Donald Guay. La Conquête du Sport:

Le sport et la société québécoise au XIXe siècle. L'histoire au présent.

Montréal and Paris: Lanctot Editeur, 1997. 244 pp.

Reviewed by Jan Henry Morgan, H-Canada.

The purpose of Professor Guay's work as he describes it is to establish the circumstances and the consequences of the integration of sport into Quebec society, emphasizing the factors favouring or discouraging the practice of sport among the French Canadians of Quebec. He is interested in looking at sport as it reveals and is affected by the culture of the society, demonstrating its intimate links with the evolution of the society and culture in which it is found.

The third chapter of the book details the growth of the most popular sports in Quebec in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With charts and illustrations accompanying the text, Professor Guay describes the summer sports of horse racing, cricket, regattas, athletics, lacrosse, cycling, baseball, rifle shooting, football, swimming, and croquet, and the winter sports of curling, snowshoeing, ice hockey, skating, and skiing. He also includes the indoor sports of boxing, billiards, wrestling, fencing, and bowling, thus providing a survey of the growth of activities which he points out all developed after the conquest of Lower Canada by the British in 1760. The chapter concludes with a look at the factors leading to the expansion of sports in Quebec: the need to adapt, the British presence, patronage, communications, free time on Sundays, charity, and urbanisation.

Professor Guay's thesis, summed up in the concluding chapter of the book, is that sport, a cultural product of the English Protestant aristocracy, made its appearance on the Quebec scene after the Conquest with the arrival of British immigration, beginning with horse racing, which appealed to French Quebeckers because of their pride in their own horses. Certain sports, which fit in with traditional Quebec activities — such as regattas, skating, snowshoeing, etc. — became popular, while others, such as boxing and cricket, made little impact.

He contrasts the individualistic nature of Protestantism with the Catholic view that one should not amuse oneself but should work and develop one's spiritual nature, as defined by God and the Church. In addition, the nationalists looked on sport as cultural aggression and resented among other things the Englishness of the language of sports. Also, the growth of sports clubs was frowned upon by the clergy as a danger to the family and the nation.

It was not until after 1870 that sport began to catch on with young people and to penetrate the Catholic colleges, beginning with baseball and lacrosse. After 1890, with the arrival of ice hockey, sport finally became more integrated into the society. However, even then, French Canadians were far from having adopted a sports mentality. They were not particularly interested in sports heroes or in competing and winning.

The marginal involvement of French Canadians in the sports scene throughout the whole of the century Professor Guay attributes to their way of life, most of the population being rurally based (60 percent in 1901) while sport is an urban phenomenon. Also, French-Canadian workers — and presumably English-Canadian workers as well, though no mention is made of them — worked ten to fifteen hours a day six days a week, leaving little time for other activities. Professor Guay sees also an egalitarian mentality which meant that French Quebeckers were not interested in the competitive aspects of sport, but preferred amusements and fetes.

He concludes by taking issue with Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who considered that French Canadians were backward in physical activities and insists that they had other physical methods of amusing themselves and being sociable. In a period in which British imperialism encircled the globe, in which the British elite were convinced that the English were a chosen people and that all others should accept their ways, de Coubertin was a "passionate anglophile."

While I found Chapter Three interesting and informative, though necessarily superficial, I was, on the whole, disappointed with the book. It reads to me far too much like a doctoral thesis for a work by a professor with many years of experience in the field. Chapter One, for example, is used entirely to establish the definitions of the terminology. I had particular problems there with the definition of "sport," which of course is key to the whole book and which by the particularity of its definition leads directly to the conclusions, developed at length in the second chapter, that there was no such thing as "sport" prior to the sixteenth century in England.

Chapter Two, all nineteen pages of it, devotes itself to a history of the activities leading up to "sport" from the Greeks onward and seems to me to have almost nothing to do with the rest of the book. Two pages would have sufficed to make the points contained in it, and more space could then have been devoted to the topic. I had a similar problem with Chapter Five, the reaction of the Catholic clergy to sport. Here twenty-nine pages are devoted to establishing that the Church heartily disapproved of organized sport, had very little use for physical activity in general not related to one's work or one's spirituality, and felt that they would lose control of their flocks if they allowed them to take part in sporting activities. Again, a few pages could have established the same points. The space thus saved might have been used to give a more detailed picture of the changing attitudes over the length of the nineteenth century and to show a greater variety of positions among various groups. The contrast is almost entirely between the stereotypical English aristocrat and the French Canadian peasant or worker. What about the immigrant Irish, for example, who poured into the province during the nineteenth century?

I am not convinced by the argument that the French Canadian had no use for the competitiveness of sport until the British Protestant came to show him how. The sketches of horse races across the ice that come to us from the early nineteenth century, of skating and foot races, of boys boxing and wrestling, and of "goelette" racing-did these activities only become "sport" when they were officially organized? I hope that Professor Guay might, in a future work, take a more descriptive position, relaxing the strictness of his definitions and possibly looking at the varieties of viewpoint and experience in the province as a whole.

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