

The Sport of Kings: Kinship, Class and Thoroughbred Breeding in Newmarket. *By Rebecca Cassidy*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002. x + 186 pp. Index, notes, references. Cloth, \$58.00; paper, \$21.00. ISBN: cloth 0-521-80877-4; paper 0-521-00487-X.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Hill

I was recently rebuked by a critic for overlooking horse racing in a book I had written on sport and leisure in twentieth-century Britain. Horse racing, I had claimed, was not a “participant” sport and had little popular purchase in British society, except as a vehicle for gambling. The rebuke was, no doubt, deserved. Horse racing, as Rebecca Cassidy points out, is a major commercial activity. In 2000, over 7,000 races were held during 323 days of the year at 59 courses. The whole enterprise employed some 60,000 people, and 40,000 more when the betting industry (which derives 70 percent of its income from horse racing) is taken into account. Betting shops took £7 billion and generated £344 million for the government in betting tax. What is more, and this is the core of Cassidy’s argument, horse racing is a powerful source of ideas about ourselves and our society. When the celebrated jockey Gordon Richards talked about racing as “a form of public life,” he put his finger on something significant.

Cassidy pursues this issue through a case study of the racing town of Newmarket. Indeed, it is the racing town *par excellence*, known universally as “headquarters.” It is therefore exceptional, though it bears some characteristics that are to be found in other racing towns in Britain, notably in the composition and beliefs of the diverse range of people who comprise what Cassidy terms “racing society.” This, as may be imagined, is a conservative and deeply hierarchical group, riven by internal tensions though ultimately united by a love of horse racing and a hostility to “outsiders,” who are not only people who live outside Newmarket but also anyone who is not part of racing. What binds together those who are is a fundamental commitment to notions of “pedigree” (as in the thoroughbred horse) and “heredity” (as in the transmitting of influence and skill in racing from father to son), and a readiness to explain the world—both human and natural—in these blinkered terms.

The study is founded upon fifteen months of participant observation by Cassidy at Newmarket in the late 1990s. The result is a close reading of racing society in a number of its aspects. Chapters are devoted to the town itself and its racing “connections”; the culture of the race course; betting, by both “mugs” and professional punters; breeding and sales (which are a far more lucrative side of the business than racing and the prize money it might bring); the world of the stable “lad”; the relationship between horses and humans; and the matter of pedigree and the thoroughbred. Cassidy was accepted in most levels of racing society because of her preexisting knowledge of and aptitude with horses, and she apparently benefited from possessing an Irish name, which convinced many that racing was “in her blood.” The wish to believe in heredity can be that strong.

The book displays a welcome interdisciplinary vision, being informed by sociological, economic, and historical perspectives, but it is in essence an anthropologist’s study, and anthropological discourse, especially on kinship, provides the focus of debate. While Cassidy is aware of the importance of history (racing people might call it tradition) to horse racing, she herself limits consideration of it to such topics as the development of the sport’s governing body, breeding techniques, and the changing patterns of betting. She has some interesting observations on the culture of the betting shop, which challenge Ross McKibbin’s views (*Past and Present*, 1979, p. 82) about the rationality and intellectual stimulation of gambling by working-class males. Cassidy sees it as a routine activity, devoid of skill and excitement. For women, laying their bets in the course of their shopping rounds, it seemed a mechanical practice, displaying no knowledge of racing or study of the form. One woman told Cassidy: “I wouldn’t know one end of the thing from the other” (p. 73). There is also a sense that the status quo is constantly under challenge, in the present by such initiatives as AI (artificial insemination) and cloning, and that the durability of racing’s traditions is less assured than its practitioners might suppose. But there is little engagement with the important work of historians like Wray Vamplew and Mike Huggins and therefore no serious consideration of how historians have explained the racing business. The study concentrates chiefly on relationships and ideas within Newmarket racing society now.

How, then, might the book help readers of this journal? In two main ways, I think. First because there is much in Cassidy’s richly documented observation that explains the

business side of racing, which has long been in the vanguard of commercialized sport in Britain. Racing has displayed few of the “peculiar economics” that have marked sports like association football and especially cricket. Cassidy reveals how thoroughly commercialized the business is, notwithstanding the many conservative attitudes that make up its “common sense.” In the devotion to traditions of pedigree and breeding, there is an indication that this is not a rational business, but then how many businesses are? Interesting comparisons are suggested, not only with horse racing in other countries but also with other business practices. Cassidy is not, however, primarily concerned with the economics of the sport. Her emphasis is on the social and cultural processes to be found in racing. This is a study of racing society in Newmarket, rather than of Newmarket society itself; and so, while there are intriguing hints of the resentment harbored by some townspeople against racing people (over, for example, horses causing traffic congestion), such issues are not pursued. Cassidy makes a good case for the application of kinship models formerly applied to “primitive” societies to make sense of the racing community in Newmarket, and she links this hypothesis with notions of social class, showing how ideas of “nature” serve as an explanation of human society. Breeding, according to this line of thought, makes the good racehorse, just as it accounts for the “natural” superiority of some people over others. The strength of Cassidy’s analysis lies in the way she unravels the ideologies of self and society from the apparently innocent and natural practices of everyday life. Though it is of course much more difficult to apply Cassidy’s methodology to a context in which her willing and voluble respondents exist only as documentary fragments, there is nonetheless much for the historian to mull over in this precisely written and imaginative study.

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