

DISREPUTABLE PLEASURES

Less virtuous victorians at play

Editors

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FRANK CASS
LONDON AND NEW YORK

**Also available as a printed book
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General Editor: J.A. Mangan

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First published in 2004 in Great Britain by
FRANK CASS
2 Park Square, Milton Park,
Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and in the United States of America by
FRANK CASS
270 Madison Ave,
New York, NY 10016

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-203-48708-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-58191-1 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-714-65363-2 (cloth)
ISBN 0-415-34598-7 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

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Prologue: All mere complexities

MIKE HUGGINS AND J.A. MANGAN

Certainly some Victorians took pains to paint themselves as virtuous, solid and respectable citizens. The walls of Leeds Town Hall, that monument to mid-nineteenth-century civic pride and conspicuous urban wealth, list meritorious maxims reflecting the values for which the industrial and commercial plutocracy of Victorian Leeds wanted to be remembered: 'Honesty is the best policy', 'Weave truth with trust', 'Industry conquers all'. Such clichés were a celebration of the world of work and religion, duty and ethics, virtuous commercialism and confident capitalism.

In the past historians have too easily accepted such pious pomposities and sanctimonious rhetoric as illustrating a uniform commitment to respectability, authority, duty and religion. In the early twentieth century historians tended to view Victorianism as an uncomplicated phenomenon; subsequently the nature of Victorianism has been the subject of vigorous debate. Changed cultural and economic values, the world wars, burgeoning hedonism, new historical fashions, political imperatives and even the heritage industry have all influenced the way in which the Victorians have been presented.¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, historians needed a supposedly repressive and repressed Victorian middle class as the hypocritical foil to contemporary 'modernist' sexual liberalism, and to point up the virtues of the working class, and the need for a more inclusive and populist history. Then in the 1980s Mrs Thatcher's mythological world of 'Victorian values' shaped public perceptions of the Victorians as serious, earnest and sober, committed, *inter alia*, to those mantras of Victorian leisure – rational recreation, respectable pastimes and muscular Christianity. The Victorians have thus been the victims of academic *naïveté*, sectional manipulation and political simplification – all in the interest of the peddling of a purified past. This collection is rather more concerned with reality.

Raymond Williams defined culture as 'a whole body of practices and expectations, the whole of living...perceptions of ourselves and our world... a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are expressed as practices appear as reciprocally

conforming'.² Williams's work provided the stimulus for work on working-class leisure by E.P. Thompson and others.³ In their work the middle class figures only indirectly. Peter Bailey, Hugh Cunningham and John Walton subsequently viewed popular Victorian mass entertainments such as the music hall, the seaside or the pub mainly from this working-class perspective.⁴

Williams, however, struggled to come to terms with these popular leisure forms. More attracted by 'high culture' – the world of the arts and the intellect – he largely dismissed them as trivial. Likewise, Asa Briggs's work deals with Victorian culture more in terms of provincial and metropolitan 'cultures', in the sense of 'a veneer or polish', and 'refinement of taste and manners'. His discussion of the 'cultural life of a Victorian city' is replete with references to libraries, clubs, reading rooms, theatres and periodicals.⁵ This view of an apparently largely middle-class Victorian 'high' cultural and 'respectable' leisure life has been further explored by a number of other social historians.⁶ Bob Morris, for example, in his studies of the Victorian British middle class, presents the various voluntary associations, such as choral societies, literary groups and charity organisations, as creating a respectable recreational world in which a range of mainly middle-class interests could be accommodated, a view that also embraces the emergence of sports clubs in the late nineteenth century.⁷

Pierre Bourdieu's work on culture and its relationship to the social order suggests that cultural hierarchies reproduce and reinforce social divisions, and that good taste and reputability help to delineate and maintain social boundaries.⁸ His work has had a major impact. By the 1980s 'reputable' and 'disreputable' were being used as valued concepts for an understanding of the cultural life of the Victorian period. Geoffrey Best was one of the first to portray the cultural gulf between 'respectables' and 'roughs' as a sharp, virtually absolute dividing line, which consolidated cohesion between middle-class and working-class 'respectables'. F.M.L. Thompson constructed a polished interpretation of the social history of Victorian Britain as 'the rise of respectable society', with respectability as *the* central Victorian value. In this analysis 'respectability' is represented as a highly specific value system of considerable normative power, espoused by *both* the middle class and the working class.⁹ It gave rise in turn to Cunningham's picture of a single, monolithic middle-class leisure culture.¹⁰

This 'respectability' thesis has not gone unchallenged. Indeed, Bailey first mounted an effective attack on the more simplistic aspects of the supposed differences between the 'respectable' and 'rough' working class some 20 years ago.¹¹ Yet it is only recently that more direct attacks on the viability of the thesis with regard to the middle class have begun to be launched.¹²

Disreputable Pleasures sets out to further challenge the ‘respectability’ thesis by examining the extent of disreputability, mainly, but not wholly, in terms of *actual* middle-class leisure experience. In Victorian Britain the debates about respectability formed part of a cultural contest over ‘correct’ social values and ‘appropriate’ ways of life. Many members of the middle class attempted to define themselves, and others, in accordance with inflexible conventional values. Their certainties, however, clashed with the ideas and actions of others, and thus were divisive.

The rituals and symbols of respectability served major purposes for many in the middle class. They were integral to the struggle for middle-class dominance in society, integral to attempts to establish social leadership, and integral to the need to demonstrate that their precepts and practices were superior to most of those of the working class. Reputability and disreputability were powerful *leitmotifs* in Victorian life and death, fact and fiction, ideas and language. They set parameters and allowed segregation. They permitted self-serving dichotomous identities – ‘refined’ and ‘rough’ – and defined a polarised world of absolutes: virtue and vice, morality and immorality, sanctity and sin, purity and impurity, puritanism and pleasure. The pleurably disapproving contemplation of the disreputability of other people, places and practices became a moral obsession, providing reassurance, security and predictability for those who aspired to membership of the ‘respectables’. The volume of Victorian public rhetoric of moral condemnation, the energy of the reformist drive for rational recreation, the projection of sensationalist negative images in the press and the harsh punishments frequently handed out to transgressors all hammered home the message that decency was crucial. The ‘spin’ of the decent was unrelenting; the success of the ‘spin’ was uncertain.

The middle class unquestionably played a central role in the new Victorian sports culture. Consequently these sports were imbued with what Neil Tranter has described as a ‘battery of serious purposes’, which were intended to transform sport into ‘a device thought essential for the continued success of Anglo-Saxon civilisation’.¹³ These ‘serious purposes’ included the improvement of health and physique; personal, civic and national prestige; and personal profit. Participation thus supposedly benefited society by improving personal health, promoting ‘right’ values and inculcating sound virtues. Sport was also seen as a cultural bond that promoted social stability, although in reality many in the middle class resisted the spread of sport ‘down the social ladder’ for fear of working-class domination, with its consequent immoral possibilities. The code of the mainly middle-class amateur was designed to keep the working class in proper moral subjection.

Various sports historians have given different degrees of emphasis to the concepts of ‘respectability’ and ‘morality’ in their discussions of the late Victorian sports ‘revolution’. John Lowerson, in his well-crafted and rigorously researched work on the sports of the Victorian and Edwardian English middle class, suggests that their sports ethic initially was grafted onto ‘the great mid-century virtues of Work, Punctuality, Thrift and Respectability’. He recognises, however, that this wavered as play became ‘a socially acceptable alternative to Sunday churchgoing for growing numbers of the middle class’ by the turn of the century.¹⁴ Richard Holt, in a more general overview, sees the efforts of the middle classes to keep themselves ‘*morally* [our italics] distinct from the lower orders’ as one of their defining characteristics.¹⁵ Dennis Brailsford argues, a little sweepingly, that the various Victorian sports had to accommodate themselves to the growing ascendancy of the middle class and ‘that complex of high if sometimes hypocritical moral values known as “Victorianism”’.¹⁶ Neil Wigglesworth, in his account of the evolution of British sport, asserts, equally sweepingly, that ‘the new righteous middle class preferred a more recreational involvement in sport...resulting in a strictly codified amateur ethic and the rise of the sporting club’.¹⁷

Such views are too narrow – a depiction of a more or less monolithic middle-class sports culture, at one and the same time both sanctimoniously and sincerely occupying the moral high ground. These views do scant justice to reality, to the sectional complexities, divisions of interest and diverse attitudes as well as the range of motives associated with sport within Victorian Britain’s middle class. These could be different at different ages, in different places and in different social settings. Cultural variations, subcultural divisions and shifting subcultural conflicts and alliances, not to mention individual self-assertion, meant that there was a wide variety of ‘lived’ cultural experiences within the middle class. Definitions of the morality associated with respectability could be fluid and the use of the term in relation to class identities should be cautiously exploratory rather than assertively confident.

Happily, historians are beginning to concede that the Victorians were far from one-dimensional in their values and actions. Victorian leisure in general, and sport in particular, possessed shades and nuances, general and specific elements. There is, in consequence, a real need for a subtle analysis of Victorian culture in all its variety. This is the primary concern of this collection. The Victorians were multifaceted, leading lives that might entail multiple identities and multiple selves, at different times, at different places and with different companions. They could, and did, live not in one but in several worlds. This collection challenges the overly simplistic binary class

division of reputable and disreputable leisure and sporting identities, and, it is to be hoped, provides a more subtle and nuanced view of the ways in which the apparently more disreputable aspects of sport co-existed with the reputable. The collection has its roots, in part, in Bailey's earlier work on the situationally contingent nature of Victorian pleasure, and the extent to which working-class behaviour was more or less respectable depending on context, income and opportunity.¹⁸ It also draws on Huggins's more recent work, which drew attention to the multiple settings in which the middle classes could participate in less respectable pleasures.¹⁹ Yet it is only a beginning.

The collection takes subject matter from a cross-section of mainland Britain, including Wales, Glasgow and Edinburgh, Yorkshire and Lancashire, London and the Home Counties. It covers activities as varied as horse-racing, rugby and recreational reading, and deals with great British rituals such as the Grand National, great British institutions such as the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and watershed British moments such as rugby's 'great split'.

The essays concentrate on the middle class, whose involvement, investment, participation and spectatorship underpinned the sports 'revolution' of the late nineteenth century, and, through complex processes of cultural hegemony, cultural proselytism and cultural imperialism, made *the* major contribution to national and global sport as a cultural and social entity.

In the 'contested cultural space' of leisure, sports that were reputable when sensibly indulged in by the more affluent could become disreputable when 'wastefully' taken up by the less affluent. In this respect, many sports were respectable for some and not for others. However, what constituted 'respectable' behaviour was always a fluid and dynamic category, highly responsive to changing circumstances. Victorian attitudes, of course, changed over time, and the frontiers of respectability were constantly in flux, so the temporal aspects of behavioural contexts are significant. Croll and Johnes, for example, show how in Wales the *cnappan* form of folk football became once more respectable and regarded nostalgically as part of a romanticised pre-industrial age, once its unruly and violent behaviour was safely in the past. Nevertheless, respectability, puritanism and sobriety in Victorian life, while powerful social forces, were not the only forces. As the chapters in this collection illustrate, middle-class Victorian sport was linked to such disreputable activities as gratuitous violence, obsessive gambling, sexual licence and excessive drinking. The latter, in John Burnett's neat phrase, 'liquid pleasure' was, of course, a major 'recreation' of the period,²⁰ while hedonism, controlled and uncontrolled, was an integral part of manly sports. 'Sensual recreation' entertained and educated individuals, maintained and sustained relationships, and aided and abetted communal

well-being in different ways, but no less successfully than 'rational recreation' did.²¹ Hence its attraction and survival.

Thus, Victorian society was characterised by the co-existence of reputable and disreputable patterns of behaviour, usually linked to highly specific contexts. There were some middle-class Victorians who stuck inflexibly to a 'strong' puritan respectability and accepted it as a life-organising principle in all situations. There were other Victorians who had a more flexible and pragmatic respectability, in which actions were judged as appropriate or inappropriate as the situation demanded. Few, except some very rich or some very poor, had consistently disreputable lifestyles. The middle class is not to be equated invariably with inflexible segregation. Reality was more complicated. There were separation and integration, heterogeneity and homogeneity. Participation in disreputable as well as reputable pleasures cut across classes, as well as existing within them. Furthermore, there was a necessary and often thick patina of 'overt' decency and 'covert' indecency. It is useful to remember that at least one of the members of the royal family privately enjoyed an excess of drinking, gambling and sex. Prince Albert Edward (later Edward VII) trod the public stage with the outward appearance of dignified respectability. His private life was rather different.

When considering the cultural contexts of less reputable behaviour, social class is not necessarily always the best analytical tool to employ. It can be an analytical labyrinth. As David Cannadine has recently reminded us, contemporaries employed several different models and languages of class.²² Nevertheless, as several chapters in *Disreputable Pleasures* make clear, differences over respectability associated with aesthetic taste and sporting behaviour were consistently used as powerful symbolic weapons between classes (and generations), and respectability used in this way was often closely linked to a defensive and offensive class rhetoric. However, the chapters also make clear that the various class 'leisure cultures' of Victorian Britain overlapped, making for a complex reality.²³ Some sports, such as horse-racing, brought all the classes together in shared enjoyment, making sense of Patrick Joyce's notion of 'the people'. Joyce argues that working 'people' possessed a spectrum of identities that in many cases involved the sharing of values, attitudes and loyalties with those from other social groups.²⁴ In beginning the difficult process of mapping out and providing a more detailed survey of the multiple leisure settings in Victorian Britain, *Disreputable Pleasures* likewise challenges simplistic representations of homogenous class attitudes and actions.

Cultural historians, of course, are now coming to realise that, while class remained a powerful determinant of leisure choice, late Victorian 'leisure

culture' was pluralistic. As already noted, definitions of respectable behaviour were highly dependent on time and place. What this collection makes clear is just how important life-cycle stage and location were as determinants of sporting identity and behaviour.²⁵ Less respectable behaviour was much more common at certain times in the middle-class life cycle. Adolescents, younger unmarried males and older married men whose families had grown up were most prone to such behaviour. Sites of social solidarity, visibility and significance – the home, the pub, the church or chapel, or the workplace – strongly influenced lifestyle priorities. However, locations hidden from the potential control and pressure of family, the workplace and the church or chapel self-evidently reduced the need for respectability, and, of course, were far more likely to offer opportunities for disreputable lifestyles.

The first section of *Disreputable Pleasures* considers some of the places of 'privileged play' in which members of the more wealthy middle and upper classes could indulge themselves, and the extent to which these were associated with activities that would be looked upon disapprovingly in other social settings. Schools and universities are both dealt with in some detail. The seaside and spas, music halls and racecourses also provided escape from irksome social constraints, where respectability could be relatively easily abandoned.

The Victorian public schools, in all their variety, were crucially important educational institutions. They developed the cult of athleticism. They lay at the heart of Britain's imperial mission. They were the matrix of later global sport, and in their late Victorian manifestations they helped to foster the codes of militaristic manliness, fair play and team spirit. J.A. Mangan's chapter in *Disreputable Pleasures*, however, brings together material on the concomitant violence, brutality and sadism that some middle-class pupils experienced. For too many boys 'the public school experience was nasty, brutish and not short enough'.²⁶ The violence of the Victorian public school has been, understandably, a much less trumpeted aspect of its enduring publicity. It provided both licit and illicit pleasures, for both boys and masters.

Among the more titillating images and major anxieties in Victorian literature were the sinful pleasures of the young, unmarried middle-class male. He enjoyed more free time than his elders and sometimes applied himself more to play than to work.²⁷ The behaviour of some university students, then as now, reveals an irresponsible, frivolous and immoral lifestyle. Mangan's chapter on Victorian university life sheds illuminating light on this fascinating feature of the Victorian establishment. 'Oxbridge' presented itself as the training ground for developing 'character', necessary for the confident administration of the

empire and for entry to an assured ruling elite. Yet for many students Oxbridge was not a source of self-discipline, but a place of privileged play on the river and games field, and, as various disciplinary books reveal, of disorderly, rowdy and undisciplined behaviour within college and beyond college walls. Nineteenth-century athleticism came to predominate over the aesthete and the academic in student life. It sustained indiscipline, anti-intellectualism and philistinism, and it was encouraged by some university dons for various and contradictory reasons – both pragmatic and altruistic – to maintain control of bored students, to develop their ‘character’, to maintain college recruitment levels and to adhere to classically rooted ideals.

The liminal nature of certain locations such as the racecourse, the seaside and the music hall, or the anonymity of large urban areas such as London, Liverpool, Manchester or Newcastle upon Tyne, rendered them particularly attractive places of disreputable play. Simultaneously they confronted and sustained decency, allowing individuals to slip into or out of disreputability as the choice took them. John Pinfold discusses the involvement of the Liverpool middle class in local races, especially the Aintree meetings, and provides vivid evidence of the extent to which the races provided opportunities for middle-class drunkenness, gambling and association with prostitutes, all activities looked on tolerantly by the authorities. Pubs, hotels and betting clubs in Liverpool, he states, continued to offer facilities for betting, including illegal cash betting, throughout the nineteenth century, although betting clubs were in decline by the later 1890s. Many of the Liverpool magistrates, he asserts, were lenient in their attitudes to both on-course and off-course betting, and, where members of their own class were involved, unwilling to interfere too actively. The largest bookmakers of the city were regarded as wholly respectable by the local press. Pinfold explores the more dubious aspects of the lifestyle of James Maybrick, a Liverpool cotton merchant, and his US-born wife Florence, both representative of at least a segment of Liverpool middle-class society. Their lives shed a bright light on one member of the city’s merchant community and highlight the need for more extensive local studies of less respectable as well as respectable Victorian middle-class behaviour.

The Victorian belief that disreputability could be located, described and categorised was created partially through the period’s media. The local press provided colourful insights into the practices of bourgeois culture.²⁸ Certainly the media provided vicarious opportunities for the enjoyment of disreputable pleasures, and helped to shape attitudes to both respectability and ‘non-respectability’. In the second section of the book the three chapters by John Springhall, David Scott Kamper and Mike Huggins consider the ways in which the Sunday press, ‘penny dreadfuls’ and comic cartoons vari-

ously dealt with less acceptable pleasures. The chapters by Collins, Pinfold, and Croll and Johnes provide a further rich fund of local newspaper coverage. The fast-growing towns and cities of the Victorian age gave local journalists opportunities to write about a wide range of doubtful pleasures. Their approach was often pathological, episodic and sensational, with allegedly 'typical' rather than first-hand description, dialogue and action. Their mix of prurience and censoriousness, which positioned them on the moral high ground, coupled with graphic description, was hugely popular. The later *News of the World* had its Victorian antecedents.

The popular press became increasingly sensationalist in its content and coverage as the nineteenth century went on. By the 1890s the Sunday newspapers were particularly popular and commercially successful, with about two million copies being sold each week, largely to the lower middle and working classes. Kamper describes how these newspapers helped to define the terms of class-based cultural debate, in which claims to respectability could be articulated, accepted or denied. Some middle-class moralists refused to read these supposedly lower-class, 'grubby' newspapers, as evidence of their own respectability. Newsagents claimed to dislike Sunday trading but were unwilling to lose newspaper sales. The newspapers themselves were careful to frame detailed crime reportage and coverage of sport, especially horse-racing and betting, within a condemnatory rhetoric of respectability. However, although betting was an inflammatory issue, almost all the Sunday papers provided racing tips, and defended the betting of their working-class readers as legitimate, honest and decent, while condemning excessive and dishonest gambling by the rich. In short, the public and the press attempted to have it all ways.

Thanks to elementary state education, adolescents, literate and semi-literate, were more and more a part of the reading public in late Victorian society. Springhall shows how 'penny dreadfuls' and 'bloods' created a new commercial market among middle-class as well as working-class adolescents.²⁹ These penny part serials and cheap weekly periodicals, with their details of low-life London, prurient and risqué tales of women in peril and school stories with sport thrown in, were aimed mainly at working-class boys, but targeted also the sons of the middle and lower middle classes. Certainly Springhall suggests that much of the middle-class 'moral panic' associated with these comics derived from a fear that their own sons and daughters were as much at risk from contamination by them as the children of the urban poor were. With alternative images to biblical morality these entertaining and indecorous periodicals had a clear appeal.

To lapse briefly into esoteric jargon, there has been a recent emphasis on the 'linguistic turn' in sports history writing.³⁰ However, relatively little atten-

tion has been devoted to what might be termed a 'visual turn' in the study of Victorian leisure, which may seem somewhat surprising, given the emphasis placed on media images of sport in the twentieth century.³¹ Mike Huggins attempts a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the varied nature of visual sporting humour in two contrasting periodicals, *Punch* and *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, and of the patterns, themes and narratives that characterised their satirical sports coverage. Victorian sporting cartoon artists were faced with the challenging task of interpreting the significance of the sporting revolution that their society was experiencing. The resulting cartoons cover the concerns, expectations and prejudices of audiences and artists, and reveal associated beliefs about the 'respectability', or otherwise, of sporting behaviour. Huggins paints a complex, shifting picture of attitudes to the role of sport in masculine identity, in the inter-relationships between classes and sexes, in male social relationships and attitudes, and in male concerns over the essential nature of femininity. *Inter alia* he discusses the evolving metropolitan and provincial attitudes to dominant ideologies such as athleticism.

The last three chapters explore middle-class (and working-class) violence, vice and virility, in a variety of regional and sporting settings. Tony Collins shows how attitudes to hacking, brutality and aggression within middle-class rugby changed over time, an important theme first developed in *Rugby's Great Split*, his prize-winning book on the origins of rugby league football.³² In the 1860s and 1870s such behaviour was generally seen as legitimate, and was viewed approvingly as 'manly' and 'British'. Rough and robust approaches still characterised some 'gentlemen' and former public school teams in the 1880s, and their gamesmanship and emphasis on winning were a long way from any 'Corinthian' ideal. The game's traditions of violence were initially part of its appeal, even if they became increasingly antithetical to some sections of middle-class public opinion. Collins demonstrates that it was only in the 1880s, when such tactics were successfully used against these teams by the working-class players then entering the game in large numbers in Yorkshire and Lancashire, that these traditions were 'un-invented'. They were replaced by a utilitarian ethical system of 'fair play', used in part to justify continued control of the game by the public-school-educated.³³

Croll and Johnes offer an original interpretation of the ways in which the dominant leisure images of 'virtuous Wales' and Welsh Nonconformity during the late nineteenth century need to be reconsidered. They provide a revealing picture of the ways in which the 'aesthetics of vice' developed in South Wales. It is hardly surprising that, with the increased urbanisation, industrialisation and commercialism of South Wales, the frontiers of respectability were constantly shifting in response to changing attitudes,

making healthy, formerly eyebrow-raising pursuits such as female cycling acceptable and rendering previously taken-for-granted brutal street ball games unacceptable. Increasingly as the nineteenth century progressed, Welsh aspirants to respectability came face to face, not always unwillingly, with louche behaviour through the extensive reporting of a 'disreputable' Wales in the pages of the local press. Thus, reading about sordid and sinful ways of life became a widespread pastime, making readers vicariously 'veritable connoisseurs of the disreputable', while at the same time confirming their decency through 'inescapable' vicarious involvement.

Not surprisingly, given the 'double standards' of the time, less respectable sporting recreations were much more likely to be found in all-male settings, rather than in mixed or all-women settings. There were, for example, many men-only clubs, with their betting, billiard-playing and bookmaking, scattered across the face of urban Britain, from the Victoria, the Turf Club, and the Junior Tattersalls Clubs in London to the Waterloo, Camden and Grosvenor Clubs in Liverpool. Detailed investigation of the records and minute books of the more respectable Victorian sports clubs, all almost incidentally the result of a concern with amateurism and professionalism, reveal that for many members their main role was social.³⁴ Sport was not always 'improving', and ribaldry, drinking and betting could often be found in even the most 'respectable' of clubs. Members of cycling clubs, for example, faced accusations in the 1890s that 'they fill themselves with liquor to the accompaniment of vulgar and often obscene songs'.³⁵

Hamish Telfer explores the socially exclusive male world of the late Victorian Scottish harriers clubs. These clubs first emerged in Glasgow and Edinburgh in the mid-1880s, and by the 1890s they were popular in cities across Scotland. Dundee alone supported some 17 harriers clubs between 1887 and 1890. The larger and more prestigious clubs could have an active membership of up to 100 or more. These clubs placed a strong emphasis on gentlemanly sociability and some acquired town club rooms, with lounges, overnight accommodation and other facilities providing a persuasive veneer of respectability. They organised regular winter Saturday cross-country runs in a variety of venues, booking good-quality hotels and socialising energetically afterwards. Although there were individualistic competitions, many events had a strong emphasis on teamwork and collective performance, with 'packs' running together following 'hounds'. If 'conviviality lies at the heart of sport', in the case of the harriers clubs Telfer makes it clear that single-sex conviviality was certainly as great an attraction for many members as the sport itself.³⁶ All-male socials and 'smokers', with their drinking, smoking and revelry, were far more of an attraction than the inhibiting sobriety and propriety of the mixed Grand Annual Dance.

The less respectable aspects of sport, then, were largely, although not entirely, a male phenomenon. Both the emergence of the entrepreneurial and professional middle class, and the rise of the evangelical movement, gave fresh impetus to a view of women 'as carriers of social and religious virtue' in the private, domestic sphere.³⁷ However, as indicated in the chapters by Pinfold and Huggins, middle-class women were sometimes able to publicly break through the male 'glass wall' inhibiting their personal conduct. However, as in the case of Mrs Maybrick, more often than not they experienced moral opprobrium if they transgressed the limits of decorum. Historians could usefully explore more fully middle-class women's participation in leisure of the time, which was often linked to the sinful. Successful female athletes, such as pedestrians, for example, were often portrayed as women with questionable reputations.³⁸ The opponents of cycling, for their part, saw it as indecent practice, while any closeness between near-naked bodies during mixed bathing smacked of depravity.³⁹

Victorian middle-class women developed ways of exploiting sexual double standards. Women frequently got men to place bets 'for them', often receiving the winnings in the form of a pair of gloves, but invariably avoiding paying out on a losing bet. In mixed sports women could get away with behaviour that etiquette forbade to men. Numerous accusations of female cheating seem to suggest that while, in public, women were placed on pedestals as paragons of virtue, in sport they were allowed the licence of immature children. On the Victorian croquet ground a peculiar sort of role reversal could take place, which enabled women to jettison their expected passivity and dominate – indeed, humiliate – men, mixing flirting with tantrums, wrangling and argument.⁴⁰ In 1893 Lewis Carroll went so far as to claim that 'croquet is demoralising society. Ladies are beginning to cheat at it terribly, and if they are found out, they only laugh and call it fun.'⁴¹

Respectability clearly was adapted to circumstances, occasions and events. The same actions could mean different things to different people in different places and at different times. The overriding conclusion to be drawn from *Disreputable Pleasures* is that 'respectability' was a quicksilver phenomenon, reshaping itself to environment, gender, age and time.

There was a period complexity associated with respectability that, as yet, has not been fully appreciated, recorded or understood. What is equally clear is that the full extent of the obverse has suffered the same fate. If the former has been over-emphasised, the latter has been under-emphasised, certainly in relation to the Victorian middle class. Future investigators will surely rub their hands at the prospects of plunging them further into the layers of disreputable pleasures that this collection has barely, but, we hope, stimulatingly, exposed.

Part 1:

The privileged pursuit of dubious pleasures

Bullies, beatings, battles and bruises: ‘great days and jolly days’ at one mid-Victorian public school

J.A. MANGAN

Plus ça change...? Well, perhaps:

The Michaelmas term begins, the football season gets under way, there is a nip in the evening air and the heart sinks as one reads those announcements posted by fee-paying schools in yesterday’s paper. Yes, the dreaded YK Swotski is Head Boy, the Fourth of November will be held on Nov. 6, together with a performance of *If* in College Chapel. JSB Outstanding-Greaser is Keeper of the Mixed Grill. What memories seem to rise within me as I look at those cryptic blocks of text.

Think of the smell of carbolic; the awful afflatus of the organ on that first Sunday evening, as hundreds of pupils, their mothers’ Mitsouko still on their cheeks, whimper their way through ‘Abide With Me’. Think of that little British microcosm, with nothing ahead but violent games and teasing and the howling of the school dog, and no girls save the Chaplain’s daughter. Think of the privations, think of the cabbage, think of what it felt like to have your head kicked as you lay face down in the mud of some far-flung playing field at four o’clock as darkness fell and the sleet intensified.

And what did it feel like, my friends? It felt absolutely marvellous, of course. Totally top-hole. It made me what I am. It was a first-rate preparation for life.¹

Another irreverent modern commentator has sent an equally satirical dart winging its way to a bull’s eye:

You can't expect a boy to be vicious till he's been to a good school. So wrote Saki, and, although he was joking, the joke was funny because it was also true. Schools have long been recognised, in our literature and by the man in the street, as dens of vice, distinguishable from prisons in their capacity to encourage bad behaviour.²

In the second half of the nineteenth century 'a good school' meant 'a good public school', which meant invariably bullies, beatings, battles and bruises. Marlborough College by the 1870s was 'a good school'. The Schools Inquiry Commission of 1868 (the Taunton Commission) put Marlborough College and Rugby, with Marlborough College in first place, far ahead of all the other schools in terms of the number of Open Scholarship holders at Oxbridge. It also commented:

The kind of education given at Eton, at Rugby, at Marlborough, whatever may be its drawbacks, has at any rate received whatever stamp of public approval can be considered to be given by overflowing numbers. And it is not too much to say, that what chiefly wins this approval is not so much what these schools teach, as the training which is given by their school life.³

In the same decade, the Oxford University cricket eleven included five Marlburians, and the 12th man was also a Marlburian.⁴

All was not quite perfect. Of the Marlborough of the time, Sir Lionel Earle wrote, with a laconic display of the proverbial 'stiff upper lip': 'The education was wooden and in my opinion unenlightened... The food was bad and there were considerable outbreaks of boils.'⁵ Edward Lockwood, in his *The Early Days of Marlborough College*,⁶ wrote of Lent in the earlier pre-Clarendon Marlborough: 'On Wednesdays and Fridays my only food was stale bread washed down by water from the pump, and we used to search for pignuts to satisfy our craving.'⁷ On food, or the absence of it, the Kemble Notes ('Marlburiana') state that:

after a leg of mutton had been cut down to the bone, the bone itself was held up on the fork, dexterously severed by a sharp blow, and the two bones placed on two plates as a helping for two boys. Any boy's plate coming up after this had to beg from another table or the poor boy had nothing.⁸

Starvation was not the only ordeal. It was not only the daily diet that was bad, Earle remarked, so was pupil behaviour: ‘There was much bullying, and young Burne-Jones, the son of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, the painter, was so heckled for writing home daily to his mother that he ran away and was found after three days in a starved condition in Savernake Forest.’⁹ Earle added, surely unnecessarily, that his parents ‘very wisely took him away’.

Unendurable ‘ribbing’ was only one torment. The *History* of 1923 records that all the boys in the mid-1840s were taught in one room. In the winter most were frozen. They might have seen the flames of the log fire at the end of the room in school hours, but the only time they felt its warmth ‘was when they got a great deal more than they liked, and were submitted to the ordeal of “roasting”, a familiar form of torture in those days’.¹⁰ Shades of Flashman! Earle too had something to say on school torture: ‘Among all the tortures invented by... the Marlborough bully, the suspending of small boys in sheets over the bannisters of the upper corridor of a House is, perhaps, the most blood-curdling.’¹¹

To his reminiscences Earle attached as a conventional rider the smoothly diplomatic comment that he believed that Marlborough in the 1930s was one of the best of the public schools – as indeed it was, but only a few years earlier it had seen some celebrated bullying of the so-called ‘hereticks’, a group of aesthetes that included Anthony Blunt, John Betjeman and Louis MacNeice. Betjeman’s description of ‘Big School’ in his verse autobiography *Summoned by Bells* provides merely a flavour of their defiant suffering:

Alas for them, that wrapped in swaddling clothes
 Are A House’s special care,
 Who dread the ‘bloods’ that turn their collars up,
 Wear coloured socks and paste their hair.

Alas for them, I say, when plunged from thence
 To pan barbaric Upper School,
 Whose aspect grim within is not denied
 Where hardy, stubborn athletes rule.¹²

Nevertheless, Betjeman had it easy. The early days were by far the worst: ‘in the general hurly-burly no mercy was extended to the weak. They led a life of oppression, though they had at least the consolation of seeing and knowing that their companions in misfortune were numerous.’¹³

Whether or not this was a consolation is now impossible to know. Some sort of consolation was certainly necessary. In response to ‘most attempts to

awaken the chords of memory' associated with those early moments of Marlburian history, it has been remarked, it was the 'bitter cry of the weak and the oppressed' that was 'the prevailing note'.¹⁴

James Franck Bright has left an account of Marlborough about the time that G.E.L. Cotton was appointed headmaster in 1852. The school, he remembered, 'was in a very bad state'.¹⁵ Apart from savage bullying,

There was a fixed hostility to the masters. The organisation of games was scarcely perceptible. The arrangement of the school buildings lent itself to disorder – immense dormitories and schoolrooms in which certain privileged boys were allowed to sit out of school hours, where they cooked illicit meals, but where it was nearly impossible to read or study; and an enormously big school, the scene of all sorts of pranks and bullying, into which all the unprivileged were crowded.¹⁶

There is much more in the same vein set down by pupils and masters of the time. However, Marlborough was not exceptional: it was typical. It had its idiosyncrasies, but it also had its commonalities. As an anonymous contributor to *All The Year Round* in 1879 remembered of the school in the 1840s: 'In literal truth we were not worse than any other set of boys, and our outbreaks did not arise from any inherent wickedness, but were the venial ebullitions of youthful spirit inadequately watched and restrained.'¹⁷ Sir Lionel Earle's recollections are, therefore, quite typical of his generation (and in some aspects, of later generations), and indeed repeated over and over in the autobiographies, memoirs and reminiscences of Victorians.

Bullying was a commonplace pleasure of the bigger mid-Victorian public schoolboy. J.S. Thomas, in his 'Reminiscences' of Marlborough of the 1840s, noted that the real brute in the school was the school bully and added that he himself had witnessed

acts of which the only explanation could be that the author delighted in inflicting torture. I remember a big fellow who was in the habit of calling small boys to him and running pins through lobes of their ears, and on one occasion I saw him vary this practice by using a penknife instead of a pin.¹⁸

Such memories, he added, somewhat gratuitously, made thoughts of Marlborough hateful. Another cruel amusement he described involved