POPULAR RECREATIONS IN ENGLISH SOCIETY 1700-1850

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Robert W. Malcolmson's

Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850:
An Appreciation

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It is now thirty years since the publication of Robert Malcolmson’s *Popular Recreations in English Society*, thirty years that have seen wholesale expansion and development of the field of scholarly endeavor that the work helped establish.¹ The influence of *PRES* extends well beyond the temporal and geographic parameters within which it was framed. Judged the "definitive study" of eighteenth-century popular recreation, the book was an early representative of the hugely influential Thompsonian approach to history that had its institutional base at the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick.² Malcolmson wrote his doctoral dissertation at Warwick under the supervision of E. P. Thompson and in the company of a number of other graduate students who have since gone on to make their mark in social history. *PRES*, originally that dissertation, reminded scholars of the eighteenth century of the value of studying the neglected culture of laboring people, established as a central thesis of the literature on English leisure the transformational effect of industrialization, and offered a richly empirical model of the "new" social history.³

**Facing page:** The title page with illustration of the original 1973 Cambridge publication of Malcolmson’s *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850.*
My appreciation of *PRES* is of a piece with my indebtedness to the political movement and social sensibility in which it is grounded. The leftist ideological underpinnings of histories such as this, that infuriate those of a conservative or centrist bent and even seem to irk otherwise sympathetic readers, supported late-twentieth century reforms in English education and academia from which I, and many others of my class, benefited enormously. The post-World War II democratization of higher education made possible what had not been possible before—the entry of working people to the nation's universities and colleges and thus to worlds of other possibilities. The extension of serious scholarly interest to lower class culture that *PRES* signaled validated the importance and worth of something that so often was (and, it has to be said, so often continues to be) disdained and dismissed.3

So what follows is an appreciation of *PRES* as much in the sense of an expression of the regard that one member of an historically "underdog" class has for the political sentiments that inspired the book, as in the sense of a consideration of its scholarly contribution.6

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The central argument of *PRES* is that prior to the late eighteenth century, the laboring people of England enjoyed a rich, vital recreational culture that was enmeshed with and derived its meaning from the economic and social patterns of rural, localized, "pre-industrial" life. Structured around the seasonal and church calendar and the cycles of task-oriented labor, this culture expressed and sustained relationships within and among the lower classes and between them and their "betters." The patterned, customary rituals of recreation permitted a contained, sanctioned breaking of social codes and taboos, a carnavalesque disruption and, consequently, maintenance of the normal order. Vigorous athletic sports allowed plebeian men to contest their worth, to rough up their rivals, and to bond with and bind themselves to their brothers. Village fairs and parish wakes were occasions for everyone to dress up in their finery and to feast, drink, and dance away from the mundane. Until the late 1700s, this culture enjoyed the sanction and often the material support and active patronage of the gentry with whose own recreational interests it accorded and whose political interests it served. But from the 1770s, accord crumbled before a rising tide of reformism, moral earnestness and urban industrial-capitalism. Increasingly, the upper and evermore influential middle classes policed, licensed, and suppressed plebeian amusements to such an extent that "sports and pastimes and festive occasions which had been widespread in 1750 were, by 1850 in many localities, either of negligible significance or obviously on the wane" (p. 89).

What William Howitt characterized as a "mighty revolution" by the early Victorian period, Malcolmson determines had turned to waste the popular recreational culture of pre-industrial England, leaving a "vacuum which would be only gradually reoccupied." That process of the remaking of a popular leisure culture, one that was "of necessity . . . novel or radically revamped," would not unfold until after 1850 (p. 170).

Malcolmson lays out an impressive accumulation of documentary evidence in support of this proposition, material scoured from archives, the periodical press, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, and the voluminous writings of antiquarians. This is no mean feat
for, as he observes in his introduction, the very ordinariness of popular pastimes, even of the main seasonal holidays and festivals, meant that they passed largely without registering in the historical record. "The experiences of the common people," Malcolmson reminds us, "were not usually subjects worthy of notice" by those who wrote that record (p. 2). And although the people had their own rich store of cultural memory, traces of which did take more enduring form in broadsheets, chapbooks, and the published literature of lowborn poets, autobiographers, and other writers, most of their recreational culture melted into the ephemeral flow of passing time. Consequently, there was no substantial body of sources upon which Malcolmson could base his study; but there was much that was "scattered, fragmentary, often incidental (p. 2)." Tracking down such material, sifting and straining it out is a laborious business that not everyone in the field is prepared to undertake and those who do perform an invaluable service for the rest of us. For me, Malcolmson's footnotes were a point of access to sources on working women's leisure in the eighteenth century that it would have taken an age to find otherwise, and which I was very grateful to have at hand.

The richness of the detail that Malcolmson takes from his sources, and the skilful and understated way he interweaves his argument through it, make for a compelling narrative analysis. This is organized chronologically and thematically, beginning with a chapter on popular recreations before the eighteenth century that establishes two central points: that the status of popular recreations in English society was perennially insecure and that the kind of popular recreational culture that existed before the rise of urban industrial capitalism would not survive after it (p. 3). Medieval ecclesiastical and civil authorities had periodically attempted to exert some discipline over popular sports and festivities that flaunted a dangerous "counter-morality" (p. 6). Puritan reformers tried, too, from the Elizabethan era through to the mid seventeenth century, in one of the most considered and concerted movements to challenge a recreational culture. "Energetically reformist, opposed to conventional (especially primitive, medieval) practices, earnestly soul-searching, anxious about sin and salvation, firm on the necessity of dutifulness in one’s calling," Malcolmson writes, "the puritan disposition was almost completely opposed to the inherent temper—the explicit pursuit of pleasure, the levity and boisterousness, the lack of restraint—of the people's customary recreational activities" (p. 7). Those activities had been woven into the fabric of popular life since the Middle Ages, and they were not to be easily preached down or prosecuted away. They also had considerable support from the established church and the monarchy, the latter publishing royal orders affirming the right of their "good people" to "lawful recreation" in 1618 and in an extended form in 1633. (After the Interregnum when the exiled Stuart heir to the throne returned from Europe as Charles II in 1660, this support was renewed.) The Puritan attack on popular recreation was ineffective, Malcolmson judges, because it could not displace the deeply rooted conservatism and custom characteristic of a rural, localized society and economy that sustained and supported it. Puritanism was too urban, too earnest and too progressive; it was too far "ahead of [its] time" (p. 14).

Chapters two through five of *PRES* are devoted to describing the fabric of plebeian recreational practices, contextualizing them, and through a judicious use of functionalist and modernization theories, explaining them. The annual and church calendars that marked
the occasions customarily given over to holidaymaking, festivals and sports. Parish feasts (also known as revels and wakes), originally celebrations associated with the patron saint of the church, were among the most important holidays and the most prevalent, well into the nineteenth century. Fairs, too, were important, as were hiring fairs or "stattis" or "mops" (statute sessions for the hiring of servants). Fairs and wakes tended to be clustered during the lulls in the seasonal and agricultural calendar: between late spring and early summer and then again in the period after the intensive labor of harvesting, threshing, and the like were completed at summer's end. And there were major seasonal and church holidays such as Christmas, Easter, May Day, and Whitsuntide, and some commemorative days for events in England's political history: Guy Fawkes Day observed on November 5, for instance.

Sports of a wide variety—athletic contests, ball games, games of skill and chance, animal sports and combat sports—were a significant part of popular recreation and Malcolmson devotes chapter three to examining them. He establishes that some features of sport in the period with which PRES is concerned were what have come to be labeled "pre-modern." There was great variability in the forms of football played, for example, some of which ranged over open country or through the streets, and many of the proceedings were informally run according to custom and thus open to innovations in tactics and strategy. But there was also a good deal about sport that qualified as "modern": a degree of organization and formalization in football that amounted to institutionalization in some communities; publicizing and detailed reporting of cricket, pugilism, and cocking in the print media; national titles in prize-fighting; and commercial and professional enterprise among athletes and promoters. The dissimilarity and distance between the sport of the modern era and that of the eighteenth century registers most strikingly when one reads Malcolmson's accounts of animal sports. These convey well the sensibilities of a society that could not afford to be squeamish about its treatment and use of animals, sensibilities that twenty-first-century western society would for the most part condemn. Although, as Malcolmson points out and as continues to be the case in England, those in authority were ready with rationalizations for allowing the brutalizing and killing of animals in the name of the sport of some—a topic that he returns to in a later chapter.

Malcolmson renders the world of eighteenth-century popular sport and amusements in lively, living color, quoting to wonderful effect the words of its inhabitants. Adopting their voices he offers insight into the passions at play during football games and cockfights: "My Tenant in the Country is verily persuaded, that the Parish of the Enemy hath not one honest Man in it" (p. 83). He shows how those passions were worked through in the complex relationships between genteel and plebeian sportsmen:

There was to begin a great cocking at Halifax . . . many gentlemen came to it upon the munday, that day was spent in appointing judges to sit and match the cocks which they did with great authority, on the Tuesday the poorer sort of Halifax brought their cocks which were to fight first, but Mr. Tho. Thornhil said what had beggars to doe to fight their cocks among gentlemen upon which Tho. Cockrofts son tript up his heels, so they fell to blows, and they took sides and all fought desperately a long while, Ab. Mitchell taking the poor mens part: at last Jo. Mitchel drew his rapier and swore he would run him through that struck another stroke, so they were quieted—then they fell to cocking . . . they
drunk all night and were so high in swearing, ranting at the Crosse that they were heard far in the town (p. 49).

He evokes the building of plebeian relationships of all kinds that holidays and festivities effected: "I hear of one [parish feast] every Sunday kept in some Village or other in the Neighbourhood, and see great Numbers of both Sexes in their Holiday Cloaths, constantly flocking thither, to partake of the Entertainment of their Friends and Relations, or to divert themselves with the rural Games and athletick Exercises" (p. 53). And he illustrates how much some recreations depended at least partly on the patronage or approval of the gentry; and how the people saw this support as their customary right:

The poor Labourer thinks crowns all, a good Supper must be provided, and every one that did anything towards the Inning [bringing in and storing the corn harvest], must now have some Reward, as Ribbons, Lace, Rows of Pins to Boys and Girls, if never so small for their Encouragement, and to be sure plumb Pudding. The men must now have some better than best Drink, which with a little Tobacco and their screaming for their Largess, their Business will soon be done (p. 56).

With a wealth of material of this kind, Malcolmson conjures up the recreational lifescape of the eighteenth-century laboring people and, in chapters four and five (on social contexts and social functions respectively) considers its broader significance. In examining this issue he is guided by sociological theory and concludes that popular recreations served such social ends as the bracketed discharge of enmities, the expression and satisfaction of sexual and other desires, and the friendly and sometimes unfriendly meeting of plebeian and gentry on the safe terrain of common custom. The employment of Robert Merton’s functionalist theory allows Malcolmson thus to account convincingly for the enthusiasm and attachment that laboring people had for their sports, festivals, and recreational rituals, but it is not entirely clear whether he sees the "functionalism" of these practices extending to the social order as a whole.9 The "larger structures" with which chapter five is concerned, Malcolmson states "are primarily those of only one group in society, the labouring people, not the social system as a whole" (p. 75). But, this same chapter ends, "recreation was one major dimension of an established culture—here rooted in exclusively plebeian experiences, there overlapping with the culture of gentility—and it was woven into, and derived its meaning from, the total social fabric" (p. 88, my emphasis). Furthermore, the distancing of genteel from popular recreational culture and the withdrawal of gentry patronage that began in the last decades of the eighteenth century were crucial factors, Malcolmson argues persuasively later, in that culture’s decline. This implies the kind of interconnected wholeness of society and thus of the functions of each constituent part he seems to be reluctant to assert unambiguously.

The final three chapters of PRES detail the process of the polarization of common and genteel culture and the falling away of the gentry’s support and approval for plebeian recreation in the context of the broader cultural, economic, and social transformations of the second half of the eighteenth century. The net effect of these changes was to render the functionalism of sports and amusements for plebeian society insufficient cause for their persistence. Moral reformist movements, the ascendancy of industrial-capitalism with its attendant work and time disciplines and a shift in the balance from rural to urban modes
of life "relentlessly swept away" "the foundations of many traditional practices," Malcolmson concludes (p. 170).

The undercutting of the structural supports of popular recreation is examined in chapter six. As the eighteenth century advanced, echoes of the stern moral code of the Puritans appeared in an increasingly unsympathetic view of popular recreation among the governing and employing classes. "This tradition," Malcolmson writes, "in all its various strands, posed one of the most powerful threats to the established customs of popular culture, and it significantly aggravated that widening rift between high and low society which was to emerge fully developed by the early nineteenth century" (p. 90). For the propertied classes industry was a moral and social obligation, especially of the lower orders whose social value political economists insisted derived entirely from it. Idleness was the corresponding vice which, these and others of their persuasion believed, "ran rampant among the labouring people," revealing itself very obviously in their predilection for luxuries like tobacco and tea and "unprofitable and foolish recreations" (p. 93). Congruent with a widely influential evangelical movement that was passionately opposed to popular pastimes these attitudes coalesced by the late 1700s into the work discipline that was so central to the rise of industrial capitalism and so damaging to the fabric of the customary recreational culture. Changes in the use of and access to land that were inherent in the capitalization of agriculture also helped undermine that culture. As fields and commons were enclosed and turned over to intensive farming, customary sites for sport and recreation disappeared. And the power of custom itself, as a means of asserting and maintaining the right to recreation also fell away leaving the people with few mechanisms for defending or advancing their interests as they saw them.

By the opening of the nineteenth century what had started as an erosion of the attitudes and customs sustaining popular recreation became a direct assault upon it. Chapter seven concentrates on the activities that bore the brunt of this attack: blood sports, especially throwing at cocks and bull and bear baiting, football, and pugilism. Blood sports such as these were particularly vulnerable because they offered the animal not even a "sporting" chance and because they did not have a gentlemanly following as did cockfighting and the field sports of hunting and coursing. Groups opposed to blood sports successfully campaigned for legislation that culminated in the 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act which made any blood sport involving the baiting of animals illegal and by the 1840s "most... had been almost entirely eliminated" (p. 119). Football, too, was subjected to legislative and other suppressive measures, most notably in the growing urban centers where it was judged to be disruptive of business and productive labor and destructive of property. Blood sports and football had few supporters among the ruling classes, most of who were marching lock and step towards the rationality, progress, civility and civilization that capitalism, evangelicalism, and the Enlightenment endorsed. Brutal, cruel, and disorderly sport had no place in this economic, social and moral climate. Neither did week long wakes and parish feasts or the more boisterous of the pleasure and hiring fairs which were also subjected to criticism and attempts at suppression, though not to the same extent or with the same intensity.

All of this notwithstanding, the forces of reform and repression by no means had it all their way. Indeed, one of the most noteworthy features of the cultural war that Malcolmson
describes was the spirited defense of their customary forms of play that working people mounted. The protracted campaign against bull-running in Stamford and that against street football in Derby—the authorities of both towns had to resort to the Riot Act and detachments of dragoons and metropolitan and special police as well as the local constabulary to enforce their will—speak to a not inconsiderable degree of popular agency. For some time this was reinforced by the support of a declining minority of Tory traditionalists among the gentry that had managed to resist being seduced by the "code of sensibility and refined manners" broadly current from the latter 1700s (p. 155). But that agency is underemphasized in the book as a whole, which closes in the mid-nineteenth century wasteland of popular culture to which the developments of the previous century-and-a-half have been leading.

This imbalance between the agency of the ordinary people and that of the upper and middle classes, between the inertia of customary ways and attitudes and the momentum of those of modernity, between the forces of conservatism and change is what opens up the rift that for Malcolmson sets off the modern leisure world from the pre-modern. The early decades of the nineteenth century were a period of "exceptionally acute social change" and "the dislocation of [popular] recreational life was keenly felt and only marginally alleviated," he concludes. The making of a new, very different popular recreational culture would fall to a very different kind of laboring people, one that had managed to accommodate to "the new world of congested cities, factory discipline, and free enterprise" and molded its culture accordingly to suit that world’s conditions and requirements (p. 171).

Three decades of ever-expanding scholarship since the publication of PRES has done nothing to dent the central element of its thesis: that the rise of urban industrial capitalism effected a major transformation of English leisure. What subsequent work has done is complicate the narrative Malcolmson relates and some of the concepts he employs, develop other concepts and focus on other issues, bring into play a broader cast of historical actors, and suggest alternative emphases and trajectories of the history of popular leisure.

One important contribution comes from Hugh Cunningham whose Leisure in the Industrial Revolution (1980) marked an early reconsideration of the suddenness, scale, and significance of the dislocation and change in popular recreational culture that Malcolmson discerned. In contrast to Malcolmson’s notion of a vacuum, Cunningham argues that from 1780 to 1840 popular leisure was growing apace and also commercializing in the manner that the leisure of the eighteenth-century middle class commercialized. In fact, it was the "efflorescence of popular leisure in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" that explains the "virulence of the campaign that was mounted against it." Despite the obvious contrast with Malcolmson’s pessimistic outlook on late eighteenth–early nineteenth-century popular culture—as one reviewer of PRES points out, "the Puritans won after all"—Cunningham is reluctant to be embraced by the "optimist school of historians," preferring to frame his emphasis on the continued vitality of popular leisure as affirmation of the Thompsonian insistence that "the people had some capacity to make their own culture." There are many studies—too many to be identified in this essay—that endorse some version of this argument through emphasizing the continuities, adaptations,
and endurance of popular culture, especially of sport. The valuable collection of essays that Eileen Yeo and Stephen Yeo have edited is arguably representative of the best work in this vein.11

Another challenge to Malcolmson’s vacuum thesis comes from J. M. Golby and A.W. Purdue who are decidedly unsympathetic to cultural Marxist frameworks. Individualism was deeply entrenched in English society by the early eighteenth century, they assert, and the common people were relatively "free from the restraints of custom." This, together with the percolation of the "spirit of emulation" “far down the social hierarchy” and a significant degree of consumerism and commercialism among all social ranks "makes nonsense" of the idea of a sudden disruption of customary, "traditional" society at the turn of the nineteenth century.12 Unquestionably, recent research has shown that popular consumerism was developing in the eighteenth century and that, in London and provincial centers, even the lowly could enjoy the delights of a commercial leisure culture.13 And the wish to impute agency and a degree of self-determination to working people is something with which I am very sympathetic. But Golby and Purdue’s rather intemperately phrased entry into the debate would carry more weight were it based upon the depth and detail of empirical research that mark Malcolmson’s work. In this regard even some of the most thoughtful newer studies are more exercises in conceptualization than explorations of the substance of popular culture, certainly in their treatment of periods more distant from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; as such, they cannot best or come close to matching PRES.14

Where recent work has taken the field that PRES did not is in the use of alternative concepts and categories of analysis, and the exploration of issues, topics, and subjects that were not placed very high on the research agenda of the 1970s, if they appeared there at all. One major trend, not just in the history of popular culture, but in the discipline as a whole was initiated by feminist scholars who insisted that attention must be paid to that half of the human race that had been excluded from the historians purview, women. No longer overlooked, marginalized, or trivialized, even in fields such as political and labor history where it was almost axiomatic to do so, women have in the last thirty years proven to be very worthy of scholarly attention. A major innovation of feminist historiography has been its foregrounding of gender as an organizing, framing devise and a crucial aspect of human identity, relationships, and the dynamics of power. These new currents have produced stellar works on popular culture, both in the period with which PRES is concerned and in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Anna Clark, Barbara Taylor, Elizabeth Roberts, Ellen Ross, Melanie Tebbutt, Deborah Valenze, Claire Langhamer, John Walton and Andrew Davies, among others, have written books that see women as dynamic characters in the landscape of lower class life and make gender as central a force as class in the history of the English working people.15 As part of this reconfiguration there has begun to be a necessary and welcome appreciation of the cultural construction of working men’s gender identities, too; Jeffrey Hill and Richard Holt, for example, have both shown how particular versions of masculinity are crafted through sports such as association football and rugby league. John Tosh has emphasized the exclusionary role that men’s associational forms played in maintaining masculinist privileges in the late nineteenth century. Valerie Hey, Jacqueline Bratton and Peter Bailey have highlighted the labor that women per-
formed in the major commercial leisure ventures in which masculine identities and communalities were forged. These studies are indicative of the rich potential that the currently underdeveloped examination of men and masculinities offer the field of popular history.

Also complicating class, and dislodging it as the central organizing principle of studies of popular recreation, is the consideration that is now being given to other social configurations and identities. This has been particularly pronounced in histories of sport where local, regional and national senses of belonging and status are beginning to be explored, resulting in a fascinating interrogation of understandings of Britain and the United Kingdom, and of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Each of these "imagined communities" is being interpreted as constructions of various, sometimes conflicting, social groups and cultures. For working people—especially for men—as for the similarly devalued, marginalized and disempowered Celtic nations and for England's regions and provinces, sport has served as a particularly potent mechanism for constituting identity and community and asserting worth. That it has not done the same for racial minorities who have found in the mainstream sport culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries racist intolerance and abuse of the worst kind calls attention to the literature's bias towards white working people and neglect of those of color. The work that has been done on non-white popular culture comes mostly from scholars in Cultural Studies such as Dick Hebdige and Paul Gilroy; Phil Vasili's biography of Arthur Wharton, a multi-talented Ghanaian athlete of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras shows how crucial it is for the historical dimension of these people, their culture, and their struggles to be reclaimed, too.

Peter Bailey has suggested that the leisure history that Malcolmson's *PRES* helped pioneer as "a radical new departure" is in danger of "becoming something of a backwater," "its denizens suffering from hardening of the categories" (p. 155). While I would agree with Bailey that the emergence of cultural history and the literary and post-modern "turns" in the broader discipline signal a querying of the solid, empirical tradition of social history to which *PRES* belongs, I do not accept his diagnosis of intellectual sclerosis in the field. Bailey's own wonderfully innovative "poetic" approach to the history of popular recreation is part of a larger trend, one that encompasses the authors of many of the works referenced here in the final section of this essay. This scholarship is open to the challenges presented by shifting currents in the larger intellectual sphere, it is adapting in the light of important historiographical developments, and it is exploring subject matter and the experiences and identities of people that were previously unexplored. In all of this the recent literature continues the very best of the tradition of transformational history to which Malcolmson's *PRES* belongs; and of it and that critical, groundbreaking work I am greatly appreciative.

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3 Although *PRES* and Malcolmson's other work are clearly influenced by and indebted to E. P. Thompson, Malcolm Chase suggests that the notion of a "Thompsonian school of history" cannot be


This is not intended as a review of the literature on the history of leisure. Peter Bailey has rendered invaluable service in that regard with the article cited above in endnote 4 and with his earlier "Leisure, Culture and the Historian: Reviewing the First Generation of Leisure Historiography in Britain," *Leisure Studies* 8 (1989): 107-127. In a tribute to Thompson’s teaching, Malcolmson alludes to the appeal that studying “underdogs” had for him at the time that he was embarking on his graduate training at Warwick. See "E. P. Thompson, 1924-1993: Mentor Extraordinaire," *Queen’s Quarterly* 100 (1993): 742-748, 743 (QUOTATION).


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Bailey’s early work on the history of leisure was also a model of social history, as his most recent is exemplary of the “new” cultural history. Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge, 1978); idem, *Popular Culture.*