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Muscular Christianity has an eerie ring to it, at least to the secular Nordic ear, but in British history, to some extent even in sport history, it's considered a prestigious term denoting the best of Victorian values, morals and norms. As a movement, it propagated energetic Christian activism combined with vigorous masculinity; physical education, sports and morals, one thing would lead to the other. The originators of the muscular Christianity movement were Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes; in 1880, the latter, author of *Tom Browne's Schooldays* (1857), which depicts public school life at Rugby School, founded the settlement of Rugby in Tennessee as an experimental, utopian colony, a classless, agricultural community for younger sons of English gentry who would inherit little or no property. A Christian lifestyle as well as sports and physical education were central to life in Rugby. One hundred and twenty five years later, with explicit reference to Hughes' American experiment, a conference was held in Chicago under the rubric of "Muscular Christianity and the Postcolonial World", and after another three years a volume with contributions from the conference was published, *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*, edited by John J. MacAloon (Routledge). We asked Paul Dimeo, University of Stirling, for a review. His well founded critique of much of what the conference and the book represents, and his ironic tone when dealing with certain parts of British sport history, offers intellectually stimulating as well as entertaining reading.

Muscular Christianity and 'Games Ethics' Unchallenged

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John J. MacAloon (ed.)

Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds

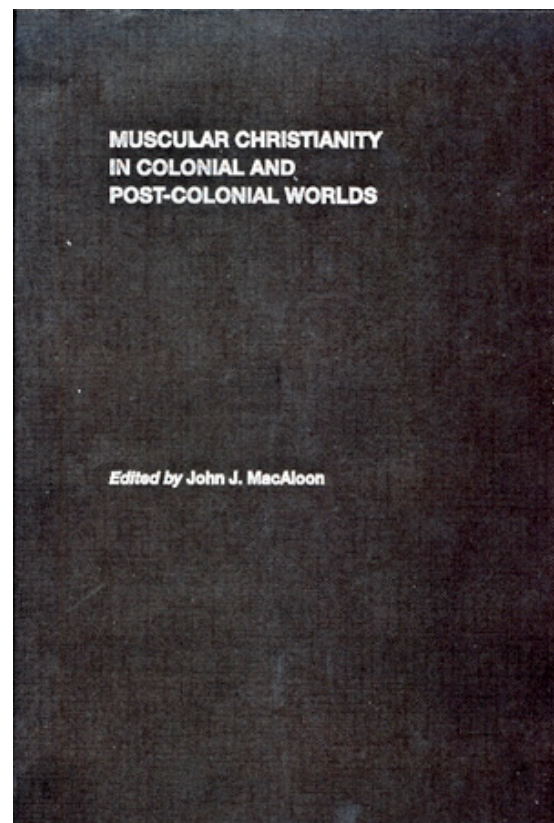
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(Sport in the Global Society)

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The origins of this book lie with a conference hosted by MacAloon at the University of Chicago in April 2005 which was called 'Muscular Christianity and the Postcolonial World', though it is not clear which of the contributors attended this conference. The speakers were then invited to a follow up seminar, hosted by the 'staff' of a town called Historic Rugby in the state of Tennessee; 'most' of them managed to accept. This is quite intriguing but MacAloon tells us nothing about this town except that it has a 'historical 1882 library conserving the original collection of 7,000 books solicited by Thomas Hughes from his many American and British admirers in the publishing trade'. Thanks to the wonders of the Internet, it is easy to discover more about Historic Rugby. The organisers call it a 'restored Victorian village founded in 1880 by



British author and social reformer, Thomas

Hughes'. The website enthuses about Hughes' vision for a 'would-be utopia', a 'cooperative, class-free, agricultural community for younger sons of English gentry and others wishing to start life anew in America'. This community, as one would imagine, was also based on Christianity and sport: tennis, rugby, horse riding, croquet and swimming.

It would appear then that the conference and follow-up seminar, and therefore this edited collection, are in the spirit of celebration and revivalism. MacAloon does not use these terms directly but the first paragraph flags up two dates as reasons for this 'timely' edition: the first being the 125th anniversary of the New Rugby community set up by Hughes in Tennessee; the second being the 150th anniversary of the year he wrote *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. MacAloon does attempt to distance the collection from claims that it is merely a 'dutiful commemoration' by referring to the 'historians and anthropologists of the postcolonial condition' who are inspired by C. L. R. James 'in using the transformations of muscular Christianity around the world to break free of the simplistic binary of colonial hegemony and resistance into new logics of hybridity and indigenous appropriation' (p. xi). In other words, the question of what the book is trying to achieve and for who is not immediately answered the first few pages. Celebration seems to be mixed with a cautious invitation for critique and revision.

The authors are largely traditionalists who offer a blend of empirical details about of a particular sport in a particular place within the conceptual framework of the 'games ethic'; the legacy of J. A. Mangan might prove as long lasting as that of Thomas Arnold. Given that he is one of the contributors (offering a slightly updated if much the same version of a chapter from the 1998 book *Games Ethic and Imperialism*) and one of the Editors of the Sport in Global Society series and the journal (*IJHS*) within which the collection was first published, his influence works on a number of levels. As well as the production and editing side, there is a strong thread of acknowledgement towards his earlier contributions to the field. As an example, Ikuo Abe's chapter 'Muscular Christianity in Japan: The Growth of a Hybrid' describes Mangan's *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* as 'sensational' (p.15). It comes as no surprise to find that Abe offers a powerful reassertion of the 'games ethic' model:

The influence of Western teachers? Western missionaries, and above all of some Japanese Christians has been immense. Those who most successfully promoted modern sport and the games ethic in Japan were Japanese muscular Christians, and they established the tradition of muscular Christianity there. Though obviously overwhelmed in the colonial period by the ideological constructions built by nationalists through appeals to traditional *Bushido*, the secularized concept of sportsmanship active in Japan today was largely the creation of the Japanese muscular Christians through their hybridizations of *Bushido* and Christianity (p.32).

The collection feels like a monument to people like Thomas Arnold who promoted the relationship between religion, organised sport and some sense of moral or social purpose, as well as to the academics who have worked tirelessly to uncover cases and episodes to illustrate the model. Even the recognition of 'post-colonial' situations is largely an attempt to demonstrate the on-going influence and power of the 'games ethic' – the detailing of which seems to have become a sub-specialism of sports history. In his Introduction, MacAloon reveals his interpretation and intention:

I suggest, and one day hope to show convincingly, it is because the [Muscular Christianity] ethos and its reflections are all around us and so normalized (usually but not always under secular rubrics) that it fails to stand out as anything unusual. I would suggest that not just the sports departments but the entire moral economy and discourse of American public schools – officially secularized, of course, and today embodied in 'mission statements', not sermons – remain largely derived from the legacy of Muscular Christianity and the games ethic. (p.xvi).






And so, this discussion of sport and religion begins to sound like a religion itself. Bruce Kidd argues that 'despite the tremendous economic, technological, demographic and social changes in the intervening years, the ideas and movements Hughes encouraged continue to push Canadians to humanitarian ends' (pp. 10-11). Muscular Christianity is ethical, constant and omnipresent. Wherever someone takes up a bat or ball, swims, runs, cycles or rides a horse, they are the descendents of the Victorian Muscular Christians. These secularized people may have turned their back on their creators but they should (it is argued) realise and accept the origins and values of what they now practice. Mangan's chapter is a stirring defence of the games ethic proselytisers, to which he concludes: 'Arguably these imperial moralists, ironically, have inherited the earth despite the fact that their morality is now mocked! They have played their part in promoting the popularity of sport in the modern world, but more to the point, they have helped ensure an emphasis on its potential moral value as a continuing reality and an enduring ambition' (p.98). (It is fascinating that Mangan himself continually refers back to his own earlier works, as if these are infallible texts that merely need to be quoted for the truth to shine through.)

For the purposes of a considered debate, it might have been more valuable to invite one or two sceptics to present their work. There are some serious questions to be asked about the empirical knowledge that underpins studies of sport in historical settings. And an expert in post-colonial theory might have offered a more careful dissection of colonial discourse, hegemony, response and legacy. In trying to find examples of the success of the 'games ethic' there is a risk that examples of failure or limited impact are ignored, grand claims are made on the basis of select cases, and that the subtleties of the (post)colonial condition are not adequately explored. Other approaches that considered issues like discipline and pain in the social construction of the body might have offered some interesting

insights.

This collection is based on a restricted understanding of the body and sport in history. It is not enough simply to continue ploughing the same furrow. Progress involves self-reflection and self-critique – recognition that for every thesis there is an antithesis. In my view, the question facing sports historians when putting together a collection like this is whether the discipline is best served by a friendly group with shared ambitions or by encouraging rivals to face each other more directly: toe-to-toe as it were, no quarter asked for and none given. That spirit of sport might enliven such well-worn debates as this, and invigorate the discipline as a whole. If nothing else, it would make conferences and spin-off publications much more interesting.

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