studies*, 8 (1989), p.114.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Ibid.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Cashman, 'Cricket and Colonialism', p.261.
- [39] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 206.
- [40] Thomas, 'Hunting Heads', p.31.
- [41] James, *Beyond a Boundary*, pp.38–9.
- [42] Cashman, 'Cricket and Colonialism', p.271.
- [43] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p.25.
- [44] Ibid.

Copyright of International Journal of the History of Sport is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.