

H-Net Reviews

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Stephen Hardy, Andrew C. Holman. *Hockey: A Global History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 600 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08397-6.

Reviewed by Stephen Smith (Independent Scholar)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

By the end of May, the winter had mostly receded from the upper third of the North American map, if not yet the nation's appetite for hockey. While on Canada's east coast the national junior championships were wrapping up, fans of the international game settled in across the country to see whether the plucky national team could grab gold at the International Ice Hockey Federation World Championships in Slovakia. Off the ice, the sudden springtime demise of the nation's women's professional league continued to reverberate.

Meanwhile, at the center of the hockey world, National Hockey League (NHL) commissioner Gary Bettman convened a press conference to deliver his annual state-of-the-game address. The fact that he was doing so from Boston, and that (once again) no Canadian-based team would be playing for hockey's most coveted prize, the Stanley Cup, isn't enough anymore to faze the country that thinks of hockey as a proprietary natural resource indivisible from the national soul, never mind how far the Cup might wander away from home.

Bettman spent much of his time on the podium lauding the successes of the corporation he guides. "While there are things that are always debatable in our game," he said, "let's first focus on some indisputable facts that detail why the NHL is in the strongest position in our history." [1]

Bettman went on to extol hockey as the "greatest spectacle in sports" and the "remarkable" season the NHL had seen on ice. He cited soaring TV ratings, expansion to Seattle, exciting future ventures into Europe and China, and technological innovations that will

bring player and puck tracking into play as soon as next season. He spoke about the prevailing turbulence in women's hockey, but only in passing. His assertion that the NHL features "the best pace of play in sports" may or may not have been primarily directed at those with both doubts and attention deficits. "We have the most and fastest action in the shortest period of time," Bettman boasted. [2]

Speedy as it is, the NHL has also become in its one hundred years of existence such a mighty mass that at times it can seem to displace all other forms of the game that don't quite mesh with the massive workings of the league's corporate machinery. For all the excitement that the league generates with its hockey, despite its many good-faith efforts to grow and diversify the game, the NHL hockey is not—and should never be—the only game in town.

Authors Stephen Hardy and Andrew C. Holman don't command TV cameras the way Gary Bettman can, and their important new book, *Hockey: A Global History*, won't be broadcast as widely as the commissioner's messaging. It's too bad: their expansive and very detailed study of hockey's evolution, structures, and culture is required reading, *the* new standard text when it comes to understanding how the sport got from the far-off historical there to where it is today.

The library of the sport's literature is an extensive one, but there's nothing in it like their *Hockey: A Global History*. Hardy is an emeritus professor of kinesiology and history at the University of New Hampshire; Holman is a professor of history at Bridgewater State University

in Massachusetts. It's not that the game hasn't been studied with serious and scholarly intent before. A stack of the most interesting and edifying books on the game's rise and development would necessarily include, for example, *On The Origin of Hockey* (2014) by Carl Gidén, Patrick Houda, and Jean-Patrice Martel; Craig Bowsby's *1913: The Year They Invented The Future of Hockey* (2013); and *Deceptions and Doublecross: How The NHL Conquered Hockey* (2002), by Morey Holzman and Joseph Nieforth.

For insight into hockey's character and culture (including its many deficiencies and outright failings) you'd add *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities, and Cultural Politics* (1993), by Richard Gruneau and David Whitson; *The Death of Hockey* (1972) by Bruce Kidd and John Macfarlane; and the 2018 scholarly anthology, *Hockey: Challenging Canada's Game*, edited by Jenny Ellison and Jennifer Anderson. As for general histories, books like Michael McKinley's *Putting A Roof on Winter: Hockey's Rise from Sport Spectacle* (2000) stick close to hockey's perceived home ice, which is to say Canada and the northeastern United States. No previous single-volume study has ranged so broadly as *Hockey: A Global History* nor dug so deeply into the details, and I don't know of a precedent, either, for the quality of Hardy and Holman's analysis as they make their way through hockey history, cracking open orthodoxies as they go, and briskly re-ordering many of what we have come to think of as the game's immutable verities. It all makes for a brisk and fluid narrative, too: on top of everything else, Hardy and Holman unpack an awfully good story.

The crux of it all is in the title, three words in. Referencing Gruneau and Whitson, Hardy and Holman acknowledge that Canada and the Canadian experience is at the center of any discussion of hockey. "The problem," the former pair wrote in *Hockey Night in Canada*, "arises when Canadians' appreciation for hockey is mistaken for 'nature' rather than something that is socially and culturally produced" (p. 6). "We try," note Hardy and Holman, "to move hockey history beyond the limits of one national bias" (p. 7). Unbounded, they also succeed in their effort to transcend "dimensions beyond nationhood, particularly along lines of class, gender, and race" (p. 11).

They also make a key shift in considering the game's early evolutionary momentum. The emphasis of much previous historiographical debate has been fixed on determining hockey's "birthplace" rather than on discussing migration patterns. As Hardy and Holman write, "birth details would matter little (beyond antiquarian in-

terest) if the game and its followers, players, and promoters had never grown, if they had never become fruitful and multiplied" (p. 65).

If there is a consistent tone to the narrative here, it's set early on as the authors remind readers (while discouraging any romanticists who might have strayed by) that there was never a golden age of hockey, a prelapsarian frozen garden where once the game was purely, innocently yet to be spoiled. Hockey, like most human endeavors, is an imperfect, in-process, not always entirely progressive affair that its various stakeholders—players, coaches, owners, members of the media, fans—continue to make up as they go along.

And it was ever thus. The game, to start, was many games, and they proliferated spontaneously wherever people picked up sticks to knock balls—or bungs or, eventually, pucks. They note that the first skates were fashioned, probably, from animal bone, with practical purpose: in northern climes, they were developed for travel and transport before they were put to use in fun and game. Many of the proto-hockeys that were played in the wintry past were, of course, informal, without consistent rules or equipment or chroniclers. That they went largely unrecorded isn't so surprising—as historian Craig Bowsby has pointed out, two hundred years ago, nobody was assiduously annotating the history of snowball fights, either.

Hockey's ancestry features strains of hurling (Irish-born) and kolf (Dutch) and of the English games of hurley and ricket. It's easy to see how it's related to hockey-like games—your polos and bandys—that once seemed like they might thrive the way hockey has but didn't—and yet still found their own narrow niches.

As Hardy and Holman see it—and as they demonstrate, persuasively—hockey's history divides into four distinct epochs. Following the chaotic early folk era came hockey's Montreal phase, and it was there, in Quebec in the late 1870s and early 1880s, that a pastime truly became a sport. "Why Montreal?" the authors ask (p. 36) and readily answer, citing geographical, demographic, and economic reasons, along with a healthy supply of indoor rinks and a vibrant university, McGill, that became a veritable "hockey laboratory" (p. 37).

It was Montreal's version of the game that gradually spread across Canada and beyond through the late nineteenth century. Hardy and Holman tab its flow as "a story about the movement of men, goods, and capital"; thanks to "familiar historical forces: contingency, individual in-

terests, and luck” (p. 64), it captured the country. And then it kept going. As it went, the game was “altered and improved, and codified” (p. 65).

The game that emerged from Montreal was speedy, skillful, and often *very* unruly—criminally so, in some cases. Hockey was “a unique construction that fused science with savagery, art with atavism” (p. 136). As elsewhere, Hardy and Holman are clear-eyed on this serrated subject, noting that the idea that hockey’s roughness was, from early on, seen as legitimate insofar as it proved and defended the “manliness” of the society that embraced it (p. 134). Intimidation and violence have also always played a tactical role, same as the speed and skill. One of the game’s essential—at times existential—questions has been about how much of its inherent violence constitutes too much.

If hockey’s second age was a period of coalescence (many games fused more or less into one) and consolidation (fans found, leagues solidified), the years 1920 through 1971 saw what Hardy and Holman qualify as a “centrifugal” pattern of development. “This process,” they show, “was akin to the splintering of a college” (p. 12). Across hockey’s now worldwide frontier, a bevy of professional leagues and national federations, amateur organizations, and colleges developed and defended their own fiefdoms. This period of divergence saw disagreements over everything from rules to playing styles to questions of gender, amateur play, and violence.

It also laid a foundation for hockey’s fourth age, which dawned in 1972 with the seismic Summit Series. From there on in, we’re in the age of what Hardy and Holman term “corporate hockey” (p. 377), the era in which the NHL has (for better and/or worse) expanded, enhanced, and cashed in on its brand. “After a half-century of diversification,” they write, “... distinctions on and off the ice began to collapse toward a central model” (p. 377).

Throughout, Hardy and Holman trace the important contributions of many early hockey “evangels” (p. 69)—enthusiasts and advocates who spread the word, organized games, tournaments, and leagues, and even, as in the case of Thomas Paton in 1888 (p. 73), brought in the first sticks and pucks with which the game was established in Toronto. Some are familiar, others less so. Hardy and Holman disdain the suggestion that James Creighton should be recognized, as he has come to be, as “the father of hockey,” though they don’t deny his importance as an organizing force in Montreal.

Hockey’s history abounds with memorable charac-

ters, of course, many colorful, others heroic, some merely controversial. Many of them, along with others who worked without fame or fanfare, feature in *Hockey*, helping to illuminate the various stages of the game’s development. Arthur Farrell played on several early-era Stanley Cup-winning teams, but his most important contribution may have come with the book he published in 1899, *Hockey: Canada’s Royal Winter Game*, the first real hockey guidebook, with which he helped to describe and further disseminate the sport he loved.

Few players dominated the ice the way Fred “Cyclone” Taylor did in the years before the First World War: his example illustrates the game’s shift from the predominantly amateur to the cutthroat professional in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Around that same time, Bad Joe Hall was making headlines playing a highly effective and breathtakingly brutal brand of hockey: his story is one that Hardy and Holman use to appraise the ins and outs of what, at the time, was sometimes called hockey’s “rowdiness.”

Others who feature include the NHL’s first president, Frank Calder, and a little-acknowledged Mohawk left winger, Buddy Maracle, who is now generally recognized as the first Indigenous player to skate in the NHL. There are pioneers of European hockey, like Peter Patton in Britain and the early ace of France’s rinks, Louis Magnus, or Charles Hartley, the American-born, Canadian-bred dentist who was a force in pre-First World War German hockey. They touch on tacticians and influencers like Eddie Jeremiah, Lloyd Percival, and Anatoli Tarasov, the latter a masterful Soviet player, coach, and architect of the “collective, creative, winged hockey” (p. 366) that shook Canadian sensibilities so thoroughly during and after the 1972 Summit Series.

Many players cameo all the way, but these pages are thickly populated, too, by hockey leaders, impresarios, and bureaucrats in the order of Clarence Campbell, Tex Rickard, and Bunny Ahearne. Not all of them are white males, just most—but that, of course, is hockey. Some relief is provided by the likes of Kelley Steadman, an American player whose journey from upper New York state to Russia illuminates the restrictions and realities of modern-day women’s hockey. Hockey’s diversity—which is to say, its historical lack thereof—threads through *Hockey: A Global History*. “It has long been a white man’s game,” they write (p. 14), and while others have studied the communities that hockey has so consistently marginalized throughout is history, none has framed and contextualized those histories as thor-

oughly.

There is much more, too: discourses on the evolution of skates and sticks and on shifts in tactics; discussions of rinks and spectatorship; forays to Russia, Britain, and Finland; considerations of the role of media and the influence of broadcasting in popularizing the game and how it's perceived. Hardy and Holman take careful stock, too, of the ways in which storytelling and storytellers have shaped it. As it winds toward its conclusion, Hardy and Holman's chronicle of (to quote their phrase) "change and continuity" (p. 476) highlights, among other things, the game's increasing diversity and the role that hockey has played—and can continue to play—in building communities (p. 478).

What is absent, oddly, from the final chapters is any meaningful discussion of concussions and what disturbing recent breakthroughs in medical science might mean for the game, particularly in the area of head injuries and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). The deaths of former players who specialized in punching and being punched, Derek Boogaard and Steve Montador and others, have rocked professional hockey over the past decade. The names of researchers like Boston University neuropathologist Dr. Ann McKee now figure prominently in the conversation of the sport and where it's go-

ing. Meanwhile, as the NHL answers in US courts to a series of lawsuits from former players over the damages they suffered while playing in the league, commissioner Gary Bettman continues to downplay links between CTE and blows to the head.

Whether Bettman and the NHL he steers acknowledge it or not, this is a big deal for hockey at every level, and its absence here is surprising. The same day in May that Bettman addressed the media in Boston, Ken Dryden published another searing essay in Canadian newspapers laying out—again—the league's "willful blindness" on hits to the head.[3] Dryden, a former goaltender for the Montreal Canadiens who's in hockey's Hall of Fame for what he achieved on the ice, has been outspoken off it. As his 2017 book *Game Change* makes clear, hockey needs to—and can—adapt in the face of the urgent challenge of this new era.

Stephen Smith is a writer in Toronto, a sometime contributor to The New York Times and Canadian Geographic. He's author of the book Puckstruck: Distracted, Delighted and Distressed by Canada's Hockey Obsession (2014) and steers a blog at puckstruck.com that keeps an eye on hockey history, literature, and culture.

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