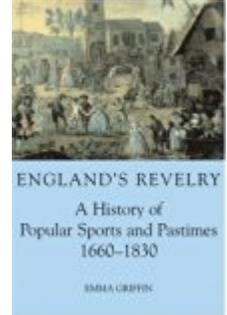


Emma Griffin. *England's Revelry: A History of Popular Sports and Pastimes, 1660-1830.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xiv + 295 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-726321-1.



Reviewed by David Underdown

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Emma Griffin's book is primarily a history of bull-baiting, particularly in the West Midlands, the so-called Black Country surrounding Birmingham. A broader context is provided by other case studies that cover the control of public streets in provincial market towns, popular sports in Yorkshire's West Riding, and the disappearance of village greens in Cambridgeshire. There are some sketchy, impressionistic pages on other popular sports and a useful introductory chapter on theoretical issues in which the author surveys the work of other historians. But this is a long way from the general history of popular sports that the book's title seems to promise.

Earlier historians of the subject, Griffin suggests, have been neglectful of two major issues: space and power. The most important space for urban popular recreation in the early modern period, she argues, was the town market square and the surrounding streets. This is where the shows and amusements of local parish feasts and wakes, the great public processions, and the annual street football matches, bull-baitings and bear-baitings had traditionally taken place, with or

without the approval of the authorities. During the eighteenth century, especially in well-governed market towns, those authorities tried, with more or less success, to take over the streets and suppress the often riotous behavior of the populace in, for instance, the well-known conflicts over the commemoration of Gunpowder Treason Day. Griffin has an interesting discussion of these November 5 disorders, though she curiously omits the best example of them: those in the Sussex town of Lewes, where blazing tar-barrels used to be rolled down the sloping streets--a custom not unknown in other small towns--to the consternation of high street shopkeepers. When such dangerous celebrations were suppressed, she argues, it was public order that was at issue, and this was also the case in the prohibition of blood-sports like bull-baiting and throwing at cocks. Griffin's discussion of street play in the older market towns is a useful introduction to the subject. But the heart of the book deals with blood sports in the newer industrial settlements after 1750. Bull-baitings, she shows, were absolutely central to the popular culture of these places, especially in the Black Country, where they often provided the

opening rituals for local wakes, but were also staged on many other occasions during the year. In the early nineteenth century, magistrates in other parts of the country were suppressing bull-baiting (always on grounds of public order rather than humanitarian sentiment, the author insists), but their efforts in the West Midlands seemed only to increase the sport's popularity and provoke increasing resistance. However, the Birmingham area also seems, on Griffin's showing, to have been unusually attached to other blood-sports like cockfighting, throwing at cocks, badger-baiting, and dog-fighting, and violently individualistic ones like pugilism.

There were other parts of the country where violent sports were played (Griffin might have profitably taken a more extensive look at cudgeling, another distinctly regional pastime, whose heartland was in the counties of Wiltshire and Somerset), but none where they had such deep roots as in the Black Country. All these were individual sports: the almost total absence of team sports in the area is absolutely astonishing. When we look at any other region we always find them: football almost everywhere (including its local variants of hurling in Devon and Cornwall, campball in East Anglia, and several others), bat-and-ball team sports like stoolball in Gloucestershire and North Wiltshire, and cricket in the southeastern counties. Team sports, it appears, are a natural expression of the cooperative spirit of the local community. But not in the West Midlands. Why? Griffin's explanation is that the industrial structure of this area, largely in the metal-working trades, was based on small employment units and that this made for a highly individualistic local culture; in Yorkshire's West Riding, on the other hand, the factory system now established in the textile industry required the common action of large groups of workers, and this easily translated into the organization of teams (football mostly, but later cricket) to express communal identity. This is perilously close to a "class" explanation, about which Griffin is distinctly squeamish in oth-

er places. And it does not explain why team sports flourished in other regions with almost equally atomized employment structures: the Wiltshire "cheese country," for example, where both dairying and cloth-making took place in small units, and yet stoolball, a team game with some similarities to cricket, had long been a prominent feature of the local culture. Clearly there is something different about Black Country culture which Griffin has not fully explained.

For her other case study, the loss of Cambridgeshire village greens as places of communal recreation, Griffin undertakes a commendably thorough analysis of enclosure acts in that county between 1790 and 1837 and concludes that very few village greens survived. She advances some intelligible reasons for this, but once again the comparative dimension is undeveloped. Cambridgeshire, she concedes, was unique among English counties for the completeness of the appropriation of public lands: fewer village greens survived there than anywhere else. But not enough information is given about these other places to provide a really convincing explanation for their survival, the uses to which they were put, or for the meanings that people attached to them. Actually the loss of public land for recreation seems to have mattered less in Cambridgeshire than it did in the industrial districts of the Midlands. In the rural county many "camping closes" (privately owned but with strong traditions of public access for the local brand of football) still existed, far more than the pathetically small scraps of land that, even on Griffin's guardedly optimistic showing, remained in the Black Country.

This is altogether a somewhat uneven book. Griffin does well with some of the component subjects, particularly the blood sports of the Midlands. But, because of the sketchy treatment of the general context of popular recreations, the separate parts never attain the sort of unity that one looks for in a monograph. The central concepts of

space and power are not used with sufficient consistency to achieve it.

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