

Literature and Sports History: A Review of Recent Contributions

Dimeo, Paul

Sport in History, Volume 29, Issue 1, March 2009, pp. 92 - 105

<http://hdl.handle.net/1893/1365>

Taylor & Francis: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17460260902775243>

Literature and Sports History: A Review of Recent Contributions

John Bale, *Anti-Sport Sentiments in Literature: Batting for the Opposition* (London 2008)

Jeffrey Hill, *Sport and the Literary Imagination: Essays in history, literature, and sport* (Bern 2006)

James Pipkin, *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies* (Columbia 2008)

Introduction

During the 2008 European Championships the British newspaper, *The Observer*, offered the highly renowned author novelist A. S. Byatt the opportunity to write an essay about football. Being a female and a ‘high brow’ writer (she has won the Booker Prize), the editor may well have imagined something original and controversial. It was indeed a surprise to me that Byatt had a passion for the sport, so I paid the essay more attention than I would a run-of-the-mill sports feature article in a newspaper. By the end of the essay I had almost come to the conclusion that sport and literature are and should remain two distinct worlds that should leave each other in peace. The essay was not only pretentious but, in my mind at least, significantly at odds with the populist experience of playing and watching football. I shall quote such two passages to illustrate:

I watch a lot of sport on television. I only watch certain sports, and I only watch them live - I don't think I've ever been able to watch a replay of a match or game of

which the result was already decided. I feel bound to cheat and look up what can be looked up. I watch for aesthetic reasons. Some are to do with real dramatic tension. There is a story, and the end is really unknown until it comes. I have worked out that I also watch as though I was watching a kinetic sculpture or abstract light show. The things I watch are all contained in quadrilaterals, concern the movement of round balls, and the shifting lines of force and energy made by the players' movements ...

When the Germans played the Portuguese the armchair spectators in our house did take sides. My husband sits in the room half-watching and half-studying astronomy on his laptop - though he always manages to notice and get indignant about diving. I very much wanted the Germans to beat the Portuguese, largely because I still remember Cristiano Ronaldo's petulant display and nasty wink when Rooney was sent off in the quarter-final against Portugal in the 2006 World Cup. My husband was extraneously irritated by German politicians' heavy-handed comments, that day, after the Irish referendum, and cheered on the Portuguese.¹

To give the author some credit though I was encouraged to reflect upon what is valuable in sports literature, what can and should be taken seriously, and what should be forgotten about. The temptation is to revere works of art that show beauty, that elevate us the mundane towards some higher transcendence, or that through style, eloquence, technique and grace encourage us to reflect, reconsider, perhaps even change. Byatt can clearly write well, but there is something risky about taking such a consciously literary approach to something so populist, traditionally working-class, and so corporeal, as football. It is

not just the lack of authenticity, but there is something strangely unnerving about trying to make football more significant by linking it to meaningful things (aesthetics, politics and even astronomy). The sport can be richly dramatic in and of itself, without recourse to ‘higher’ themes or paradigms. The beauty of sports like football may in fact be in their irresolvable paradox – they are both escape from and central to life. Umberto Eco is sharper and more intelligent, as he mocks football while grasping its essential ambivalence as being everything and nothing. He describes watching a match ‘with detachment’ observing ‘the senseless movements down there on the field’ and this leading to a much larger conclusion, ‘for the first time I doubted the existence of God and decided that the world was a pointless fiction’². Eco sees in football humanity’s tendency to elevate the futile and meaningless, his words suggest avoiding taking sports so seriously as to invest dramatic impulses and emotional attachment. Of course, Eco is trapped within the paradigm himself – by realising how seriously others take football, he takes a step back, gaining the moral high ground, while imposing a grandiose critique about God and nature. Despite the nihilism he sees on the pitch, he cannot help realise the importance of sport: in this football’s ‘nothingness’ is translated into something. And so, we return to the notion that literary approaches make sport into something different, and that by interpreting this everyday activity through the lens of cultural symbolism the distance between sport-in-practice and sport-as-text is widened. Most sports historians are somewhat more down-to-earth: in their language, their careful analysis, and their suspicion of literary flights-of-fancy (such as the above). So when approaching books that deal explicitly with discursive or descriptive forms of representation, there are numerous reasons for urging caution. However, there are also reasons to find plenty of

rich material and ideas. Novels, newspapers, radio programmes and so on, have some impact on their audiences and as such should be taken as valid sources for the historian. I want to resist here getting into the post-modernism versus empiricism debate, though the concluding sections of the article will return to question of truth and value in sports history.

The focus of this review is on three books, as noted above. My aim is to ask what they set out to achieve and make some comment on how the relationship of sport and literature has been presented, and how that relationship might reflect on the ‘cultural turn’ in sports history.

Anti-Sport Sentiments in Literature: Batting for the Opposition

This book reflects well on Bale’s scholarship and the development of his critical appreciation of the cultural nature of sport. He has selected six authors and reviewed their experiences of sport alongside their writing on sport. The authors are Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Jerome K. Jerome, John Betjeman, Alan Sillitoe, and Philip Roth. Bale admits these are personal choices, and that they reflect his knowledge and interests. What is important about the choices though is that these authors did not write books about sport, nor were they interested in promoting the values inherent in sport. Bale’s innovative approach leaves him operating outside of the discipline of sports studies which is inclined to draw upon and valorise the essence of sport as valuable and worthwhile. Indeed, some sports literature implies that taking part in or watching organised sport can ‘change the world’.³ From this perspective, Bale is a

dissenter and those writers he discusses are dissenters. He refers to critics of sport as supplying a ‘counter, or alternative, discourse – one that opposes the status quo’.⁴ Sport has become a catch-all for correcting social evils from obesity to crime, a ‘social vaccine’ despite a lack of substantiating evidence.⁵ Reading books is always a personalised experience, and I find the critical themes contained in Bale’s book to be enjoyable, not least because they contrast with the idealism of sport’s myth-makers. This resonates with both the contemporary ideologues and historians who mine the past for examples of ‘muscular Christianity’ and other such exemplars of the supposed value of sport.⁶

Bale’s central achievement is to demonstrate the rich potential within literature in its broadest sense for the sports historian. Bale takes the reader on a journey across time and space, into writers’ imaginations but also connected with the real concerns of the age in which they were writing. To illustrate this method I will consider his discussion of Charles Dodgson who wrote under the pseudonym, Lewis Carroll. Dodgson was something of an enigma – a man whose ‘day job’ was uninspiring, ‘a mathematician and a logician with a modest academic reputation’⁷ but when had a more creative side as ‘a poet, artist, storyteller and photographer who entranced the world with his so-called ‘nonsense stories’’.⁸ Dodgson had a mixed relationship with sport: not enjoying the organised games of his public school education in the 1840s but loved an organised walk in the countryside and rowing. While he did not compete in these, he did set about them with vigour and often measured his times. When he wrote about sport in his fictional works, Dodgson played around with the meanings of structured sport, that was in the process of rapid change during the mid to late 1800s. These deliberations emerge in the

scenes of running and croquet in his *Alice in Wonderland* books. For instance, Bale explains that the scene involving the Queen and Alice in a running race in which Alice has the sensation of movement but realises she remains in the same place. Drawing from Katherine Blake's comment that this 'running and getting nowhere' is 'perhaps reminiscent of the illusiveness of linear "progress" in games'⁹, Bale comments that this portrayal is 'alien' to modern sport.¹⁰

In his more serious writings he criticised the turning over of park space in Oxford to a cricket pitch and discussed various means of scoring in sports like tennis. Bale sums all this up:

Despite regular engagement in watching and even trying sports it seems clear that he opposed sporting practices in their increasingly serious forms. He disliked excess. A playful life was much more important to him than one that focused on competition, pain and injury. However, a simple Dodgson/Carroll dualism (that is serious/playful) is disturbed by his regular, quantified, and recorded character of his walking, a form of autodidactic physical education, and his mathematical interests in tennis and croquet. Dodgson's more explicit allusions to sport in *Alice* strongly suggest somewhat anarchic tendencies, totally at odds with the growing bureaucratisation of sports and games.¹¹

Bale's willingness to reveal the complexities of his chosen authors and to link their writings direct to their life and times, makes for a fascinating read. A harsh criticism

might be that the book lacks coherence because he has taken six authors and dealt with each separately. However, the lessons are not just the detail and analysis contained chapter-by-chapter but the broader sense of achievement that comes from his non-sports literature approach. It has opened up writers and novels previously ignored within sports history, as Bale notes ‘I have dealt with *how* sport might be written, by *whom* and *where* it has been written: by people apparently unrelated to sport (‘outsiders’) and writing in the interstices of the standard spaces that serve to classify written work’.¹² Of course, Bale himself is outside any simple classification, a geographer who has written history, an empiricist who loves theory, and here a sports literature enthusiast who relishes the ambivalences contained within texts that write *about* sport but not *for* sport. In doing so he adds something refreshing about how we do sports history and what past writers bring to the discussion on the value of sport.

Bale is highly cognizant of recent debates on the ‘cultural turn’ and his concluding sections reinforce both the detail of his studies and the value of his approach. This is sometimes quite complex, but the essence of Bale’s position is as follows: dry, factual histories are not enough; the real meanings conveyed by and given to any social practice are found in fictional narratives that offer fresh perspectives and judgements through the construction of scenarios, situations, and dramas. It would miss the point to ask what is truthful and what is invented. However, the blending of ‘truthful’ accounts of the authors’ lives with analysis of their fictional ‘inventions’ does open up the challenge of explaining what can be taken as reliable and what should be treated as imaginative. Charles Dodgson was a real person, but Alice was not. So surely there is some ontological difference to be

considered when discussing their respective experiences of sport? Bale tries to draw a line between Dodgson's experiences of school sport and University with his lack of competitiveness and his 'fictional representation of a more egalitarian form of running'.¹³ The real and the fictional merge, but the conventions of history lead us to ask: what are the facts of the matter? Of course, real and fictional are not opposing binaries. The supposed truthfulness of the author's life is based on textual sources written from impression, observation and subjective accounts. Fiction can be broken down into those examples purely derived from imagination and those which are based on experience. And the meaningfulness of fiction depends very on how much the reader finds the situation, plot and characters to be believable – as well as their own receptiveness to the deeper interpretations presented in fiction. Surely a reader would need some knowledge and some concern about sports in order to see the implications of such episodes as the running race in *Alice in Wonderland*. The process of mediation depends on the audience and Bale tells us very little about this aspect of sport and literature.

Discussing authors and texts is fascinating, however posing conventional historiographic questions raises doubts about what exactly is achieved in terms of the development of knowledge towards sports history. Not that Bale is unaware of this:

Such an explicit 'literaturisation' of sports *research* poses several problems but the reasons for so doing resonate with the contents of the present work. Such works stress the case for uncertainty, lack of knowledge, the floating signifier of 'sport'

and the shifting bases of ‘truth’. In other words what exists is a sporting world of slipperiness, disorder and sometimes chaos.¹⁴

This is provocative, probably deliberately so, but history is not going to progress much if truth (relative or otherwise) is abandoned to some amorphous notion of uncertainty. If everything is uncertain then we cannot be sure Charles Dodgson existed or that he wrote fiction. However what we can say with some accuracy is that he, and the others in Bale’s book, had some interesting things to say about sport. We can accept that their writings are worthy of interpretation. It is harder to accept that such an interpretation inevitably leads us to the farthest realms of postmodernism where everything is narrative, fiction and invention.

Sport and the Literary Imagination: Essays in history, literature, and sport

Jeff Hill shares Bale’s enthusiasm for exploring the myriad ways in which sport has been represented by writers of fiction. However, the subtle differences in their approach are perhaps best summed up in the single quotations that each uses at the top of their first pages. Bale chooses a comment from Charles Fruehling Springwood: ‘Sport must not be understood as a stable, monolithic cultural institution but as a site or sites where creative resistances are practised, bringing the process of struggle to the forefront of popular culture’.¹⁵ This sets a tone of response, debate, ideological struggle, even a dialectical exegesis – a framework that Bale brings to his analyses. Compare this to Hill’s single

quote from the Spanish author Javier Cercas: ‘All good tales are true tales, at least for those who read them, which is all that counts’.¹⁶

If this quote gives a feel for Hill’s approach, it should not suggest that he ignores methodological issues. Quite the opposite, he prefaces his discussions of specific books with a clear, succinct outline of recent debates in sports history. I do not wish to go through the finer points here. It is enough to note that he draws from the best of post-modernism and the ‘cultural turn’ alongside recognition of the ‘empiricist’ case. He argues against a clear conceptual distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘imagination’: ‘it is a blurring, if not an absolute breaking down, of the hard-and-fast distinction between these two categories, that this book is attempting’.¹⁷ In so doing, he offers some helpful signposts such as: ‘the novel is something capable of ‘making sense’ of the world, and this attribute of literature is something that should be very important for historians’.¹⁸ One can see the connecting thread Hill has drawn – Cercas’ nod towards the impact of stories, a methodology that can be inclusive of interpretive and imaginative literature, but all bound up by the notion that ‘in the last analysis, the business of the historian is about trying to figure out what life was like in the past’.¹⁹ For him, post-modernism does not take the historian away from that objective; rather, critical awareness of methods opens up new inroads towards achieving it. It is intriguing then that he still moves on towards a quite pessimistic view of the future of ‘sport and literature’ that shows the organisational structure and politics of sports studies in the UK militates against such a cross-disciplinary, non-pragmatic, approach. He notes that ‘literary representations of sport are thought to contain little that is important to working in the [sports] business’.²⁰ At the

same time, those who take a cultural or historical approach to sport tend not to be grouped together in the same Department and so struggle to maintain any power or even credibility within their own Universities. While funding is a central issue here – and is to all subjects – I cannot but help wonder what happened to the pleasures of reading, learning, and of gaining insight into human nature, personalised experiences, and society at large. Perhaps there is a risk that sports historians worry too much about the politics and pragmatics of their research and should just set about what they do with vigour and confidence. Certainly, by the time I got past Hill’s musings on methods and context, the substance of the book was wonderful.

Rather than take Bale’s approach, where authors are considered in turn for their perspective on the essence and value of sport, Hill has selected a series of novels in which sport is a substantial part of the narrative and plot. Once again, I will just take one example to illustrate how this works.

The first book which Hill discusses is by Scottish author Robin Jenkins, was written in 1954 and is called *The Thistle and the Grail*.²¹ It concerns a minor football club, Drumsagart Thistle Junior FC, and the story revolves around the club’s successes in the national Junior Cup competition. The background to this, as provided by Hill, is both the literary trends of the day against which Jenkins swam, and the national preoccupation with football as symbolic of masculinity, culture, community and nationhood. Hill tells us that Jenkins ‘recreated a recent past in which to explore Scotland’s spiritual malaise’ and that ‘an enduring theme in his writing has been the tension between the moral

absolutes conceived by his characters and the social realities in which they live'.²² Hill describes some of the main elements and characters of the book with a sense of purpose and clarity. He emphasises the ways in which the club's successes are situated within very ambivalent circumstances, for instance in the domestic struggles of the club's president, Andrew Robertson. He works hard for the club and his own acceptance into the community but when they arrive he realises these are fleeting gestures, for example coming to reflect that 'there is no lasting solace in football, though it is capable of providing brief epiphanies. It is perhaps the only hope for Scotland, since spiritual solace in the form of religion has made no impact'.²³ Hill develops this argument later by showing that the year of publication coincided with Scotland (and England) realising that they no longer had any predominance on the stage of international football:

There is, therefore, a certain irony in Jenkins's celebration of Scots' pride in football at the very point when this shaper of their identity as a nation was to evaporate, probably for all time ... Jenkins appears to want us to see the country's fall, the point of convergence of all the circumstances that destroyed national hope, the site where the battle for the future was lost and football took over ... At some point in the early twentieth-century Scotland lost its heroic qualities and became a place where only football – 'the mysterious masculine sacrament' – had the capacity to consume the spiritual faculties of its inhabitants.²⁴

As with Bale's book, these analyses are enjoyable to read, insightful but leave wide open the question of what can be taken from them as meaningful aspects of sports history. Reading

the above paragraph, questions of an empirical nature inevitably undermine the success of the conclusion. To what extent did football shape Scottish identity? Was the early 20th century that much different to the late 20th century? Did the social importance of football increase alongside secularisation? And, even within the frame of the book itself, is Jenkins criticising the tendency within Scotland to see football as a type of religion? If he is, then what makes Scotland different in this regard from almost every other country?

Hill answers the questions about truth and methods by re-emphasising the potential for novels and other works of fiction to tell us something about the meaning of sport. He goes so far as to argue that a novel is different but equal to a research-based historical account because ‘the meaning of sport is constructed in a variety of forms’.²⁵ Hill also argues that novels serve an ideological function because they help readers to make sense of the world, they therefore help to shape reality and historical change. So underlying the understanding of novels is the sense of a process in which readers take something away from novels back to their own lives. As with Bale’s approach, this does leave some important questions unanswered, not least about how this process of ‘constitution’ works. If the analysis remains with the texts themselves not with the readership, then it is not clear what sort of influence a writer or a novel might have on the wider world. When Hill writes that ‘if the reader takes the text to be a plausible explanation of life as s/he understands it, then a process of linguistic construction has occurred’²⁶, the obvious focal point for the critic is the word ‘if’. Since we do not know how these books were read, we cannot say with any certainty whether indeed readers found them ‘reassuringly truthful’ and if they did what intellectual or active changes resulted? Again, this is an interesting

and revealing study of sport in society, but too many questions are left unanswered about how the historian can use works of fiction to further our understanding of the past.

Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies

Pipkin, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston, approaches the literariness of sport in a different way to Bale and Hill. Rather than taking specific individuals or books in turn, he imposes a thematic structure on top of select examples drawn from a series of autobiographies of American sports men and women. He is arguably more at home with literary techniques or devices than researchers coming from a sports history or social history background. His source material is the representation in texts of subjective experiences; how the stories of public lives are retold and reshaped to bring forth surprisingly common metaphors and myths. Already we are foraging into territory that some conventional historians would feel uncomfortable in. Where are truthfulness, reliability and validity? Pipkin bats this off with some confidence:

My overriding concern is not historical accuracy or the objective reliability of athletes' testimony but the way their subjective expressions of their experiences reflect a view of sports, one different in key respects from those written by journalists, historians, sociologists, and others who do not sit inside the lines.²⁷

And so he privileges the narrativisation from within, the sense of self and of how people come to reflect on their lives:

what drives the good sports autobiographies are the stories the athletes tell, the particular episodes they select from the storehouse of their memories ... the best autobiographies have the qualities of a story. They emphasize not facts, but personal experiences. The factual accuracy – the historical truth – of an autobiography is important, but it is less interesting and usually less significant than the different - and deeper – kind of truth athletes reveal in telling about their experiences.²⁸

The introductory chapter deals engagingly with the more technical aspects of literary criticism applied to sports autobiographies. There is the question of who wrote the book: Pipkin wants to find the authentic voice of the athletes themselves rather than the hand of a co-author or editor. There is also the question of genre: is the autobiography a confession, a political statement, a life story more than a sports story? As readers and publishers know, some books are written early in the athlete's life and merely recount the road to success. Later, more complex books might delve into problems on and off the pitch, as well as the tortuous emotions of retirement – brilliantly exposed in a later chapter as an inevitably painful process not dissimilar to death itself.

Pipkin's central theme is quite complex, as his task is to use subjective accounts (for which the 'truth' element has been relegated to secondary importance) to understand the commonalities of the mode of expression. Essentially, he finds the same metaphors and myths cropping up throughout the various autobiographies reviewed. Athletes' accounts

are the same and different: arguably, much the same story – or style of story – but with different details. To strip this down further: the plot is much the same, the story telling is much the same, but the characters, places and denouements vary:

Certain recurring motifs, sometimes fully voiced and developed but often only quietly sounded, emerged as more distinctive and illuminating constructions of the athletes' subjective experiences. The athletes' subjective experience of sports revealed the importance of childhood, the body as site of identity, the magic of remarkable moments denied to most average people, and an unusual twist on the common fear of mortality.²⁹

The fascinating character of Pipkin's approach is that he uses innermost thoughts to firstly tell us about the textual re-construction of the sporting life, but secondly, to comment on much grander, structural themes that reflect American sport and the myths of American society as a whole. The personal and the social collide, mesh and interweave. It works as a book – it is a wonderful read – but the question of whether it works as history is much harder to answer. Like a good novel, the reader has to suspend their questioning of reality and sit back to enjoy, and I am tempted to suggest here that, since we are interested in the constitution of sports history, we cannot afford that luxury. Yet, we should remember that Pipkin's subject matter is actually more 'truthful' than the novels reviewed by Jeff Hill. Successful athletes are also celebrities, and therefore have been living in the media and public spotlight. The important moments in these athletes' lives are already in the public domain – they are obliged to work within the confines of

what is believable, within the public's knowledge and expectations of them, and within a framework of hegemonic truth than can easily be cross-referenced to other sources.

Pipkin actually is dealing with the individual athletes' understanding of their part in events that have already been played out in public. That they happened is without question; but we are drawn towards a character study written by the hero(ine) themselves. There are a host of fascinating aspects to this, one of which is how the athlete emerges from, draws from, and adds to, the greater sense of American sports myth. The metaphor used are seasonal – the spring of early career, the 'end of autumn' being the demise of retirement. We can ask how compelled autobiographical authors feel to oblige these myths and metaphors – the rags to riches of the American Dream being another. In other words, Pipkin's conveys a sense that the athlete becomes part of an over-arching story that is in fact the story of American sport. What we cannot quite decipher though is whether the material facts of sporting lives are much the same, or whether the process of writing an autobiography means subsuming reality within structures determined by the genre itself, whether writers play up to public expectations in terms of story and plot, or indeed whether Pipkin himself has created the frame and selected suitable examples to substantiate his invention. Connected to this latter point is another criticism – the reader does not get a feel for individuals as Pipkin simply pulls out quotes or examples from various places to keep his own narrative ticking over. Perhaps North Americans who are more familiar with the specific details might find this less troublesome than I did. Nonetheless, Pipkin's approach is an interesting contrast to Bale and Hill's, though he shares the feature of not quite convincing the reader that he has arrived at a reasonable and comprehensive means of separating history from fiction.

Conclusion

There is much to be admired in the approaches taken by these three researchers. Their approach roughly falls within what Doug Booth calls ‘deconstructionism’ in that they use cultural forms of representation as their sources, they search for ways in which truth or interpretation is contested, and they do not aim to present a straightforward or linear view of the past.³⁰ The challenge is to ascertain the extent to which cultural modes of representation become ideologically significant. Would a reader of Robin Jenkins’ work think carefully about the implied critique of football as secular cult? When Pipkin discuss Denis Rodman’s autobiographies can he tell us much about who reads them and why? Do more populist forms of sports writing have more impact than ‘serious’ fiction?

Martin Johnes has raised the question of audiences when he criticises text-based methods: ‘what they sidestep is the direct consideration of what the audiences of the text actually thought ... We thus need to step beyond this and move from the text to the audience’.³¹ In his discussion of the 1953 novel *The Fight* by Vernon Scannell, Johnes admits the genuine challenges in trying to capture audience receptiveness. He notes that a ‘history of audiences rather than just texts’³² might help but that history can only ever be ‘an art of approximation’.³³ And he offers this pertinent comment, designed not to undermine the efforts to use cultural representations in history, but to be self-reflexive enough to accept the limitations of this method:

Proving that texts had power and that novels influenced people, putting the postmodern perspective into practice – still remains elusive. By contextualising the text and topic under scrutiny we can estimate how it might have been read and who might have read it, but this is hardly the same as a convincing account of the power of the text. Yet, an account of the influence of a single text will always be problematic because any power it did exercise was as part of the whole milieu of influencing texts that people were exposed to; discerning what influence came from where would generally be as impossible for the audience as it is for the historian.³⁴

In outlining the struggles to fulfil the potential of studying sport and literature, Johnes is both realistic and pragmatic. However, the question of truthfulness remains. Those working at the extreme end of the postmodern spectrum argue that history and fiction merge – that historical writing is about creating a narrative based on other texts and that the elemental truth is lost within these various reproductions.³⁵ However, just because we cannot access the event not necessarily mean that the event did not happen: this surely is what distinguishes history from fiction. One of the questions that historians or sociologists might ask of audiences is whether or not the proposed truthfulness of a text makes it more influential. In other words, if an account of the history of Scottish football in the inter-war period is written by a serious academic who has conducted rigorous research and provides comprehensive footnotes, would it be taken more seriously than an explicitly fictional account that conveys ‘meanings’ rather than ‘facts’. It might be that readers respond in a different way to texts that claim truth; if so, it is surely misleading to merge history and fiction under the same bracket. If nothing else, it is the central focus of

history that something real happened which, regardless of the layers of evidence and interpretation that eventually emerge in the process of converting that event into text, still remains something that was once real. As Verner Møller has argued, the difference between a novel and history is that the latter should be judged on whether the account is credible and in accordance with historical evidence.³⁶ The possibilities of the ‘cultural turn’ in sports history might be to unpick the layers of meaning that surround ‘factual accounts’ and those that surround ‘fiction’. The next stage in the process might be to accept that some narratives are more truthful than others and to analyse what specific features of a given narrative are likely to manifest ideological change. This is very challenging but without some sense of ‘impact’, we are left with literary criticism that cannot be related to social and historical context, and we are left uncertain about how truth, evidence, ideology and social change are related.

-
- ¹ A. S. Byatt, 'Lie Back and Think of Europe', *The Observer*, 29 June 2008
- ² Cited in John Bale, *Anti-Sport Sentiments in Literature: Batting for the Opposition* (London 2008), p.12
- ³ A prime example of this is the article by former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair which begins: 'Sport has the power to change the world, the power to inspire, the power to unite people in a way that little else can'. Tony Blair, 'An Uplifting Power', *Time Magazine*, June 30-July 7 2008.
- ⁴ Bale, p. 7
- ⁵ Fred Coalter, *A Wider Social Role for Sport: who's keeping the score?* (London 2007)
- ⁶ See MacAloon, J., ed, *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-colonial Worlds*, (London 2008)
- ⁷ Bale, p. 17
- ⁸ Bale, p. 17
- ⁹ Katherine Blake, *Play, Games and Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* (Ithaca 1974), p.137
- ¹⁰ Bale, p. 27
- ¹¹ Bale, p. 38
- ¹² Bale, p. 154
- ¹³ Bale, p. 152
- ¹⁴ Bale, p. 154
- ¹⁵ Bale, p. 1
- ¹⁶ Jeffrey Hill, *Sport and the Literary Imagination: Essays in history, literature, and sport* (Bern 2006), p.11
- ¹⁷ Hill, p. 24
- ¹⁸ Hill, p. 27
- ¹⁹ Hill, p. 12
- ²⁰ Hill, p. 17
- ²¹ The other novels discussed by Hill are: David Storey's *This Sporting Life*, Brian Glanville's *The Rise of Gerry Logan*, Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* and Ring Lardner's *Midge Kelly*.
- ²² Hill, p. 37
- ²³ Hill, p. 45
- ²⁴ Hill, pp. 49-51
- ²⁵ Hill, p. 197
- ²⁶ Hill, p. 199
- ²⁷ James Pipkin, *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies* (Columbia 2008), p. 3
- ²⁸ Pipkin, pp. 3-4
- ²⁹ Pipkin, p. 7
- ³⁰ Douglas Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sports History* (London 2005)
- ³¹ Johnes, M., 'Texts, Audiences, and Postmodernism: The Novel as Source in Sport History', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2007, p.124
- ³² Johnes, p.130
- ³³ Johnes, p.131
- ³⁴ Johnes, p.130
- ³⁵ See Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney 2006)
- ³⁶ Verner Møller, 'Knud Enemark Jensen's Death During the 1960 Rome Olympics: A Search for Truth?', *Sport in History*, 2005, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 452-471.