The Sport of Kings

The Sport of Kings is an ethnography of the British racing industry based upon two years of participant observation in Newmarket, the international headquarters of flat racing. Racing in Britain provides a lens through which ideas of class, status, tradition and hierarchy can be examined in an environment which is both superficially familiar and richly exotic. This book explores concepts about 'nature' specific to thoroughbred racehorse breeding, and pursues the idea that in making statements about animals, we reveal something of ourselves. It explains the action that takes place on racecourses, in training yards, on studs and at bloodstock auctions. It analyses the consumption of racing through betting on the racecourse and in betting shops, and it proffers an insightful description of a unique class system: that of the humans and animals involved in the production of British flat racing.

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Kinship, Class and Thoroughbred Breeding in Newmarket

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Contents

Preface

Riding across Newmarket Heath on some shiny specimen of thoroughbred perfection I often thought to myself, 'I must be the luckiest anthropologist ever.' Studying horseracing enabled me to fulfil a number of ambitions, including riding racehorses, taking a yearling through the sales ring, seeing a thoroughbred foal born and, ultimately, leading up a winner at Newmarket's July Course. My relationship with my informants in Newmarket was influenced by the passion for horses that I shared with most of them, to the extent that no study would have been possible without it.

Newmarket is a town of seventeen thousand people and four thousand racehorses (Newmarket Tourist Information Centre 2002). It is located on the Suffolk–Cambridgeshire border, and its windswept Heath has been the site of horseracing in a multitude of forms, from the scythed chariots of Boadicea to the massive finances and internationalism of flat racing today. It is often assumed that the history of Newmarket *is* the history of horseracing. It is occasionally stated that Newmarket *is* horseracing.

Newmarket epitomises English racing. It is not typical of, nor entirely different from, other racecourse towns and cities. What makes Newmarket interesting is that it was the site of the codification of horseracing in the eighteenth century, and became the favoured location for the most powerful opinion-makers in horseracing society at that time. Newmarket still accommodates the Jockey Club Rooms. The result of this concentration of power has been the identification of the town with a single industry that still dominates its landscape, daily routines and social relations. Amongst racing professionals and aficionados Newmarket has earned the nickname of 'Headquarters'.

This book is a case study of a 'specific class system' – that of the trainers, owners, breeders, bloodstock agents, racing administrators, stallion men, lads, farriers, stud-workers and work-riders who contribute to the production of racing as a sport, industry and betting medium, referred to throughout as 'racing society'. It offers a characterisation of this system as well as an explanation of how it is maintained in dialogue both with those who bet and visit the racecourse, and with the aristocrat of the animal world, the English thoroughbred racehorse.

Fieldwork in Newmarket

I arrived in Newmarket in October 1996, an experienced rider, but a relative newcomer to the world of racing. I enjoyed going to the races, but I did not know anyone with a professional involvement in racing. During my undergraduate degree I had acquired the habit of driving over to Newmarket to watch the horses on the Heath, and it was during this time that I began to notice the interesting characters surrounding the practice of horseracing.

As later chapters reiterate, my pre-existing knowledge of horses and my ability to ride and handle them was one of the most significant factors influencing my fieldwork. Evans-Pritchard famously said, '"cherchez la vache" is the best advice that can be given to those who desire to understand Nuer behaviour' (1940: 16). Of course, in relation to Newmarket Evans-Pritchard's advice would read instead, 'cherchez le cheval'. My acceptance by many racing people depended upon my ability to perform tasks involving horses with the minimum of difficulty and fuss. On meeting people for the first time, I was often asked to 'just grab hold of that old mare for me', or 'hand me that scraper will you?' Though the manner was casual and the task usually straightforward, its completion often depended upon a confidence with horses and a knowledge of their specialised equipment, which indicated to 'horse-people' that I was 'one of them'.

This book is based upon fifteen months' fieldwork in Newmarket. Although Newmarket was the primary site of my fieldwork, my object of study was in fact 'racing society', a collection of people involved in the production of racing, found in high concentration in the town. I also gathered data from a variety of locations outside Newmarket, specifically, from racecourses all over Britain, from the Ascot and Doncaster bloodstock sales, from racing's service providers in Wellingborough (Weatherbys) and London (the Jockey Club and the British Horseracing Board) and from Lambourn, the centre of National Hunt racing in Britain.

I began my fieldwork in the autumn, when most of the important sales take place at Tattersalls Park Paddocks in the centre of Newmarket. The breeding season for English thoroughbreds runs from February to July, and all thoroughbreds share a nominal birthday of 1 January. Foals are the produce of a particular 'dam' and 'sire', a mare and a stallion. Female racehorses are referred to as 'fillies' up to and including the age of four, after which time they become 'mares'. If the filly is 'covered' (mated) before she is five, she automatically becomes a mare. A 'stallion' refers to a male horse at stud, a 'gelding' is a castrated male horse, a 'colt' is a male horse up to and including the age of four years who is not at stud or gelded. A 'horse' is a male horse over the age of five who is neither gelding nor stallion.

Most English thoroughbreds are sold as yearlings, ready to go into training and to race the next season as two-year-olds. Yearlings are either brought straight

from the stud on which they were born to the sales, or go through a 'preparation' with a sales agent. The sales run until the end of the year, and once they had finished I began working on a stud, at the beginning of 1997.

My experiences of working as a stud hand are described in detail in chapter eight. The early part of the year was dominated by foaling and then by 'covering' (mating). Once the foals had been born and the mares covered, the emphasis changed and the turf flat season began (all-weather flat racing continues throughout the winter, but is not as prestigious or valuable as turf racing). My fieldwork also moved, from stud to training stable, where my own initiation into riding racehorses began. My experience of working as a 'lad' is described in chapter seven. The yearlings bought at the sale are sent to the training stables chosen by their owners. Racehorses are trained on behalf of their owners by professional racehorse trainers, who may board between six and two hundred 'horses in training'.

Once a yearling has been placed with a trainer, it becomes a 'horse in training', and is 'backed' and 'broken', that is, accustomed first to a bridle and saddle, and then to a rider. Two-year-olds may be too 'backward' to race and need time to grow before they can withstand the pressures of training. Others are quick to learn, growing into what is referred to as an 'early' two-year-old. Once the two-year-old is broken, he will be 'tried' against his peers, to see whether he 'shows' any speed. A two-year-old who is 'showing' at home will be tried in a race, the outcome of which will determine his future. The majority of two-year-olds will be given several chances to race as they may not show their ability due to being 'green', i.e. lacking in experience. At three, the racehorse is thought to be mature enough to have 'shown' his ability although there are some who are 'slow to come to themselves' and continue to develop. Once a racehorse has established his ability, after several runs at two and three, it is unlikely that he will ever run in a better 'class' of race, and will run at the same level until he loses his physical 'soundness' or 'form'. At this point the horse may be retired or tried over jumps. Mares are likely to be 'put into foal' whilst only the best bred and most successful colts become stallions.

The major phases of my fieldwork were thus spent working on a stud, in a training yard, on the racecourse and at the sales showing yearlings. In addition, I met members of racing society who were eager to describe their families. These interviews were conducted throughout fieldwork, at the races and in informants' homes. My association with the professional punter, who explained a great deal about gambling, stemmed from an introduction by a racecourse commentator with whom I spent a day. Over the course of fieldwork I also spent time with breeders, owners, farriers, vets, bloodstock agents, Jockey Club officials, racing correspondents, bloodstock experts, local councillors, the local

Member of Parliament, the London Racing Club, and at Weatherbys, the Jockey Club and the British Racing School.

I choose not to describe this thesis as an example of 'anthropology at home'. In Newmarket, I was 'at home' in relation to my nationality, skin colour, upbringing and affinity with horses. I was also, of course, not 'at home', because I was always a member of a community of anthropologists, that membership being the purpose of my presence in Newmarket. Writing up has reinforced this separation. If 'anthropology at home' refers to a purely geographical notion of 'inside Britain, Europe, or North America', then it is merely uninformative. However, if it implies something more profound, such as a sharing of concepts significant to the conduct of anthropology in that area, then I believe that it is misleading. It is not necessary to leave the society in which one feels 'at home' in order to question the founding principles of that society, whilst, as McDonald has argued, it is possible to go to any distant society, only to return with fulfilled and unquestioned expectations. ('We now realise, I think, that some anthropology never left home, or never really returned with its home categories and values seriously challenged in any way other than that in which we expected them to be disturbed. We expected the natives to have lots of ritual, religion, kinship, metaphor, myth and meaning, and that is what we found' (McDonald 1987: 123).) I would prefer to emphasise Cohen's statement that, 'any mind beyond the ethnographer's own is Other and, therefore, requires to have interpretive work done on it' (1990: 205).

Whilst it no longer seems necessary to rail against exoticism within anthropology, it does appear that some societies remain more suitable subjects of anthropological enquiry than others. In particular, anthropology seems suited to understanding the most under-represented and least powerful societies. Part of the purpose of this study was to discover whether anthropology was equally well suited to characterising a Western, aristocratic elite. I feel that anthropology met this challenge, with the anticipated benefits to the relationship between fieldworker and informant. Shovelling muck at 6 a.m. one freezing morning, with a broken finger and a strapped ankle, covered in horse secretions of various sorts, I pondered my place in the scheme of things that was my fieldwork. I was shaken from my reverie by a loud blast from 'the boss': 'Rebecca! Get your anthropological arse out here!' As Ortner said of her high-school colleagues whom she made objects of study, 'it's healthy to be in this more symmetrical position vis-à-vis my informants. Nobody can accuse me of silencing *them*' (1995: 271).

Those who might feel that horseracing is too technical and specialised a world to comprehend from so short a piece of work have succumbed to the exact state of befuddlement that racing knowledge is intended to induce. No understanding of the handicap weighting system or the tongue-strap/blinkers controversy is

necessary in order to approach this book. I hope that it will become obvious that the technicalities of racing are strangely unfounded, and therefore that their significance lies less in what they enable an individual to *do* and more in the appearance of knowledge they communicate. This awareness is intended to help the reader to concentrate less on what they do not know about horseracing and more on what I can tell them about the people who have racing lives.

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Whilst I hope that the description of peoples, places and events is an accurate reflection of the period when I conducted my fieldwork, some changes will inevitably have taken place since 1996, and readers should not assume that what was, to the best of my ability, a true record at the time, is necessarily still so.