

doi:[10.1017/S095679331800016X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S095679331800016X)

Mike Huggins, *Horse Racing and British Society in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018. viii + 316 pp + 11 illustrations + 10 tables. £60. ISBN 9781783273188.

In the conclusion to this monograph the author seems to do the work of a reviewer. The 'book has been much more than a study merely concerned with horse racing', he claims (p. 278). 'It also offers some innovative and important insights for cultural and social historians', he continues (*ibid*). The study 'contributes substantially to debates' (p. 284) and has 'important implications for the ... long eighteenth century' (p. 287). It is, surely, up to the reader to decide whether or not a book is 'innovative', 'important' and 'substantial'. The immodesty is as unnecessary as well as it is dispiriting, because, truthfully, the book merits much appreciation. Simply, the book instructs the reader in the early history of Britain's first modern sport – a long century defined as dating from 1660 to 1815. Mike Huggins offers few arguments as such – rather, he complicates existing knowledge and problematises clichéd assumptions about 'the sport of kings' and Newmarket domination. A vast amount of ground is covered – horse racing pun intended. Triumphantly, the book achieves two goals that are rarely achieved in tandem: there is a totally convincing generalised geographical, historical, national and social narrative; this readable broad-picture narrative is complemented by a terrific wealth of local, particular, nitty-gritty detail. This has been achieved partly because the prose is nearly always very clear, readable and bereft of jargon and the illustrations and tables are instructive; but it has also been achieved because Huggins is perfectly up-to-date with both mainstream and obscure contemporary scholarship and because the range of primary sources cited is sweeping. Huggins's exploitation of disparate sources is very effective. He uses sources to make general observations about changes in racing during the period as well as to identify and sometimes enjoyably revel in anecdotal evidence. Sources used impressively to establish facts and/or to provide colour include racing calendars, eighteenth-century newspapers, court records, stage plays, contemporary veterinary tracts, regional newspapers of the period, little-read memoirs of racing veterans, long-ignored Victorian histories of racing, family archives and Georgian paintings and prints.

The book, unlike a horse race, is a game of two halves. After a long, informative introduction we get three chapters that contextualise racing within British social and political culture. The political and social picture is a complicated one: yes, some kings were obsessed with racing; but others weren't. Aside from two fairly ineffective Acts of 1740 and 1745, racing was basically ignored by Parliament. Individuals from sects within Parliament were, however, sometimes heavily involved in racing – to, allegedly, the detriment of parliamentary business. All sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds were involved. Much of the detail about racing fans is laugh-out-loud funny: the Prince of Wales got involved in racing and befriended stakes-obsessed Whigs like Charles Fox to annoy his father, George III. Races could be used for all sorts of more serious political

reasons: some glorified the Hanover dynasty; other meetings were a cover for Jacobite meetings. In Lichfield Whigs and Tories staged rival meetings during the same month of 1748. Amusingly, Huggins shows that disruptive demonstrators at a 1734 race meeting sponsored by Whigs were demonised for violent thuggery by Whig papers but praised as dignified and decent by Tory papers. Press bias and dishonesty is an ever-fixed mark in British life.

The other four chapters deal with a narrower focus on the practicalities of racing during the (very) long century. Huggins's account of the business demonstrates a mixed picture: racing was organised and chaotic, polite and coarse, meticulous and haphazard, refined and brutal, genteel and rough, parochial and international, sporting and dishonest. These chapters tell us a great deal about the rich and the poor who were involved in all aspects of racing: certainly, these chapters will be indispensable for anyone who wants to know about the roles played by male and female owners, trainers, jockeys, grooms and about the developing thoroughbred horse itself. The detail is gripping; it is fascinating to hear that racing may well be thought of as the sport of kings but in 1778 Nottingham men were paid 1s 6d a day to mark out the course. Some people thrived in racing; some flopped; some participants died in racing incidents; some bookmakers, owners and 'blacklegs' made fortunes; some gamblers killed themselves because of the shame and despair brought on by catastrophic losses. Racing has always had many victims, equine and human.

This is a splendid book, overall, but not one without minor flaws. The sixth chapter, oddly, does not have a conclusion – every other chapter does. There are some baffling errors and contradictions: for example, on p. 256 we are told that Gervase Markham expressed an opinion 'by c. 1695' although he lived 'c. 1568–1637' and the edition of the Markham book quoted is dated to 1665. The Index is inadequate. For example, I noticed that Horace Walpole is mentioned at least four times in the text – on pp. 45, 95, 138 and 140. But it is noted quite wrongly in the Index that he appears three times – according to the Index, these three references are on pp. 45, 95 and 136. Oddly too, Horace is called 'Robert Walpole' on p. 140. The actual Robert Walpole is mentioned on p. 72 – but that Walpole is not accounted for in the Index. These minor things can be cleared up in future editions – and I hope that there will be future, more careful, more modestly self-analysed editions of what will become a classic, seminal study of a crucial early modern activity. In today's Britain, horse racing is quite marginalised: young urbanites are embarrassed by modern racing's obsequiousness towards British and Middle Eastern royalty; they are squeamish about racing's patchy welfare record and its association with foxhunting; the tiny, leathery jockeys look less and less like pin-ups for our over-fed society; and betting companies are more likely to make money by getting mugs to throw away money betting on football or on fixed odds terminals or online casinos. Now that racing is not the behemoth in British cultural life that it was, we need to know more about its complexities when it was that complicated, nuanced, conquering, meaningful beast.

Kevin De Ornellas
Ulster University