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978-0-521-09039-1 - Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology

J. A. Mangan

Excerpt

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Prologue

Five years after the Great War an aggressive pamphlet entitled *The Public Schools and Athleticism* appeared. It was a condemnation of the excessive interest in games in the schools by an obscure schoolmaster, J. H. Simpson.¹ It struck an unpleasantly discordant note amid applause which had begun some sixty years earlier and which, in an atmosphere of post-war nostalgia, had risen to a crescendo.

Simpson was more than a critic. He sought understanding as well as reformation. He asserted that games were an ostentatious and pervasive feature of the public school system, and argued that the study of this 'athleticism' was crucial to a comprehension of the system as a whole. Despite this observation there has been no close scrutiny of athleticism in the public schools.² This is a regrettable omission. The ideology strongly influenced the schools between 1860 and 1940; its widespread adoption had extensive educational and social repercussions. No history of the British public school and no record of British educational ideologies can be complete without a consideration of this controversial movement.

This book, therefore, is an attempt to rectify a longstanding omission. The intention is to trace the growth and consolidation of this once powerful ideology and to investigate the means by which it was created and sustained. But first, four problems must be resolved: what precisely is a public school, which schools are to be studied, what is the relevance of the term 'ideology' and finally, what exactly was athleticism?

There has never emerged an exact and universally acceptable definition of a public school.³ This is not for want of trying. A wide variety of writers have struggled with the problem.⁴ The definition adopted in this book is Vivian Ogilvie's since it combines clarity, comprehensiveness and qualification, and would meet with widespread understanding and acceptance. Ogilvie assures us that the

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principal characteristics of a public school are: it is for the well-to-do, expensive, predominantly boarding, independent of the state, but neither privately owned nor profit making. He points out, however, that there are illustrious public schools which fall out of line in one or other particular: these constitute exceptions within the general rule. The rule (in its full-blown form) 'is an independent, non-local, predominantly boarding school for the upper and middle classes'.⁵

The public schools so defined are diverse in origin, history and type. At least six important nineteenth-century groupings may be discerned. The most famous group was the 'Great Public Schools', the subject of a royal commission set up in 1861, the Public Schools Commission or Clarendon Commission (after the chairman, Lord Clarendon).⁶ The schools investigated were Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester, Shrewsbury, Charterhouse, Westminster, St Paul's and Merchant Taylors.⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century, the period of the great expansion of public school education, other groupings emerged or were consolidated. The most amorphous was the large group of Denominational Schools: Roman Catholic, such as Stonyhurst (1793), Ampleforth (1802), Ratcliffe (1847) and Beaumont (1861); Quaker, such as Sidcot (1808) and Bootham (1823); Methodist, such as Kingswood (1848), Leys (1875) and Ashville (1877); and other Protestant Nonconformist, such as Mill Hill (1808), Caterham (1811) and Bishop's Stortford (1868). All were formed to provide an alternative education to that provided by the schools of the Established Church following the reform of the Penal Laws in the late eighteenth century.

A further grouping was the Proprietary Schools. These were financed initially by shareholders who purchased the right, in consequence, to nominate pupils. Cheltenham was the first: 'There were 650 shares, each share entitling the holder to nominate one pupil (usually, of course, held by the parent). If the proprietors should fail to nominate pupils, then the governors could do so.'⁸ Other schools of this type include Marlborough (1843), Rossall (1844), Malvern (1865) and Dover College (1871).

Edward Thring became headmaster of Uppingham Grammar School in 1853. He transformed this small, unprepossessing local grammar school into an expensive national boarding school for the upper classes. A similar process of transformation occurred at several other institutions, including Sherborne, Tonbridge, Rep-

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ton, Giggleswick, St Bees and Sedbergh. These schools became known on this account as 'Elevated Grammar Schools'.

A little before Thring in Rutland raised Uppingham to the ranks of a school for the wealthy, Nathaniel Woodard in Sussex had embarked on a more ambitious project: a network of Anglican middle-class schools throughout England. Originally only one, Lancing College (1848), was intended as a school for the better-off, but ultimately this was to be the fate of them all. By the time of his death in 1891 there were six Woodard boys' public schools: Lancing (1848), Hurstpierpoint (1849), Ardingly (1858), Denstone (1868), King's College, Taunton (1880) and Ellesmere (1884).

Finally, there were a number of schools financed and owned by a single individual, usually the headmaster: the Private Venture Schools. One such school was Loretto, a small boarding school outside Edinburgh, founded in 1827 by the Rev. Dr Langhorne, an English curate of the Scottish Episcopal Church. In 1862 Loretto was purchased by Hely Hutchinson Almond who modelled it on the lines of an English public school. By the end of the century it had become a small but famous public school in his hands. Other schools of this type include Merchiston (1833), Radley (1847), Bradfield (1850), Bloxham (1860), Monkton Coombe (1868), Wrekin (1879), Wycliffe (1882), and Abbotsholme (1889).

The distinguished social scientist Robert Merton has written of two species of academic investigator: the 'European and the American'.⁹ The 'European' is preoccupied with interaction that should logically occur; the 'American' is concerned with relations that empirically exist. 'Europeans' interpret grandly from a short supply of material; 'Americans' interpret scantily from a mass of evidence. It is the possible weakness of the 'European' approach which concerns us here. A paucity of material, claims Merton, is no obstacle to the 'European' in his confident use of documents as indicators of extensively held views. Furthermore, the more often and the more emphatically a generalisation is aired, the greater the likelihood of its adopting the guise of a fact.

All this is relevant to historical studies of the English public school. Some recent works have been general in scope.¹⁰ In J. de S. Honey's study of the public school as a community, for example, the 'sampling universe' is the whole system. And the evidence accumulated is unavoidably fragmentary. All historical studies, of course, face the problem of incomplete records: the result of

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material lost through accident, indifference or calculation. Optimistically, all that can be done is to echo the words of one scrupulous social historian and state bluntly that we are dealing with intangible evidence which is difficult to assess; but that sifting this evidence is valuable and the general impressions obtained are worthwhile.¹¹ Yet the question still remains as to how representative such evidence is. Can it be effectively claimed, for example, that it was the adoption of the pastoral role of the assistant master which changed the master–pupil relationship in the public schools and to produce as evidence an original model for Mr Chips, an extract from the death speech of Potts of Fettes, an old boy's autobiography, *Stalky and Co.*, and details of the emergence of a small and esoteric society of pious assistant masters?¹² There is a strong temptation to ask: what of happenings in the many unmentioned schools?

These comments should not be taken as an attack on a distinguished historian of the public schools. The debt owed to him by subsequent inquirers is considerable. But there are real methodological problems to be confronted here. In a study of athleticism in the public schools what is the 'universe' to be? If it is to be the 'total universe' and all the public schools are to be investigated the problems are formidable. The quality of the sources for each school varies greatly. At the same time a detailed study of scores of schools would take many years. One possible remedy from the social sciences – a random sample – might leave out schools which played a leading role in the development of the ideology and this could result in vital historical omissions. It is clearly unsuitable.

However, an investigation of one school from each of the groupings discussed earlier – Great Public Schools, Denominational Schools, Proprietary Schools, Elevated Grammar Schools, Woodard Schools and Private Venture Schools – would provide a systematic analysis of the growth and consolidation of athleticism in a cross section of the public schools that would help avoid the excesses of Merton's 'European' academic. Such an approach, of course, precludes confident generalisations about the entire public school system. However, it assists the building up of systematic knowledge of a cumulative character;¹³ the detailed information gathered would provide material for future generalisations which would rely on substantial evidence rather than arbitrary selection; new or amended hypotheses could be offered on the basis of fresh material and weaknesses in earlier general studies could be revealed.

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But perhaps most important of all, this approach permits the study in depth of individual schools, allowing detailed investigation of *variation in interpretation* of ideological fashion which general commentators are careful to suggest occurred but, understandably, to which they can devote little space themselves;¹⁴ a variation attractively described by Bernard Darwin: ‘What are truisms at Rugby, are paradoxes at Harrow, and an Eton custom would prove a revelation at Marlborough.’¹⁵

This type of analysis has been called appropriately ‘intensive–comparative’.¹⁶ No methodological approach possesses all the advantages or escapes all the shortcomings. Any analytical scheme is partial. Some things are analysed, others unexplained. However, as we have already seen above, the intensive–comparative approach has the virtue of being complementary to the general survey. It serves it in a monitoring role; and provides it with source material. To fulfil this dual purpose this study of athleticism will break new ground. It will be intensive and comparative; the ‘total universe’ will be the public school system and British upper-class society between approximately 1850 and 1950 – the relevant years; the ‘sampling frame’ will consist of all the schools in existence in this period and the case-studies will be made up of a sample of schools from the several sets described above.

In 1905, about the time that athleticism was at its height and school athletic success was a noted asset in the scramble for status and pupils, the *Harmsworth Encyclopedia* published a list of the names of ‘the most famous’ public schools of the period. They were:

Bedford, King Edward’s School (Birmingham), Brighton, Charterhouse, Cheltenham, Christ’s Hospital, City of London, Clifton, Dulwich, Eton, Haileybury, Harrow, Lancing, the Leys, Malvern, Manchester Grammar School, Marlborough, Merchant Taylors, Mill Hill, Repton, Rossall, Rugby, St Paul’s, Sherborne, Shrewsbury, Stonyhurst, Tonbridge, Uppingham, Wellington, Westminster and Winchester, together with the Scottish schools Fettes, Glenalmond, and Loretto.¹⁷

This catalogue of the distinguished contains examples from the six groupings mentioned above, and will provide the sample for this book. The following schools will comprise the case-studies: Harrow (Great Public School), Stonyhurst (Denominational School), Marlborough (Proprietary School), Uppingham (Elevated Grammar School), Lancing (Woodard School) and Loretto (Private Venture School).¹⁸ These particular schools have been selected because of the richness of archive and secondary source material associated

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with them and because of the importance of certain of them (for example, Marlborough and Loretto) in the evolution of athleticism. In addition, they have been chosen because they are widely scattered throughout the United Kingdom and so offer the possibility of interesting evidence of variation in regional response to ideological diffusion, and quite independent ideological patterns in response to local factors.

Ideologies,¹⁹ it has been argued, are essentially the outcome of man's need for imposing intellectual order on the world.²⁰ Whatever their purpose a plethora of definitions exists. At the crudest level an ideology may be defined as a set of principles held by individuals or groups. At a more subtle level it may be regarded as a set of principles which determines action by providing a means of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable ideas. Even more expansively it is the whole complex of ideas and feelings linking the members of a group together with the means whereby these are established;²¹ it embraces not only what is believed but the means of ensuring belief. There are further definitions to be considered. Some have regarded ideologies as forms of deceit, as pseudo-principles, obscuring the real reasons for action.²² Others have considered that ideologies are simply value-judgements disguised as statements of fact to give them credibility.²³

These several definitions are all useful conceptual tools with which to explore athleticism as an ideology in the public schools.²⁴ One purpose of this study is to demonstrate that it embraced a complex of ideas and feelings deliberately and carefully created through ritual and symbol; that it was, on occasion, a form of 'pseudo-reasoning', a deliberate rationalisation for ambitions such as status and power; and that it constituted value-judgements masquerading as facts to reinforce commitment. There is no one simple meaning of ideology in the context of public school athleticism. The term is a conceptual alembic. To reinforce this critical point by employing a different metaphor: the meanings resemble the layers of an onion, one hides within another. A fact that must be consistently borne in mind in the ensuing chapters.

The concept of athleticism, of course, may also be variously interpreted.²⁵ The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines it in neutral and unsubtle terms as 'the practice of, and devotion to, athletic exercises'. In contrast two scholars, in the similarity of their interpretation,

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form a small, but sharp comminatory chorus with a large modern audience. In their view athleticism was a malign fashion. The most distinguished historian of the English public school saw athleticism in crude pathological terms: 'the late Victorian schools nurtured vices of their own. Probably the most important was the worship of the athlete with its attendant deification of success, and the mere physical virtue of courage';²⁶ and the most recent historian of British physical education has been no less harsh in his judgement: 'By athleticism is meant the exaltation and disproportionate regard for games which often resulted in the denigration of academic work and in anti-intellectualism'.²⁷

Edward Lyttelton, an observer of the ideology in action in the nineteenth century, took a more balanced view.²⁸ Athleticism had dangers: particularly distraction from intellectual pursuits. It also possessed advantages: the stimulation of health and happiness and good moral training. Lyttelton readily admitted athleticism was 'a training shackled by many an antiquated abuse and sadly marred by countless stupidities',²⁹ but he felt it played a valuable part in the education of the higher classes.

Cyril Norwood, early in the twentieth century, attempted to distinguish between 'over-athleticism' – the attachment of wrong values to games, and athleticism – 'part of the ideal of the English [educational] tradition'.³⁰ He saw the latter as the attempt to implant certain ideals of character and conduct through the games field: 'a game is to be played for the game's sake . . . no unfair advantage of any sort can ever be taken, [yet] . . . within the rules no mercy is to be expected, or accepted or shown by either side; the lesson to be learnt by each individual is the subordination of self in order that he may render his best service as the member of a team in which he relies upon all the rest; and all the rest rely upon him: . . . finally, never on any occasion must he show the white feather.' Norwood concluded: 'If games can be played in this spirit, they are a magnificent preparation for life.'³¹

Today it is fashionable and to a degree wise, to look askance at such a naive and frequently abused faith in the educational virtues of the playing fields as demonstrated by Norwood and his ilk; but at the same time it is as well to remember that we are reacting, possibly predictably, with extremism to extremism. It is perhaps salutary to recall that English education has embraced the belief in the efficacy of sport *inter alia* for character building since Tudor times.³²

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Lyttelton and Norwood remind us of a period truth. Athleticism was all its critics claim of it; yet it was more. The clichés of modern conventional judgement must be resisted; the validity of contemporary generalisations must be challenged. They owe much to fashion, less to impartiality. If athleticism often degenerated into the self-absorption of Caliban, it frequently aimed to effect the selflessness of Ariel. Apparently it was *sometimes* successful. According to Philip Mason, for example, the games-trained officers from the public schools won an engaging fidelity from the Indian soldier, for their selfless leadership. Mason borrowed a description from the philosopher George Santayana to depict this imperial elite at its best: ‘Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master.’ The reason, it appears, lay in a simple fact. ‘Hardy as Spartans and disciplined as Romans’ these masters carried the qualities they had learned on the games field into their military careers and led with boyishness, decision and courage.³³

Reality is occasionally attractive. By virtue of its obscenity, the ‘athleticism’ described by T. C. Worsley in *Flannelled Fool* does not have to be the entire truth for all public schools and public school boys. Mason may have access to an equally valid reality. And Ray, the decent games player in *Tell England*, might have had just as much substance in the flesh as Cayley, the brutal athlete in *The Harrovians*.³⁴ In a passage totally contradictory of his later outspoken attack on public school games cited above, even E. C. Mack discovered virtue in their imperial consequences. He argued that the training largely acquired on the games field was the basis of courage and group loyalty that created ‘responsible, honourable boys, willing to give their lives unquestionably to the preservation and expansion of Empire’,³⁵ and considered that if world conditions had remained as they were in 1870, there was much of substance in the argument that public schools were worthy institutions, admirably serving the interests of the upper classes. The empire and the public school boy’s contribution to it lasted beyond 1870. Mason’s valedictory embraced the Indian army of the twentieth century.

The purpose of this brief defence of athleticism is not to gloss over deficiencies but to strike unaccustomed balance; it is an attempt to break a lance in the interests of accuracy. The public schools’ considerable concern with games was not wholly vicious. It had nobility; it did reflect ‘love of the open air, of sport and pluck and fair play’.³⁶ To borrow (and slightly adapt) Robert Nisbet’s

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striking phrase, athleticism was ‘a neologism born of moral passion’³⁷ as well as a Simpsonian term of justifiable disparagement. Physical exercise was taken, considerably and compulsorily, in the sincere belief of many, however romantic, misplaced or myopic, that it was a highly effective means of inculcating valuable instrumental and impressive educational goals: physical and moral courage, loyalty and co-operation, the capacity to act fairly and take defeat well, the ability to both command and obey. These were the famous ingredients of character training which the public schools considered their pride and their prerogative.³⁸

The extract below supplies a period flavour of the once widespread educational certainty surrounding games in the public school system:

Many a lad who leaves an English public school disgracefully ignorant of the rudiments of useful knowledge, who can speak no language but his own, and writes that imperfectly, to whom the noble literature of his country and the stirring history of his forefathers are almost a sealed book, and who has devoted a great part of his time and nearly all his thoughts to athletic sports, yet brings away with him something beyond all price, a manly straightforward character, a scorn of lying and meanness, habits of obedience and command, and fearless courage. Thus equipped, he goes out into the world, and bears a man’s part in subduing the earth, ruling its wild folk, and building up the Empire; doing many things so well that it seems a thousand pities that he was not trained to do them better, and to face the problems of race, creed and government in distant corners of the Empire with a more instructed mind. This type of citizen, however, with all his defects, has done yeoman’s service to the Empire; and for much that is best in him our public schools may fairly take credit.³⁹

The situation is clear from this and similar pronouncements. For many in the Victorian and Edwardian public schools, games became ‘the wheel round which the moral values turned’.⁴⁰ It was a genuinely and extensively held belief that they inspired virtue; they developed manliness; they formed character. At the same time there were certainly casuists who used moral argument as a cover for simple pleasure. There were also opportunists, especially housemasters, who saw the value of games in terms of control and publicity.

The truth of the matter is that the ideology involved virtuousness, indulgence and expedience; it embraced idealism, casuistry and opportunism. It was, in fact, a complex manifestation. And as we shall now see, its origins were equally complex.

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Part I

The growth of the ideology