A revolution obscured

In 1838 William Howitt observed that “a mighty revolution” was occurring “in the sports and pastimes of the common people.” For Howitt, that “revolution” primarily entailed the loss of traditional recreations at the hands of reformers and urban necessity. Little could he foresee that a growth in the quantity of time free from work, and new modes of recreation as well as new patterns of spending on recreational diversions, would prompt future historians “to take the view that there was in Victorian England a virtual ‘leisure revolution.’ ” That overview was in the distant future.

Pioneer historians of the Industrial Revolution fixed their attention on machines, factories, investments, transportation, demographic change, problems of housing and food supply, and questions of hours and conditions of work.

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Industrialized man lived by bread alone, or so it seemed. *Homo faber*, not *homo ludens*, reigned supreme in the minds of economic historians of the Industrial Revolution.³ Their offspring in the mid-'60s, the urban historians, initially did little to change the focus. In *Victorian Cities* (1965), Asa Briggs totally ignored leisure, recreation, and sport except for a brief reference to “the general interest in sport among all sections of the population” of Melbourne, Australia, which Briggs deemed altogether different from English cities.⁴ In 1966 H. J. Dyos outlined an “Agenda for Urban Historians” to the first international conference of the new Urban History Group, but omitted any reference to leisure activities.⁵ As late as 1973, a massive two-volume assessment of *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, edited by Dyos and Michael Wolff, added urban religion, politics, and the plight of the poor to the customary topics of statistical growth, demographic patterns, physical facilities, and transport systems, but devoted not a single paragraph to leisure.⁶

Some social historians, of course, have not been quite so oblivious to the leisure question. As a part of their grim picture of early Victorian towns, the Hammonds dealt with the loss of playgrounds to enclosures, industrial development, and urban sprawl.⁷ In his classic study of *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson chronicled the suppression of customary plebian amusements and festivals, a movement that was based on moral arguments as well as urban expediency.⁸ But for Thompson and the Hammonds, as for most historians of nineteenth-century England, the Victorians were primarily political animals eager to seize (or retain) and wield power; or they were crusading, serious-minded participants in movements for political, ideological, or humanitarian ends. Playful they were not.

Even Johan Huizinga, the most articulate of all apologists for “the play element in culture,” was of the opinion that the nineteenth century left “little room for play”: “Work and production became the ideal, and then the idol, of the age. All Europe donned the boiler-suit. Henceforth the dominants of civilization were to be social consciousness, educational aspirations, and scientific judgement.” According to Huizinga, all “the great currents” of nineteenth century thought were “inimical to the play-factor in social life”: “Neither liberalism nor socialism offered it any nourishment. Experimental and analytical science, philosophy, reformism, Church and State, economics were all pursued in deadly earnest in the 19th century. . . . Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness.”⁹

At first glance, Huizinga’s description seems perfectly phrased for Victorian England. A puritan heritage overlaid with utilitarianism made “seriousness,” “industry,” and “work” holy words in the lexicon of the Victorian middle class.¹⁰ “The night cometh when no man can work” was a favorite text of social pundits as well as pulpit orators. “Work is the mission of man in this Earth,” intoned Thomas Carlyle in 1839. “A day is ever struggling forward,
a day will arrive in some approximate degree, when he who has no work to
do, by whatever name he may be named, will not find it good to show himself
in our quarter of the Solar System; but may go and look elsewhere, if there be
any Idle Planet discoverable.”¹¹ In the same vein (though in less eccentric
prose), Samuel Smiles’ highly popular treatise on Self-Help (1959) connected
industry and energy to “uprightness” and success; idleness was the bedfellow
of “selfishness and vice.”¹²

Scarcely idle, eminent Victorian reformers, authors, politicians, and scientists
exemplified the virtues of hard work. Alongside the saints of earnestness
chronicled by the facile Lytton Strachey,¹³ one might well place John Henry
Newman, who turned out reams of prose in the service of Mother Church;
Charles Dickens, whose energies went into amateur theatricals and platform
readings as well as numerous massive novels; W.E. Gladstone, not only the
most vigorous Prime Minister in English history but also a moral reformer, a
prolific essayist, a self-appointed theologian, and an inveterate letter-writer;
and T. H. Huxley, who tirelessly defended Darwin, pursued his own research,
and still found time to champion popular causes. With such high achievers as
role models, it is little wonder that when economic prosperity and a growing
army of “downstairs” servants provided the Victorian middle class with time
to spare for pleasant diversions, they found leisure to be a “problem” as well
as a blessing.¹⁴ As the Saturday Review observed in 1866, those respectable
folk “trained to habits of order and punctuality, and the most scrupulous em-
ployments of every moment” were ill-equipped to deal with “the easy care-
less attitude’’ of a leisured society.¹⁵

The aristocracy had no problem with leisure. Long before Veblen cast his crit-
cical eye on the “conspicuous consumption” of rich Americans,¹⁶ the English
aristocracy were “the leisureed class par excellence.”¹⁷ Their privileged
position admittedly entailed responsibilities, not the least of which was in lo-
cal and national politics. But even the political activity of the aristocracy was
more play than work, more given to clubbish conviviality than to laborious
chores. Leisure was their birthright. To Brighton and Bath they went in the
nineteenth century to find pleasure in the company of their own kind. Their
seaside fun and games never fail to attract historians interested in the elites of
English society.¹⁸ For more ordinary leisure fare, however, aristocrats fol-
lowed the hoof-beats of their ancestors hunting foxes in the fields and attend-
ing races at the track. The best of several recent studies of these activities are
Raymond Carr’s history of fox hunting and Wray Lamplew’s social and
economic chronicle of horse racing.¹⁹

The cutting edge of leisure research, however, lies not with the aristocracy.
Concerned with change, historians naturally gravitate towards those historical
scenes and groups who represent departures from the past. The Victorian ar-
istocracy was not, of course, inflexibly fixed in their traditional patterns of
wealth, status, and leisure. But their alterations were relatively minimal, more on the order of evolutionary than revolutionary change.20 Far more dramatic was the process by which the Victorian masses—middle class as well as working class folk—had their attitudes and life styles turned upside down. Within the past few years the leisure revolution of which they were the central figures has finally attracted the attention of historians, producing some thoroughly researched and analytically sophisticated assessments of Victorian men and women at play as well as at work, seeking not only economic stability, political representation, and social mobility, but also amusement.

THE GREAT TRANSITION

The Victorian leisure revolution makes little sense without some acquaintance with the ancien regime of popular culture in Britain, and its “modernization” under the impetus of the Industrial Revolution. As industrialism and urban growth began eroding traditional patterns of rural life, early in the nineteenth century antiquarians set to work recording age-old customs and amusements. Joseph Strutt is undoubtedly the most famous of all those collectors,21 but other antiquarians of his day were similarly diligent and exhaustive in recording traditional British pastimes.22 Following in their train, modern amateur historians such as Christina Hole, Norman Wymer, and John Armitage make much of pre-industrial sports and pastimes.23 Nor have scholars trained for the task relinquished the field to popularizers. Isolated articles in out-of-the-way journals and compendiums deal with subjects as diverse as medieval Sunday amusements, ancient plough festivals, Stuart and Georgian sports, and eighteenth-century popular festivals.24

Their diversity of subjects and quality notwithstanding, these studies shared a common limitation. Lacking an analytical framework, they all failed to relate play to the staple of pre-industrial life, village work. To this problem an Oxford historian, Keith Thomas, turned his attention in 1964, in an article on “Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society” published in Past & Present. Employing anthropology in the service of history, Thomas observed that primitive work and leisure were indistinguishable. Both were collective activities; both mixed pleasure and utility. No clock called a halt to one in order for the other to begin. Before the Industrial Revolution, time was measured in terms of seasons, not hours. Rural English and European communities traditionally enjoyed wakes and ales, sports and games, during slack seasons in the agrarian cycle. But even work itself featured competition, sociability, and delight, characteristics now associated primarily with leisure and sport.25

Distant echoes of the pre-industrial mixture of work and play fill Dennis Brailsford’s Sport and Society: Elizabeth to Anne (1969). Though Brailsford was more concerned with theories of physical education than with popular practices, his treatment of Puritan assaults on traditional sports and games
brought him into the field of mass recreational activities. For a more exhaustive survey of that field, R.W. Malcolmson collected a large bundle of documentation for a doctoral thesis supervised by E.P. Thompson at the University of Warwick, then turned it into a most important book entitled *Popular Recreation in English Society 1700-1850*. From a bevy of ephemeral literature, local newspapers, old journals, parliamentary reports, and manuscript diaries and notes, Malcolmson reconstructed the life and death of traditional plebeian leisure.

Despite Puritan assaults in Elizabethan and Stuart England, the recreational culture of villagers survived and thrived. Parish feasts, festive fairs, blood sports, and athletic contests were all deeply rooted in that traditional society whose tempo of work and play revolved around ancient religious holidays such as Shrovetide, Easter, May Day, Whitsuntide, and Christmas. Yet the Church was peripherally involved with play. Good business sense prompted local publicans to organize card games, skittles, bowls, and quoits games; animal-baitings, cockfights, and dances; and cudgelling, wrestling, cricket, and football matches. Country gentlemen customarily patronized such activities, often paying for the food and drink to celebrate the end of sheep-shearing and agricultural harvests, local weddings and baptisms, and national events such as elections, coronations, royal birthdays, military victories, and declarations of peace following wars.

Though the rural gentry shared many of the plebeian appetites for rustic pleasures, their patronage of leisure activities was also a form of self-interest. Plebeian amusements served as a safety valve for personal and social hostilities; they also fostered a sense of rural cohesion between the masters and the masses, and thus were a form of paternalistic social control. “Popular diversions were not simply ephemera in a play-world of little consequence; they were fundamental social activities which were inseparable from the full range of social reality.”

During the second half of the eighteenth century, however, radical social change undermined traditional amusements. In large measure the fundamental causes were economic and demographic. The enclosure movement, a process that had begun centuries earlier, continued to withdraw open fields and village greens from public recreational use; the growth of cities not only eliminated playing space but also removed rural folk from the context of customary holidays and rights. All the while, the concern for effective labor discipline which had originated within the ranks of “improving” agricultural landlords made a quick and easy transition to the urban captains of industry. The Evangelical movement, promoting morality and propriety, nailed the lid on the coffin of traditional rustic pleasures.

Old blood sports, especially, fell under the reformers’ hammer. From 1800 to
1835 Parliament debated eleven bills on cruelty to animals, and in 1835 finally passed a Cruelty to Animals Act proscribing bear-baiting, bull-running, cockfights, and the like. Football, too, momentarily became a thing of the past for mass participation. Concerned with law and order, property, and social propriety, urban authorities banned football from the narrow streets of towns. Ironically, while “the people’s game” became prohibited to the masses, public school boys took it over and adapted it to their cloisters and playing fields.30

Recreational opportunities in the early industrial cities and towns were, in brief, few. Moral prohibitions on the old pleasures were severe. Open space was at a premium. For a period, time free from work to choose one’s own diversions was virtually non-existent. “In the new world of congested cities, factory discipline, and free enterprise,” Malcolmson concluded, “recreational life had to be reconstructed—shaped to accord with the novel conditions of non-agrarian, capitalistic society—and the reconstruction was only gradually accomplished over a period of several generations.31

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LEISURE

Three recent monographs chart the Victorian reconstruction of leisure. First in order of publication, H.E. Meller’s Leisure and the Changing City, 1870-1914 focuses on the city of Bristol and its middle-class citizenry who responded in “a specific, self-conscious way” to the new challenges of urban life “by providing leisure and cultural facilities.”32 Scarcely was the ink of Meller’s book dry before John Lowerson and John Myerscough came forth with a most readable but serious treatment of Time to Spare in Victorian England, a book based on a series of broadcasts for B.B.C. Radio Brighton, with evidence drawn largely from the county of Sussex. Finally, Peter Bailey’s Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885 is a detailed, closely-reasoned assessment of the transformation of both middle-class and working-class leisure patterns, with specific reference to the case of Bolton, a new industrial town in Lancashire.33

Despite their distinct styles, emphases, and time frames, these three books have several common features. All three are “historical” rather than antiquarian: they deal with contexts and connections, change and continuity. Each focuses on a particular city or locale, drawing generalizations from specific cases. And all three bring a present stock-in-trade of the historian’s craft, the concept of “social control,” to the subject of Victorian leisure.34 For Meller leisure was a part of “the social question” to which Bristol’s philanthropists and religionists responded with a “civilizing mission” to the poor.35 “The problem of the Victorian ‘leisure revolution,’” according to Lowerson and Myerscough, “was not the modern nightmare of an abyss of empty hours impossible to fill, but rather the difficulty of ensuring the proper exercise of
moral responsibility in developing activities to occupy this free time.” As Bailey’s subtitle suggests, he is even more convinced that “leisure was one of the major frontiers of social change in the nineteenth century, and like most frontiers it was disputed territory.” For the Victorian middle class, leisure was an issue clouded with self-doubt on the one hand, social anxiety on the other. “Viewed from above, leisure constituted a problem whose solution required the building of a new social conformity—a play discipline to complement the work discipline that was the principal means of social control in an industrial capitalist society.”

While legal prohibitions and practical barriers of time and space curtailed outdoor amusements, old diversions died slowly in the minds and appetites of plebeian rural folk recently come to town. For overworked, poorly paid, and miserably housed industrial workers, the tavern or pub provided convivial company, familiar indoor games, and drink to drown their sorrows. A moralistic temperance movement was one of the earliest and longest-lasting attempts of the Victorian middle class to curb the supposed indulgence of industrial laborers. As alternatives to the tavern, temperance reformers sought to provide “rational recreations” in the form of cheap concerts, public lectures, railway excursions, countryside walking expeditions, and coffee music halls.

The voice of “improvement” was everywhere to be heard in mid-nineteenth century England. As the leisure frontier first expanded far more for the middle class than for the laboring masses, light entertainment such as music, novel-reading, and parlor games joined edification to domestic enjoyment. Vacations at the seaside refreshed serious-minded Victorians “for the business of life”: business. Well-groomed suburban lawns not only provided outdoor recreational opportunity but also served as badges of affluence for status-conscious folk for whom croquet parties became popular in the ’60’s, and lawn tennis in the ’70’s.

The most common mid-Victorian combination of self-improvement and entertainment was to be found in the packed lecture halls of every town and city. Travellers, novelists, scientists, and even controversial phrenologists and mesmerists titillated their audiences with sugar-coated information. Alpine climbers were especially popular as lecturers. Exotic and informative, they also represented the more vigorous world of mid-Victorian outdoor sports and games such as athletic meets, Volunteer gatherings, and cricket matches (not to mention the various forms of football at the public schools), all contributing to the cult of health and masculinity recently portrayed in Bruce Haley’s The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture.

Until the last quarter of the century, the laboring classes had little time, money, physical mobility, or space to engage in—or even vicariously to en-
joy—such activities. Except for lectures, “penny readings,” and occasional excursions paternalistically provided by temperance or religious organizations, working-class leisure was confined to male-dominated pubs and working men’s clubs. Between 1850 and 1875, however, several social and technological innovations facilitated a new pattern of leisure for the masses. Industrial legislation and trade union activism reduced the work week, resulting in a Saturday half-holiday for many workers. All the while wages rose steadily, and newly efficient and cheap means of intracity transport allowed laborers to leave their ghettos for places of leisure. Moreover, a park and playground movement—originating in both municipal and private initiative—provided space previously unavailable for urban relaxation and play. As one might expect, a burgeoning cheap press reflected and expanded the range of new mass interest in leisure activities.

Yet these changes merely created the context for mass leisure; they did not determine its character. Similar factors in post-Civil War America and pre-World War I France produced altogether different patterns of leisure, patterns consistent with unique American and French histories, demographies, and social structures. Unlike their transatlantic counterparts, late-Victorian Britons were the inheritors of a complex blend of paternalism and competitive enterprise, of authoritative class assumptions as well as individual rights. Unlike their continental contemporaries, they possessed a rich heritage of sports and games. Within the leisure boom in late-nineteenth century Britain, discordant elements jostled against each other. Social emulation existed alongside social exclusiveness; amateur athleticism flourished, as did commercial professionalism.

THE LEISURE INDUSTRY

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Victorian leisure entered a “take-off” period analogous to an earlier economic expansionist phase of the Industrial Revolution. The analogy is peculiarly fitting, for (in Bailey’s words) “the broadening impact of technology and the quickening of commercialization constituted the forces” that most profoundly altered leisure and popular culture of the period. A composite study of technological innovations pertaining to the leisure industry has yet to be written. At the moment one is dependent on scattered references in histories of individual topics for information on the various means of city transport; improved printing press equipment and techniques, and the journalistic use of the newly-invented typewriter; sewing machines that produced uniforms and equipment; pneumatic tires for bicycles; the application of new techniques of rubber-making to golf balls and inflatable footballs; and the use of steel for bicycle frames, golf-shafts, and (more importantly) for the construction of stadia.

Like the technology of leisure, the commercial enterprise underlying the late-
Victorian leisure industry is a field scarcely explored. Bailey notes “the smell of big money” in the music hall business that prompted publicans to invest capital they had accumulated in sports promotion and the food and drink catering business, only to be superseded in the 1890’s by “the theatrical capitalist and his accountant.” Bailey also reasonably conjectures on the wealth, social status, and motivations of football club owners but the subject needs much more documentation and analysis of the kind provided by Charles P. Korr in a recent article in the *Journal of Contemporary History.* Korr used West Ham United’s club records, minutes of board meetings, and press releases to elucidate the entrepreneurial foundations of the professional game in the East End of London. The “football mania” in late-Victorian England was a matter of business management as well as spontaneous enthusiasm.

The mania was nevertheless real. Further knowledge of the inner economic workings of the game will not alter the well-established fact that professional soccer football became the most highly popular of all spectator sports for the late-nineteenth century working class. Bailey’s chapter on “Rational Recreation and the New Athleticism” (pp. 124-46), Lowerson and Myerscough’s on “Fields of Play” (pp. 115-29), and Meller’s section on “The Pursuit of Organized Sport” (pp. 225-36) all place football at the center of a sports scene that included Rugby, bicycling, tennis, archery, cricket, track-and-field athletics, and gymnastics. Most of these organized sports were socially exclusive pursuits of the middle class; football was the one game in which the working class dominated both field and spectators’ terraces.

The indoor equivalent was the highly-popular music hall. Having evolved from singing saloons featuring amateur performers, the music halls by the 1880’s were a thoroughly commercial form of entertainment. Highly paid stars, agents, and promoters fully exploited the leisure market, appealing primarily to a working-class clientele but also attracting students, journalists, clerks and artisans. The atmosphere was relaxed and gregarious; the skits were often lewd, the music inane, and the drink abundant. Such an enterprise could scarcely avoid opposition from “respectable” temperance types, but in provincial towns as well in London, the music hall thrived as a “prototype modern entertainment industry.”

As a corrective to the tendency to view the late-Victorian leisure industry solely in commercial terms, Meller’s description of the changing role of the Bristol YMCA is instructive. By the 1870’s the old religious, evangelical emphasis of the YMCA was losing its appeal. Sport replaced religion in attracting new members. In 1879 the Bristol YMCA built a gymnasium, and within the year membership almost doubled—largely because of the gym facilities. In 1883 the Bristol YMCA opened branches in several nearby towns, all sponsoring swimming and cross country events as well as cricket, football, and field hockey teams. The old self-improvement aspects of the YMCA survived
in the form of choral and dramatic societies, vocational training courses in shorthand and typing, and occasional religious meetings conducted by evangelistic ministers. But far more appealing to the masses were the sport and physical activity programs, and the YMCA-sponsored holiday tours that began in the 1890’s.\(^{56}\)

The changing role of the YMCA illustrates the transformation of social attitudes as well as leisure activities in late-Victorian England. “Much of the guilt was being taken out of fun,” in the well-chosen words of Lowerson and Myerscough. “Few now regarded free time solely as a standing invitation to vice. After the 1880’s many of the interested parties were prepared to leave improvement in the hands of the State educational system, which was already supreceding some of the functions of the voluntary improvement institutions.”\(^{57}\) “Though the debate on leisure was far from extinguished,” Bailey concludes, “society was coming to terms with its modern role.”\(^{58}\)

For our understanding of leisure in the modern world, the Victorian story is crucial. As Lowerson and Myerscough suggest, “the roots of our own recreational practices and beliefs about leisure” lie in the nineteenth century.\(^ {59}\) Yet a comprehensive history of Victorian leisure is still to be written. Meller’s monograph starts too late in the period; Bailey’s stops too soon. Meller confines her vision to Bristol; Lowerson and Myerscough largely focus on Sussex, and Bailey less narrowly on Bolton. One must nevertheless quibble with Bailey’s lament that “a comprehensive leisure history of the period” is “a long way off.”\(^ {60}\) Because of the quality of craftsmanship and the interest represented in the work of Meller, Lowerson and Myerscough, and Bailey himself, surely a full and decisive history of Victorian leisure is not far in the future. Clio has just cleared his preliminary heats; now comes the \textit{finale}.\(^ {61}\)

\section*{Notes}

21. Strutt’s Glig-Gamena Angel-Deod; or, the Sports and Pastimes of the People of England (London, 1801) was enlarged by William Hone and brought out in new editions in 1830, 1841, and 1875; revised and enlarged by J. Charles Cox in 1903 (London: Methuen), and reprinted yet again by Gale Publishers in 1967.
29. Harold J. Perkins refers to a “moral revolution” during the first half of the nineteenth century when England “ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, riotous, cruel and blood-thirsty nations in the world and became one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tenderminded, prudish and hypocritical”: Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 280.
31. Malcolmson, Popular Recreations, p. 171.


36. Lowerson and Myerscough [hereafter merely Lowerson], *Time to Spare*, p. 16.


45. Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, pp. 80-82. Neither the park and playground movement nor the emergence of the new sporting press have yet received adequate attention from historians.


49. Ibid., pp. 148-52.

50. Ibid., p. 143.


