

Reviewed by Michael Smith, University of Alberta

The Origins of Modern Sports, 1820–1840 is the second volume of a series detailing the beginnings of modern sports through documents. In the preface, editor Larry K. Menna recounts the problems of organizing the various activities for this volume. First, the years under consideration were problematic: Some sports were in the pre-modern stage, others—such as curling—were beginning to modernize, and still other pastimes would vanish from the modern scene. A second problem Menna faced was defining sport. In this volume he has used—quite rightly—a broad definition. Thus, there are excerpts and examples from deer hunting to gymnastics to boxing and regattas. In addition, Menna has gone a step beyond and included material on the development of sport journalism and on the interconnection between health and physical activity, two important considerations in these two decades and beyond.

Each chapter has a brief introduction that situates an activity into the cultural milieu. Even more important is the excellent introduction to the volume. In four and one-half pages Menna sets the stage for the documentation. He has skillfully woven the diverse strands of early nineteenth-century society into a brief but comprehensive discussion of sport’s development and the class, gender, ethnic, and cultural issues of the day. Overall, this is a stunning volume, not only documenting the transformation of sport and physical activity but also shedding light on the social and cultural issues of the era.

Having said this, there are a few problems with the volume. As a historian, I find the Canadian content sparse. True, the editor has included some choice documents about Canadian sport, but given that sport was no less prevalent in British North America, the editor could have included much more without significantly reducing the importance of major American cities. Of course, the historiography of Canadian sporting activities is less developed, especially in the pre-Confederation era, but perhaps Menna could have scanned a major Canadian newspaper for sport coverage. The bibliography suggests that Menna relied too much on what are now
outdated Canadian secondary sources. No material from the Atlantic region of Canada has been included. In fact, the index does not discriminate between Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Halifax, North Carolina. Omitting from the document section a list of sporting activities in Saint John, New Brunswick, Saint John’s, Newfoundland, and Halifax, Nova Scotia (save the one fleeting mention of the latter) is problematic. These areas were not only the first populated but also in this period, easily competitive with Canada East and Canada West for sporting action. Saint John’s is the site of the oldest organized sporting event, the annual regatta on Quidi Vidi Lake that began in 1829. Rowing contests date even earlier. Rather than the elite sport that Menna documents, rowing was also enjoyed by loggers, laborers, and fishermen, who would race on the rivers and bays of the region. Halifax was a major military post so its residents were well accustomed to British sports such as cricket. Rivalry between Saint John and Halifax went beyond the economic level to the cultural level as sporting contests and races raged between them. The omission of the eastern region is unfortunate. This is a problem, however, to which many Canadian historians contribute. An examination of the various reviews in the journal, Acadiensis, demonstrates the centralist vision in many Canadian monographs and texts. This valuable book would have been more useful had all of settled North America been included.

Documents in this volume discuss animal sports, aquatics, ball sports and games, boxing, equestrian events, field sports, gymnastics, pedestrianism, and winter sports. The selection of various articles generally is well done with only a few exceptions. Although the chapter on winter sports seems skimpy, the section on sport journalism is perhaps excessive. The gymnastics chapter only contains a section from William Fuller’s Elements of Gymnastics and Carl Beck’s translation of F.L. Jahn’s Treatise on Gymnastics, although a different section on changing attitudes to health has several articles that pertain to exercise routines.

Most of Menna’s editing is judicious, but why did he include the scoring of a 1838 Brooklyn cricket game (142-44)? Surely anyone researching the topic would examine the source material; most readers will not need a two-page listing of names and scores. While Menna has tried to discuss gender issues in the introduction and in the preface to the chapters, except for calisthenics, there is little reference to women throughout the book.

This reviewer also finds the index awkward. Rather than a general index, there are four: names, subjects, institutions, and geographic and place names. That format works fine as far as it goes, but it is very difficult at times to find specific articles without working through one or more chapters. The table of contents also causes the same problem. Often the title of a section is meaningless. For example, in the chapter on sport journalism, one article is entitled “To our Friends,” another, “To our Friends and Patrons.” While perhaps the exact titles, they are meaningless to the reader.