



Mike Huggins. *Horse Racing and British Society in the Long Eighteenth Century.* Rochester: Boydell Press, 2018. 316 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-318-8.

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Published on H-War (March, 2019)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Even those with only a nodding acquaintance with the long eighteenth century know how very big, even pervasive, horse racing was in Britain in those years. This period, after all, saw the rise of the “thoroughbred” horse, the foreign-born, British-bred gold standard for speed and prestige; it was the heyday of Newmarket and the Jockey Club, which set the standards for the institution of professional racing. Racing took place in landowners’ fields and in the rising towns of the provinces, for small prizes and heavy purses, and its language found its way into everyday speech. All that being the case, it comes as a bit of a shock to realize that Mike Huggins’s book is the first academic study to take a serious look at British horse racing and its role as an intersection point between sport, politics, class, and sociability. Dr. Huggins’s previous work is not just a big part of the historiography, it *is* the historiography; no scholar could be better placed to write the book about how thoroughbred racing began, both as an institution and as a culture. He engages easily with current scholarship on the commercializing leisure culture of the long eighteenth century, including its importance to local economic life and to the rise of genteel sociability that marks the period. This book is a many-layered history that crosses class lines: a wide range of people attended, gambled, even owned racehorses, and many

of the “lower sort,” as jockeys, trainers, and grooms, were essential cogs in the racing machine. Huggins also gives close attention to changes in the racing game over time, examining the shifts in locations, lengths, and styles of races, and the sorts of horses and the weights they carried. The only constant during these early years of British horse racing was change, a point which this book makes and supports ably.

Scholars will find much that is useful here. Huggins frames race meetings as opportunities for both sociable encounters and political networking, as well as a means to social and economic advancement; the priorities of the racing community and its connections to government, which after all was part of the regulation of racing, are clearly and fully explained. The shifting definitions of “gentleman,” “gentility,” and “polite society” and eighteenth-century angst surrounding class questions are apparent in the conflicting need to bring punters to the course, while keeping the riff-raff out and the criminal element away from the wagering. There is a very useful explanation of the value of money in the long eighteenth century, and also of the birthday/ages conventions of racing thoroughbreds, an arcane point probably unfamiliar to many readers.

The book’s first three chapters deal with the ways in which horse racing was part of British

life. Chapter 1 focuses on the race meeting as liminal social space, open to people of varying social standings within the context of a polite pursuit (a standard that it often failed to maintain). Races were performance spaces for people as well as for horses, for women as well as for men, all of whom were seeing and being seen on the course and in the assembly room. Huggins paints a vivid picture of a typical day at a provincial race meeting and the networking that went on there, as well as the many spin-off benefits to the region that hosted it. Chapter 2 dives into racing's problematic but irresistible partner: wagering. Much has been written about eighteenth-century Britain's obsession with a flutter, which went well beyond the excitement of the bet to an expression of wealth, standing, and aristocratic disdain for mere money. Huggins gives us an extended discussion of the central role of betting in the formalization of horse racing as an institution, and the ways in which it pervaded nearly every aspect of the rules and standards of the sport. Cheating, naturally, makes its appearance, taking advantage of probability as "a science ... not altogether reconcilable to the strictest notions of integrity" (p. 97). What was a morally acceptable level of manipulation of odds, of jockeys' strategies, of trainers' instructions? The lines blurred between stable strategy and outright corruption, as cheating became a stick with which to beat racing in a more general sense. Lastly, in chapter 3, Huggins examines racing as a nexus of British political life, as a Venn diagram where the natural ruling class overlapped generously with racing owners and breeders. Not only was racing *the* leisure pursuit of the aristocracy, but it also offered opportunities for political wheeling and dealing, to the point where racing metaphors and language became part of the speech of parliamentarians. The summer racing season and the summer recess of government were one, and those needing favors or wanting inside information sought them at the race course, an ideal setting for intrigue in the guise of a day out.

The next four chapters zero in on the workings of those who made up the world of the stables and the race meeting, as well as those who worked to regulate and professionalize racing as a pursuit. Chapter 4 explores the wide variations in racing's rules, including the mostly ineffective attempts to prevent cheating and promote fair play and fair racing. Everything from the weights carried by race horses to the ways those horses were ridden was tweaked in the process; over time, race meetings moved from heats to single races, and the riders were, increasingly, professional jockeys rather than owners. By the end of the long eighteenth century, racing was well on its way to establishing standardized rules and practices. Chapter 5 looks at the administrative side of the race meeting, the physical layout of the courses, and the on-the-ground settling of disputes by officials such as judges, clerks, and stewards. Sponsors and hosts of meetings also played their roles, as did the moneyed interests whose donations fattened the purses. Chapter 6 examines the evolution of the emerging "thoroughbred" from its Arabian and Turkish foundation sires to the horses raced on British turf during the long eighteenth century: the "noble horse" keeping company with the elites who bred and raced them. Ottoman standards of care and record-keeping were co-opted and flaunted as British tradition, their Eastern origins soon forgotten. Finally, chapter 7 takes us to the stables themselves, discussing the roles of the working sort—trainers, jockeys, and grooms and their relationships with their wealthy employers. Often unnamed in racing calendars, these people's stories emerge from estate and stable records, even from autobiographical writings of their own. Huggins gives us an in-depth look at stable life as limned in Thomas Holcroft's memoirs of 1750s Newmarket, which details the lives and duties of grooms and stable boys and their growing professional importance.

Huggins draws on a staggering range of source materials for this book: racing publications, including calendars with all their wealth of

information on horses, results, and records; published ephemera, such as newspaper stories, advertisements, and race reports; archival records, including estate records, wills, diaries, and letters; images, ranging from the paintings commissioned by elite owners to the prints affordable by anyone; records of all sorts, from race-meeting notes to stud books and trainers' notes; material objects such as trophies, tokens, and pub signs; and the matchbooks of Jockey Club and Newmarket. In his examination of the British racing scene, Huggins notes Newmarket's dominance but goes well beyond it, delving into the private country meetings hosted by landowners for friends and the town meetings with their attendant dinners and assemblies. These smaller gatherings were often ignored by elite racing calendars, but were still a significant aspect of British racing—perhaps more significant, since such small local matches were arguably in at the birth of the modern sport.

The book's organization is somewhat unusual in that the first section, the analysis, reads like the cart before the horse of the second, the findings. This has the feel of reducing chapters 4 through 7 to appendices, and they deserve better; readers should make sure not to miss the excellent material in those discussions. There are also several points that appear somewhat out of place in their assigned chapters: for example, a discussion of racecourse betting appears in chapter 1 instead of chapter 2 ("The Secret World of Wagering"); horses' food is covered in a different section of chapter 7 than might be expected. In terms of set-up, some chapters' sections are very short, which makes them read less smoothly than other parts of the book.

In his discussion of class distinction, and his choice of criterion for deciding to which social stratum a given figure belongs, Huggins comes up against a question on which scholars of the eighteenth century have yet to agree. He defines anyone using the title "Mr." as middling—that is, as not belonging to the gentry; however, many nonti-

tled members of the gentry used "Mr." while still identifying firmly with the upper crust. This point may have led Huggins to overestimate the proportion of middling racing owners. On p. 221, he notes "a few puzzling exceptions" to his definition; I wonder if there were more exceptions than he knows of in his sample.

There is so much detail in this book, and so many wonderful examples discussed, that at times the argument is in danger of becoming lost in the thicket of information. Nevertheless, this study is richly informative, and adds tiles to several of the mosaics that make up England's long eighteenth century. Written in clear, polished language, blessedly free of jargon, and displaying great breadth and depth of research, *Horse Racing and British Society* delivers.

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Citation: Janet Mullin. Review of Huggins, Mike. *Horse Racing and British Society in the Long Eighteenth Century*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2019.

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