

Book Reviews

Post-1800

BRETT BEBBER, ed. *Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth-Century Britain*. Studies in Popular Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012, 2016. Pp. 224. £12.99 (paper).
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Questioned by Mass Observation's amateur anthropologists on the eve of war, a Blackpool cinema owner pointed out that most moviegoers were turned off by the Marx Brothers: "they just don't see the point" (74). Instead, English entertainers George Formby and Gracie Fields confirmed audiences' closer affinity with Lancashire than Los Angeles. The same was true of sport, and George Orwell duly noted the insularity of a nation at play. Of course, Hollywood had a firm presence in Britain: witness moviemakers' fascination with imperial adventure stories, which appealed to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, homegrown films saw "our Gracie" and the gormless George triumph over economic adversity: "If we all sing along t'mill won't close!" Despairing Marxists crudely dismissed such proletarian escapism as false consciousness, an interpretation rightly dismissed by Orwell.

The longest chapter in *Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth-Century Britain*, edited by Brett Bebber, first published in 2012 but now reissued in paperback, is Jeffrey Hill's masterly exposition tracing the historiography of leisure from Orwell and J. B. Priestley, via Richard Hoggart and Edward Thompson in the 1950s, to the following decade's explosion of scholarship when Marxists, feminists, and proto-postmodernists set an inclusive agenda valid to the present day. Hill concludes by addressing that agenda's future priorities. His earlier thoughts on gender and leisure are a foretaste of the other essay especially useful to students: Cécile Doustaly's "Women and Leisure in Britain: A Socio-historical Approach to Twentieth-Century Trends." Doustaly sees women's leisure as offering "a new lens through which to assess the impact of socio-cultural change on women's lives, including greater opportunities in the professional and public spheres and more varied gender identities and family structures" (181). She makes a convincing case but, as in the case of Hill, an updated chapter might embrace the impact of a ubiquitous digital, app-based technology on individual and collective recreation.

In contrast, Chad Martin's summary of respective sides in the debate over legalization of cannabis remains surprisingly pertinent. Less convincing is his assumption that the "swinging sixties" was a national and not in reality a largely metropolitan phenomenon. Brad Beaven's well-argued essay on cinema-going in the 1930s constitutes an ideal entry point for the study of audience attitudes and preoccupations between the wars. Equally adroit is Alison Abra when explaining why the 1920s was *the* formative decade in the evolution of British ballroom dancing: the roots of the BBC's hugely successful *Strictly Come Dancing* lie in the aftermath of the Great War and a quietly triumphant nation forging a distinctly English (for which read *British*) style based upon four, later five, foundational dances. Abra explains how instructors and other professionals, administrators, and journalists fostered a cautious (fox trot yes, tango no) public's mistaken belief that it was shaping the form and direction of ballroom dancing. She describes a continuing negotiation between the profession and the denizens of the dance floor, notwithstanding top-down initiatives to standardize, regulate and—in a very English (for which do not read *British*) manner—sanitize what became a large and profitable industry. Thus the sensational Charleston was soon refashioned as the sensible quick step.

In examining westerns on British television in the 1950s, Kelly Boyd asks why intellectuals lamenting the Americanization of indigenous popular culture seemed so relaxed about "cowboys and Indians." Ideally, such a well-researched piece would also embrace the first half of the following decade, when the adult western series enjoyed prime-time scheduling on both ITV and BBC. Commercial television used well-known westerns to attract viewers away from the rival channel or to retain them; witness *Wagon Train* against *Panorama*, and the potent mid-sixties combination of *Rawhide* and *Ready, Steady, Go*. Boyd duly notes but understandably fails to appreciate the remarkable impact in 1956 of Walt Disney's *Davy Crockett*, not least through the title song's permanent presence on the Light Programme playlist. Music is a crucial factor in understanding why westerns became so fixed in the popular consciousness (*the* reason why the BBC's *Champion the Wonder Horse* triumphed over ITV's *Fury*). The same is true of the schoolboy jokes inspired by *The Lone Ranger*, *Cheyenne*, and the like, and the American bubble gum cards, which revealed just how many series were and were not crossing the Atlantic. Boyd mentions Roger Moore joining the cast of *Maverick*: recruiting a British actor reflected the unique status of both the program and its star, James Garner. Thus, what the essay fails to acknowledge is that by 1960 popular awareness was increasingly linked to the quality of writing and caliber of acting. This explains Clint Eastwood's pre-Leone fame, and why few tears were shed when *Bonanza*'s demise signaled an end to British TV's obsession with the Wild West.

Sandra Trudge Dawson's account of the circus in Britain from 1918 to the late 1940s is an impressive example of assiduous reading and heroic archival work on both sides of the Atlantic. To maximize the circus's appeal, promoters, patrons, and punters promoted it as a uniquely British creation, rooted in a shared "vision of the nation as a democratic and unified entity" (85). This "one nation" vision attracted a cross-class audience, offered escape and reassurance at a time of domestic and international crisis, and countered critics concerned about animal welfare. Unsurprisingly, despite Bertram Mills closing for the duration, the circus's finest hour was from 1939 to 1945, when no fewer than forty-five companies maintained the nation's morale.

Bebber's own contribution is a dry, somewhat narrow study of the 1975 Safety at Sports Grounds Bill's passage through Parliament. Hooliganism was the spur for bipartisan action, but Bebbber gives little attention to individual football clubs and their fans. Denis Howell, still Britain's best known minister for sport, takes center stage as an exemplary guardian of "the people's game." Ironically—and regrettably—this essay would have benefited from rigorous editing, not least in challenging several contentious and undersupported claims and rewriting passages of awkward prose. Such criticism, however harsh, should not detract from Bebbber's achievement in putting together a volume of value to students of leisure, and

attractive to anyone fascinated by the centrality of sport and recreation to British society's remarkable cohesion across the course of the last century.

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L. W. B. BROCKLISS. *The University of Oxford: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 871. \$60.00 (cloth).
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The History of the University of Oxford was published in eight volumes between 1984 and 2000. It was a huge contribution to the field of university history, and it will be actively used by scholars for decades to come. But the kinds of questions obscured by such a many-handed enterprise are the long-run questions, and these are among the most important issues raised by Oxford's history. There are, for example, questions of institutional identity: is there any sense in which the University of Oxford, as it exists in 2016, is the same institution that came into being in the thirteenth century? There are questions about the relationship between antiquity and the ability of a university to thrive today. Do old institutions possess a market advantage in comparison with their younger rivals? At a time of acutely fierce global rivalry and competition from "new providers," this is a peculiarly pressing concern for the university historian to address.

It was therefore a welcome decision by Oxford University Press to commission a major single-volume history of the University of Oxford that would, among other things, pose these big questions, and L. W. B. Brockliss was an excellent choice as author. Although he is an insider who has been a fellow of Magdalen College for more than thirty years, his background as a historian of French universities under the ancien régime and as a former editor of *History of Universities* meant that he approached the task equipped to explore how Oxford fit into wider systems of higher education, in Europe and beyond, and the sections in which he does this are strikingly good. Moreover, although a specialist in the early modern period, he has an unusually wide chronological range, and he deals as confidently with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as he does the medieval centuries.

Faced with the problem of identity, Brockliss divides the Oxford's history into four periods, so emphasizing discontinuities rather than continuities. The "Catholic university" up to 1534 was very different from the "Anglican university" that succeeded it; likewise, the "imperial university" of 1845 to 1945 was very different from the "world university" of today. This chronological scheme makes clear that Brockliss does not believe it makes much sense to think of the University of Oxford today as the same institution as that which came into being in the 1200s. He makes some telling points in support of that case. While several colleges trace their origins back to the thirteenth century, the collegiate university really took shape in the early modern period. The tutorial system, another marker of Oxford's distinctiveness, was in some ways in being by the seventeenth century, when it was recognized that each undergraduate must be under the care of a senior member of the University of Oxford, but only slowly did it come to be accepted that this should be a fellow of the college. Meanwhile, the "tutorial" as a form of instruction was a Victorian creation, and even then, Victorian tutorials were radically different from their counterparts a century later. Moreover, the global university of today, recruiting its faculty and students from across the world, is radically different from the university in which I was an undergraduate in the early 1980s, when the history faculty's more than one hundred tenured teachers included no Americans, and I think just six non-UK natives.

Brockliss does not believe that antiquity in itself does much to explain Oxford's success. Instead, he argues that Oxford's success as a globally competitive research university today should be attributed to the success of Victorian reformers in reinventing it. Oxford could