

BOOK REVIEW

A Crucible of Modern Sport: The early development of football in Sheffield

Author: Graham Curry (Tuxford Academy, Nottinghamshire, UK)

History is very rarely clear cut, linear or precise and, although modern society has developed a seeming obsession with understanding origins and beginnings, uncovering the specific moment in time that a sporting pursuit was created is a near impossible task. Matthew Taylor has described how 'determining a precise moment of origin for a sport is a difficult, some might say futile, endeavour' and that 'few sports were 'born' or 'invented' at a specific historical moment that can be clearly identified and accepted by all'.¹

It can safely be stated that this assertion will resonate with academics, historians and researchers who have focused on exploring the emergence of association football in Britain.

Over the past three decades the so-called 'origins of football debate' has dominated the discourse for those of us that have been examining the historiography of football in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, despite a wealth of research, academics have failed to reach a consensus regarding how the association game was born with the emergence of two contrasting, competing narratives referred to as the 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' positions. Those supporting either of the two paradigms have become entrenched on opposite sides of the debate and there has been little agreement or progress despite a rigorous academic back-and-forth.

However, there has been a growing acknowledgement that one arching paradigm may not hold the overall solution as to how association football developed in Britain. How the game emerged in one town, city or county may not necessarily be reflective of how the game developed elsewhere which has led to prominent figures in the debate, particularly Graham Curry² and Garry James³, calling for academics to engage in more regional studies.

Curry has been one of the most prominent figures within the origins of football debate and has sought to provide opportunities for productive dialogue between advocates of the two paradigms by facilitating academic publications which include contributions from all sides, as exemplified when he edited a special issue of *Soccer and Society* focusing on the emergence of the game. He himself has been an ardent supporter of the 'orthodox' paradigm and has been at the centre of continuing, rigorous academic discussions and critiques with 'revisionists'.

His latest contribution to the debate comes in the form of *A crucible of modern sport: The early development of football in Sheffield*. Those who have looked into the historiography of the football during the nineteenth century will be aware of the key role that the region played in the development of the game in Britain and Curry's offering is a localised study that examines of what he considers to be the earliest football subculture.

A crucible of modern sport provides a clear, concise narrative describing how the game emerged in the region by smoothly weaving together existing research with new, original data. Curry examines the emergence of what he describes as 'club football', with a particular emphasis on examining the origins and development of the earliest teams in the region, before going on to discuss relevant themes such as professionalism, the introduction of cup competitions, spectator behaviour and how Sheffield influenced the game on a national level. His expertise in the field is demonstrated by the clarity of his arguments which are underlined by in-depth, meticulous research.

Curry also utilises sociological theories to further analyse the development of football in Sheffield through the the work of Norbert Elias and the ideas engrained in figurational sociology. The concept of power is central to how *A crucible of modern sport* explains the diffusion of the game and the ultimate conclusion that it was the elite members of society in the city that had the greatest bearing on the creation of a football subculture. Although Curry accepts that the existence of a form of mob or folk football encouraged the initially establishment of the game in the region he suggests that it was the presence of what he terms the 'sporting elite', locally educated and of a prestigious social standing, that had a greater influence on the introduction of rules and organisation of football in Sheffield.

The very nature of the 'origins of football' debate will mean that many of the findings, analysis and conclusions made within *A crucible of modern sport* will be heavily critiqued. Curry has long been the most prominent figure at the head of the 'orthodox' paradigm and, unsurprisingly, his book provides a narrative that is underpinned by concepts that support that view. His interpretation of how the game emerged and develop in Sheffield, particularly the emphasis he places on the importance of the elite of society, will significantly differ to a 'revisionist' perception.

Overall, *A crucible of modern sport* provides a comprehensive narrative and sociological analysis of how the association game emerged in Sheffield and it will act as another regional study that will enhance our understanding of how the game developed nationally. However, as with any contribution made to the 'origins of football' debate, this text will provoke and facilitated further discourse regarding the 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' positions as academics, historians and researchers continue on that 'difficult, some might say futile, endeavour' of explaining how the association game was 'born'.⁴

Martyn D. Cooke

Manchester Metropolitan University, Department of Exercise and Sport Science, International Sport & Leisure History Research Team

¹ Matthew Taylor, *The Association Game: A History of British Football* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 20.

² Graham Curry, 'Introduction: Towards a Deeper Understanding of the Development of Early Football', *Soccer & Society* 19, no.1 (2018): 1-4.

³ Gary James, 'Historical Frameworks and Sporting Research', *The International Journal of Sport History* 33 no.10 (2016): 1169-1187.

⁴ Taylor, *The Association Game*, 20.