

YMCA 175

# History Papers

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## The YMCA and the Rise of Modern Sport

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The years between about 1860 and 1914 saw the beginnings of the modern sporting world. For example, the first modern Olympics were held in Athens in 1896 and many of the world sports of to-day were codified or even invented in this period, and began to move from their original homes to other countries and even other continents.

Most of these future world-sports originated in Britain or North America. The key influences on gymnastics were German and on cycling French, but these were the exceptions. Lawn tennis, table tennis and netball were invented in Britain; and it was also in Britain that association football, rugby football, hockey and the modern form of boxing were codified. Cricket and golf had long histories in England and Scotland respectively, but they now began to move across the globe. Baseball, basketball, volleyball and ice hockey were invented in the United States and Canada.

The map of modern sports reflect the travels of British and American businessmen, soldiers, teachers and missionaries – and of the YMCA.

### China

One of the most striking examples of the role of the YMCA (as well as of Christian missionaries) in the worldwide diffusion of British and American sports is China.

In traditional Chinese society physical recreations carried low social status. Elite men despised such leisure pursuits and elite women could not practise them even if they wished to do so because of foot-binding. The modern history of Chinese sport begins around 1890 with schools and colleges run by western missionaries, who included physical education and sport in the curriculum – sometimes in the face of resistance by students, who regarded such activities as degrading and/or a waste of time.

The YMCA reached China in 1885. Its involvement in sport began in 1896 when the Tientsin branch introduced basketball and athletics. The Y grew slowly at first, mainly in colleges, then more rapidly between 1908 and 1919 when branches were established in most of big cities. In 1907 Chinese YMCAs had 5000 members, with slightly over half being in colleges; in 1919 there were 48,000 members, with two-thirds being in city branches.<sup>1</sup> But the decline was almost as sudden and rapid as the rise. 1922 saw the formation of the Anti-Christian Movement, which within a few years would force many branches to close.

The Pioneers of YMCA sport in China saw it mainly as a means of attracting non-Christian male youth. But they also saw sport as building 'Christian manhood' through ideals of 'fair play' and 'teamwork'. In 1910 the International Committee of the YMCA declared its aim 'To secure for all the great cities of China both indoor and outdoor facilities for physical culture. Especially an athletic field and playground under moral Christian auspices'. (These were seen as excluding not only gambling, but any kind of financial profit.) They pleaded for 'The Three-fold Way' – 'body, mind and soul' 'developed symmetrically in all its parts' – and just as they decried the neglect of the body by earlier generations of Christians, they equally decried sports clubs 'separated from intellectual and spiritual life'.

In the quarter century from 1896 to 1922 the YMCA made several major contributions to Chinese sport and to the integration of China into the modern sporting world:

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1 Fan Hong, Huijie Zhang and Fuhua Huang, *Christianity and the Transformation of Physical Education and Sport in China* (London 2007), pp. 42-5. This section is based on their book.

(a) The YMCA School of Physical Education (1910) – which trained teachers and coaches some of whom still held leading roles in the Communist era, They also sent some potential directors of Physical Education to train in the USA.

(b) They formed links with Chinese government schools, providing training for their teachers.

(c) They had a major role in the organisation of the first national athletic championships in 1910, and the second larger event in Beijing (1914) with 298 athletes and on the first day 15,000 spectators.

(d) They were the main organisers of the second Far Eastern Championship Games, held in Shanghai in 1915. The strong interest which this event aroused has been seen as a turning-point in the Chinese adoption of Western sports. It also giving a fillip to Chinese nationalism.

The YMCA still had a big role in the organisation of the 1923 Far Eastern Games and the 1924 National Games. But these events marked a turning-point in the indigenisation of sports management. The YMCA was scapegoated for the poor Chinese performance in 1923, when they only won the soccer, while the Japanese won the tennis, swimming and athletics, and the Filipinos won at basketball, volleyball and baseball. The Anti-Christian Movement described the YMCA as 'the hounds and hawks' of the imperialists and claimed that they used sport as a kind of opium of the people to divert the youth from politics.

The era of the YMCA in Chinese sport had ended, but it had had a lasting impact.

1844

If, as Marx and Engels claimed, all history is the history of class struggles, one can equally say that all history is the history of unintended consequences.

When George Williams and his colleagues formed the YMCA in 1844 the role of their organisation in Chinese sport was a consequence not only unintended, but so remote from their intentions as to be unimaginable.

Many of the movement's founders, most notably William Shipton, expressed reservations about the growing involvement of its branches in sport and the provision of gyms, and did their best to stop it. In 1909, when it was far too late to stop anything, William Creese could only comment resignedly that 'It was born of the spirit, and now it appears to be yielding to the flesh'.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of these influential critics, 'recreation' was debated from an early stage. At the first national conference of YMCAs in 1858 Dr J.H.Gladstone, a prominent member of the Bloomsbury branch, gave a paper on 'Recreation and the Duty of YMCAs Respecting it'.<sup>3</sup> Their main work, he said, was religious, but they should also provide 'healthy amusement' – partly because 'people will amuse themselves wickedly if innocent amusements are not provided', partly because these might attract new members, partly because man is a social animal and recreation is a human need, partly because those who opposed YMCA recreations were 'modern Manichees'

He granted that religious enthusiasm for recreation can be 'taken to an extreme' and 'perhaps is so by a section of the English Church, which has acquired for itself the ridiculous reputation of teaching "Muscular Christianity"'. I shall say more later on Muscular Christianity. But it should

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<sup>2</sup> Clyde Binfield, *George Williams and the YMCA* (London 1973), p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the First Conference of the Young Men's Christian Associations of Great Britain and Ireland* (Leeds 1858), pp. 33-45

be noted that 'Manicheanism' was a favourite term of abuse of Charles Kingsley, the most famous of these 'ridiculous' Muscular Christians.<sup>4</sup>

Gladstone did not explicitly recommend sport – but in the subsequent discussion one of the three speakers favouring YMCA recreation called for YMCA cricket, and there was only one speaker who opposed recreation.

There was a considerable time-lag before any branch put these ideas into practice. Manchester was first, with swimming and cricket clubs by 1873; in 1875 they add 'Recreations of a healthy and manly character' to the list of what they provided; and in 1876 they built a gym.<sup>5</sup> Other branches followed Manchester's example, and a gym was soon seen as an indispensable part of the buildings belonging to any self-respecting branch.

### Muscular Christianity

Although the YMCA would come to be seen by many as synonymous with Christian sport, the involvement of churches and (less often) chapels in promoting sport, forming clubs and providing facilities was well under way in Britain before the Y joined in.

The key decades were the 1850s and 60s and there were three major reasons for this growing involvement. First there was the social crisis of the 1830s and 40s, a period which had seen bitter industrial conflict, the formation of the Chartist movement, the world's first mass political movement of the working class, and at Newport in 1839 the last armed uprising on the British mainland. By the later 1840s there was a widespread recognition among social elites that the lack of opportunities for recreation was one of legitimate grievances of working class. The establishment, often by Anglican clergy, of numerous 'clubs' and 'institutes' from 1848 onwards was one of the attempted solutions to this problem.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the public schools began in the 1850s to integrate organised sport, especially cricket and the various forms of football, into the curriculum. In doing so they trained a new generation of upper and upper middle class men, dedicated not so much to the traditional gentry sports of hunting and shooting, as to team games and athletics. As landowners, businessmen, teachers and Anglican clergymen, they would then go on to encourage and provide facilities for sport among their tenants, employees, pupils and parishioners, making thereby an important contributions to the sports boom of mid- and later Victorian years.<sup>7</sup>

Third there was ideology. Muscular Christianity began as a joke. The term was invented in 1857 by a reviewer of a novel by Charles Kingsley. It was used to describe a new school of Anglican writers, also including Thomas Hughes author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, who combined a liberal Christianity with vigorous enjoyment of physical recreation of all kinds, and who saw moral and religious value in sport. Most belonged to the emerging 'Broad Church' wing of Anglicanism: they advocated these ideas partly as a reaction to what they saw as the harmful influence of Evangelicals and Tractarians. Evangelicals (including of course the YMCA) were accused of a Puritanism arising from an over-rigid separation of spiritual and secular, church and world, which in particular had alienated many *men* from the church. Tractarians were accused of clericalism: their stress on the sacredness of the priestly office had encouraged the clergy to separate themselves from the laity and their concerns, including their recreations.<sup>8</sup>

Kingsley and Hughes believed that you could be a better Christian if you were physically fit – a typical day in the life of an Muscular Christian as described by Hughes might include saving

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4 Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge 1985), pp 29-41.

5 *Annual Report of Manchester YMCA, 1873, 1875, 1877* (YMCA Archive, A27, University of Birmingham Cadbury Research Library).

6 Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London 1978), pp. 35-8, 106-8.

7 J.A.Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (Lewes 1986).

8 A lot has been written on Muscular Christianity but Vance, *Sinews of the Spirit* is still the best account.

someone from drowning, dealing with a medical emergency by running a 5-minute mile to fetch a doctor, or coming to the aid of a woman who had been struck in the street. Furthermore, they insisted, God intends us to enjoy all of his good gifts, including the physical pleasures of cricket and football, swimming and running, hunting and fishing – and indeed the sexual relationship between man and wife, a special concern of Kingsley, who was a fierce critic of asceticism. It must be stressed that Hughes always insisted that moral strength is more important than physical strength – but 'the perfection of Christian manhood' requires both.<sup>9</sup> The true life is a balanced life in which body, mind and spirit each has an essential part.

The strongly Evangelical YMCA would have paid little attention to Anglican Liberals such as Kingsley and Hughes. But already in 1850s opinion was changing, albeit much more gradually, in the Evangelical world. There was a growing reaction against the more extreme stances common in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The process has been traced in detail by Dominic Erdozain. He quotes two addresses to the YMCA in the later 1850s which pointed the way to later developments, by the Anglican William Beal in 1857 and by the Baptist Hugh Stowell Brown in 1858. They used arguments which were then novel in an Evangelical context but thirty years later would have become clichés: that it was a religious duty to keep one's body in the best possible state of health; that body and soul were connected one with the other; that Christians, rather than ignoring or deprecating recreation, should focus on the best use of leisure time. Brown admitted that the Greeks had taken their adulation of the athlete too far, but went on to enthuse about 'the full development of the human frame in all its symmetry, its beauty, its activity and its strength'.<sup>10</sup>

#### North America

There were similar developments in the USA and Canada. *Tom Brown's School Days* was very popular in North America and Muscular Christianity was enthusiastically adopted by some of the American clergy – mainly those on the liberal wing of their churches. But the Evangelicals of the YMCA soon felt some of the same influences.<sup>11</sup> A key figure was the Irish-born Robert McBurney, appointed secretary of the New York City branch in 1862 at the tender age of twenty-five. In 1866 the branch changed its list of objectives to include the 'physical condition of young men' as well as the 'spiritual, mental and social condition' to which they were already committed. In 1869 McBurney appears to have been the first to propose the 'Four-Fold Plan', according to which Y should minister to all four aspects of a young man's life – bodily, social, spiritual and intellectual. Also in 1869 New York built the first YMCA gym. Other North American branches soon followed. By 1886 there were already 101 YMCA gyms in Canada and the USA.

This takes me to the debate (or at least implicit debate) between William J. Baker and Dominic Erdozain. Baker, the leading historian of sport and religion in the United States, castigates the British YMCA for being slower to adopt sport than its American counterparts.<sup>12</sup> Erdozain, in a powerful polemic, castigates the British Y for being too much involved in sport and gymnasia and thereby diverted from more important concerns

Whether or not one accepts Erdozain's criticisms of the YMCA, his research makes it clear that Baker has considerably exaggerated British/American differences. The British were a little behind the Americans, but as soon as Manchester gave the lead in 1876 there was an unstoppable momentum for the provision of gyms and of cricket, football and swimming clubs, later also of cycling clubs, in British YMCAs.

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9 See especially Thomas Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ* (London 1874).

10 Dominic Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure* (Woodbridge 2010), pp. 125-30.

11 William J. Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sports* (Cambridge MA 2007), pp. 31-41, 50-2.

12 See especially William J. Baker, 'To Pray or to Play?' *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 11 (1994), pp. 42-62.

Perhaps because of the influence of an older generation of founders, the resistances were greater in Britain, but at grass-roots level the same changes were happening and the demand for 'recreations', especially those of a 'physical' nature was equally strong.

Soon the idea of a Y without a gym seemed like a contradiction in terms. For example, a history of the Leicester YMCA published in 1901 referred to the collapse of their branch in 1870 when 'the Association could not afford very attractive rooms, and its organisations were not very numerous. It had no gymnasium and only a small library.' The revival was dated from the visit by the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody in 1883. In 1887 they acquired improved premises, including a gym. In view of his frequent criticisms of the YMCA for neglecting the spiritual side of its work, Erdozain would be interested in the statement that at the same time they were getting actively involved in support for foreign missions – 'The Christian side of the Association has never been allowed to drop into the background' – though he would no doubt see it as significant that this needed to be said. In 1898, inspired by big projects in other towns, Leicester decided to build more impressive new premises, including 'a splendid new gymnasium' – 'one of the best in the provinces. A competent instructor is engaged, and nightly many young men participate in the pleasures of organised muscular exercise.' They also had cricket, rugby, soccer, hockey and cycling clubs, as well as chess and draughts.<sup>13</sup>

There were similar new developments in Birmingham, where palatial new buildings were opened in 1904. The spirit of the times was expressed in the speeches at a meeting to celebrate the clearing of the debt in 1907. Canon Denton Thompson decried attempts to split sacred from secular, and he summed up thus the principles on which new building was designed: 'It was Christianity that sanctified the whole of life. That idea was well represented in the YMCA building by its reading room, study room, play rooms and smoke rooms, all under the same roof as they held religious meetings.' J.H. Jowett minister of Carr's Lane, the city's leading Congregational church, welcomed the fact that the YMCA had moved on since the days when he belonged to the Halifax branch 'of which the outlook was somewhat cold and confined'. 'In the past the YMCA had been associated with a flabby, emasculated piety. Goody-goody men could not do the work of the strong son of God. He wants men of strong will, clear head and fervent will to get hold of other young fellows. They could do it better than the clergy or ministers. ... It was not their business it was a crusade.'<sup>14</sup>

#### Interpretation

As these quotations suggest, there were several sides to the enthusiastic embrace of physical recreation by the Y. For many it simply gave pleasure and tightened bonds between those already belonging, while also attracting new members and associates – the latter often the majority, as Erdozain notes. It also reflected a 'holistic' vision and the belief that Christianity must engage with all areas of life: ideas once typical of the Broad Church were now shared by many Evangelicals. The concept of a local YMCA headquarters which could provide for all the needs of its members outside of working hours was very similar to the ideas behind the Institutional Church, fashionable in the USA at this time, but popular among British Nonconformists too.

What was also typical of the Evangelicals, especially of Free Church Liberal Evangelicals, of that era was the note of militancy in Jowett's speech: many of them hated militarism, but they frequently saw 'aggressive' as a term of approbation, and readily adopted a military language when advocating crusades against drink, gambling and social injustices of many kind, or in declaring their intention to 'conquer the world for Christ'. This militancy readily mixed with another side of YMCA sport – much stressed by historians of the American Y – the concern to assert a Christian masculinity.<sup>15</sup> This was a response to the perceived 'feminisation' of the

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<sup>13</sup> *Leicester YMCA. Souvenir* (Leicester 1901), YMCA Archive A49.

<sup>14</sup> *Annual Report of Birmingham YMCA 1907*, YMCA Archive A47.

<sup>15</sup> See Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America 1880-1920* (Cambridge MA 2001).

church, and to claims by less religious sportsmen that Christianity was 'unmanly'. (Back in the 1860s, when the YMCA was still hesitating, some Christian sportsmen accused the Y of being unmanly – or even 'namby-pamby'.)

The Leicester Y still apparently felt the need to refute such accusations in 1906: their prospectus for the winter programme included a photo of A.K.Yapp, later General Secretary of the YMCA, who was holding meetings 'For Men Only'. 'Mr Yapp is a Young Man's Man. A friend called him "A mass of masculinity". He stands well over 6 feet and as his photograph suggests is proportionately broad. His messages are characteristically broad, straight and manly in presentation.'<sup>16</sup>

However, if the link between masculinity and sport seemed to exclude women, the 'holistic' vision was potentially as supportive of women's as of men's physical recreation. Leicester employed Mrs C.R.Robson, the wife of their PE instructor, to run classes for women and for girls.

But what about the YWCA? This is a difficult question to answer, as the YW is largely ignored both by historians of religion and sport and by historians of women and sport – as well as in general histories of sport. But there are occasional hints in passing.

An historian of Muscular Christianity in the USA notes the rapid spread of YWCA gyms after the first came in Boston in 1884, and the fact that by 1890 the YWCA was regarded as the leading promoter of women's athletics in the US.<sup>17</sup> But he provides no detail. One historian mentions the role of the YW in the spread of netball in Britain.<sup>18</sup> Netball, which is now the national women's sport in New Zealand reached those islands in 1906. In 1907 it was already part of the programme of the Auckland YWCA.<sup>19</sup> The role of the YW in New Zealand women's cricket has also been noted.<sup>20</sup>

But the history of sport in the YWCA seems to fit few people's agendas, and remains largely unwritten.

#### The Importance of United States YMCA in Sports History

Though the differences between British and North American Ys have been exaggerated, the YMCA has a bigger place in the sporting history of the USA, and of some other countries, than in that of Britain. The British sporting boom was already well underway in 1870s when the YMCA joined in – though it made a distinctive contribution through its gyms, and one that benefited young women as well as young men. But the American Y has a place in sporting history because of the invention in 1891 by the YMCA Training School at Springfield, Massachusetts, of one of the world's most popular sports, basketball – and in 1895 another widely played sport, volleyball, was also invented by the American Y.

Basketball historians claim that their sport is the most widely played across the world, and the YMCA played a major role in its diffusion.

For example, when basketball reached France in 1898, the pioneers were the Paris YMCA – though it later became the pre-eminent Catholic sport in that country. In the same year USA annexed Puerto Rico and the YMCA followed. Very soon it became an object of concern to the Catholic clergy, who feared the attractions of basketball to Catholic youth. Also in 1898 the USA conquered the Philippines and the Y arrived in 1901. Elwood Brown as director of the Manila Y became a key figure in the development of sport in that country – founding the

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16 See pamphlets in YMCA Archive A 49.

17 Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge MA 2001), p. 148.

18 Derek Birley, *Land of Sport and Glory: Sport and British Society 1887-1910* (Manchester 1995), p. 255.

19 J.Nauright and J.Broomhall, 'A Woman's Game: The Development of Netball and a Female Sporting Culture in New Zealand 1906-1970,' *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 11 (1994), p. 392.

20 Angela Burroughs and John Nauright, 'Women's Sports in Australia and New Zealand,' in J.A.Mangan and John Nauright, *Sport in Australasian Society* (London 2000), p. 196.

Philippines Amateur Athletic Federation in 1911 and organising the first Far Eastern Games, held in Manila in 1913. By the 1920s basketball had become the national sport and volleyball was also very popular.<sup>21</sup>

While the American members of the YMCA who took Muscular Christianity to other parts of the world valued gymnastics and sport for their own sake, they also hoped that they would contribute to the spread of the Christian gospel in its Evangelical Protestant form. The extent to which this happened seems to have depended very much on context. In 1915 a member of Y in Puerto Rico noted that young men showed a keen interest in sporting facilities, but little interest in attending Bible Classes.<sup>22</sup> We have also seen how China in the early twentieth century showed an impressive growth of the YMCA and of interest in Christianity, but that both were vulnerable to the upsurge of nationalism in 1920s, directed at foreign influences generally and Christianity in particular. Enthusiasm for many of the sports brought by the YMCA and by Protestant missionaries continued, but for the time being the growth of Christianity stalled.

The outstanding example of sport and religion working together was Korea – now the Asian country with the largest percentage of Protestants.<sup>23</sup> In China Christianity and nationalism pulled in opposite directions – in Korea they pulled together, and both were in harness with sport. As in many countries at this time sport was suffused with a nationalist ethos: in Korea nationalism was directed principally against Japan, rather than against the Christian West, and Korea was the only Asian country where nationalism mingled with Muscular Christianity.

In Korea the three points of the YMCA triangle were Protestantism, Protestant sports and Korean nationalism.

#### Conclusion

What truth if any is there in Dominic Erdozain's claim that the increasing involvement of the YMCA in sport, rather than being a legitimate development out of the founders' vision, was a betrayal of that vision?

On two points I think that the evidence he cites is not sufficient to make his case.

First, it is not clear that the ever-expanding programme of athletic and educational activities was squeezing out more strictly religious activities.

At Birmingham in 1904, for example, YMCA members as well as participating in a Praying Band, a Quiet Hour, a Bible Class and a 'Conversational Bible Class' which included straight talking on issues 'of importance to young men', could bring the gospel to others through a Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, a Lodging House Mission and an Open Air Mission.<sup>24</sup> And since they were required to attend a place of worship they also presumably took part in services and other activities organised by their own church.

Second, granted that many 'associates' came to use the gym, and took no part in the Bible Studies – at Birmingham Central in 1907 there were only 250 members as against 1500 associates – it is likely that for many members the relationship between the 'religious' and the 'recreational' was not an either/or but a both/and. Here I am drawing on the example of William Kent, who was not a member of the YMCA, but whose life in south London in the early 1900s was very similar to that of many Members of the Y, and who like many of them belonged to the lower middle class. He attended a Congregational church where he took notes on the sermon at the Sunday evening service, and was also attached to a Congregational mission,

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21 Gerald K. Gems, 'The Athletic Crusade: Sport, Religion and Colonialism in the Philippines,' *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 21 (2004), pp. 1-15.

22 Antonio Sotomayor, 'The Triangle of Empire: Sport, Religion and Imperialism in Puerto Rico's YMCA, 1898-1926,' *The Americas*, 74 (2017), pp. 501-2.

23 Nam-GilHa and J.A.Mangan, 'A Curious Conjunction – Sport, Religion and Nationalism: Christianity and the Modern History of Korea,' *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 11 (1994), pp. 329-54.

24 *A Tale of Two Buildings* (1904), YMCA Archive A46.



where he took a very active part in the Bible Class and the Mutual Improvement Society, and played for the cricket team. Rather than being alternatives, as was often alleged by critics of "amusements", these various activities flowed naturally into and out of one another.<sup>25</sup>

Where Erdozain is right is in saying that the acceptance of, and indeed the increasing importance attached to sport by Evangelical Christians in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century reflected wider changes of major importance – an emphasis on the fruits of faith, rather than on faith itself, on sins rather than sin, on character rather than conversion. I disagree with his claim that this represents 'an inner secularisation of the church' – but it is still right to weigh up the gains and losses in this transition. My own view is that the gains outweighed the losses.

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25 Hugh McLeod, "'Thews and Sinews': Nonconformity and Sport," in David Bebbington and Timothy Larsen, *Christianity and Cultural Aspirations* (Sheffield 2003), p. 33.

