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Payne's York Factory

"The Sports, Games, Recreations, and Pastimes of the Fur Traders: Leisure at York Factory," an article by Michael Payne, appears in Sports in Canada: Historical Readings.

Payne's article is, to a large degree, a catalogue of leisure activities habitual to the community of York Factory during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These included activities with cultural origins in Great Britain as well as those adopted from the indigenous peoples. Of the former, examples include football, a primitive game resembling modern day rugby without the impeding rules; fighting, which might or might not be seen as a sport; arm-wrestling; dog-racing; horse-riding, at least for those of the higher ranks; ice skating; swimming and bathing; hunting and fishing, though work for some, a leisure for others; and of the more sedentary sort, chess and dominoes. Gambling, it seems, was incorporated into a number of activities. Perhaps the most practised and certainly the most perfected of leisures was the consumption and sometimes manufacture of alcoholic beverages. Just as gambling added extra spice to sports and games, alcohol gave social gatherings a refreshing libation. York Factory, like other numerous contact zones, saw not only the trading of furs, but the bilateral exchange of various elements of European and Aboriginal cultures. Atypically, this largely discarnate commerce at York Factory strangely excluded most leisure related activities. Exceptions to this were the adoption of snow shoeing and canoeing on one side, card games and draughts on the other.

Certainly, the effects of York Factory leisure were not all positive, though there was no single activity that did not at least have some beneficial consequences. Football, for example, the most popular sport at York Factory, described with brutish detail as a virtual rampage where foul play was fair play, is assessed finally as being a "useful safety-valve for social tensions." (56) The description of the game though comes from an account in the Orkneys, and it is by no means certain whether York Factory practised an identical style. One aspect of the "safety valve" is also vague: it is only supposition that suggests servants took advantage of the officers participation to "get a bit of their own back." (56) Nevertheless, the encouragement provided by large alcoholic prizes offered to the winning team strongly suggest a recognition of the social benefits of football--despite it's violent tendencies--on the part of at least some York Factory authorities.

Payne is more reluctant to support the positive benefits of sporadic and impromptu fights which took place, admitting though that, as with the more organised prize-fights, spectators did derive entertainment. Gambling, though sometimes criticised by company officers, was nevertheless an integral part of many sports and recreations back in England and was therefore more or less tolerated. Alternately, there are of course the numerous unfortunate side effects of activities which in every other way were wholesome pastimes: the numerous accidents of skaters and the mortal tragedies of swimmers. Hunting by officers was common and encouraged, but the company took numerous measures to prevent lower class participation since their goal was extra income and led to illicit trade. Perhaps the greatest cause of disharmony though was alcohol consumption, the subject of great vilification by Reverend Gardiner. Touching all levels of the community, it led to dereliction of duty, arguments, physical violence, disruption of social gatherings and even to crime and murder. But alcohol too is shown to have positive effects: firstly, as an unstated though implicit social safety-valve; secondly, as a means of control.

Leisure, though hardly traded between the two cultures of York Factory, was nevertheless a commodity to be increasingly controlled and used increasingly *to* control. Football was predominant in this respect. Its close association with drunkenness--an association ironically bolstered by the authorities and the prizes offered--meant that the game was at times either discouraged or forbidden. Matches sometimes were permitted though as a reward for good behaviour. Goose hunting, for example, was given a competitive bent by offering a prize to the hunter who brought in the first bird of the spring. Though ostensibly an act of sporting play, it was clearly a thinly disguised bribe designed to keep the slaves slaving. The illicit fur trade, a border-line leisure, was quickly arrested by measures including the raising of officers salaries, provision of bounties on total volume, and finally reducing payments to the level offered natives. And such manipulations were not restricted to the lower orders and natives: office officers were encouraged to exercise and given time off in this regard, not from magnanimous management but as treatment for ill health and as "preventative medicine," (60) thereby actually maximising their effectiveness. Alcohol though was the most common leisure related matter used as a means of control; and *its* control was essential to that process. It was used as a major item of trade and "as a reward for dangerous and demanding work or to mark achievement . . ." Mixed messages were therefore received when the Hudson Bay Company began first by restricting and then abolishing the trade of alcohol with natives and then by limiting quantities allowed to their employees. What was at first a practical measure to maintain order became increasingly a matter of morals, especially with the arrival of missionaries, whose

narrow role as proselytiser of natives was quickly enlarged to include that of moral watchdog. The manifestation of power through leisure was exhibited in a more subtle though equally common variation: by the separation of leisure activities into restricted strata of the community, it was used to effectively reinforce the class system. Examples include horse riding by senior officers and fly fishing, where restrictions of equipment are the *modus operandi*. As well as this, the ironic adoption, also by the officers, of hunting as pure leisure, otherwise an act of primary sustenance by the Indian and as a means of additional income for lower classes.

Payne makes use of both primary and secondary sources. Archive materials such as PAC and HBA are typical primary texts. Providing first hand accounts, they naturally suffer from both a class and gender bias, though this is only to be expected. We see more serious shortcomings in the secondary sources. Joseph Strutt's *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England; Including the Rural and Domestic Recreations, May Games, Mummeries, Shows, Processions, Pageants, and Pompous Spectacles, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* was first published in 1801 and is indicative of the archaic nature of some texts. Elsewhere, Payne extracts facts from secondary sources, the canoe race account in Campbell's *The North West Company*, whilst stripping away its interpretative context and so revealing a certain narrowness of vision.

Payne's style certainly avoids the contorted eloquence of narcissistic scholarship which defies criticism by defying comprehension, but instead we are offered a simplistic style which seems indicative of simplistic thinking as well as a simplistic reading of history. Thus we are informed, in prosaic terms, the oxmoronian assessment that natives "placed a good deal of *value* on leisure." (My italics)(53) This "value" is remarkable in a society that possessed no monetary system and which, like other pre-industrial societies, did not distinguish between work and leisure, whose leisure was "spontaneous."(52) Payne's lax style also allows for annoying repetition, providing not only a duplication of information, but sometimes identical phrasing. In this way we are informed twice that alcohol was given as a prize to the hunter bringing in the first spring goose; twice that sedentary games had their devotees; twice that some took pleasure in snowshoeing Similarly, the structure leaves much to be desired. Payne begins his essay in laboured verbosity, with the pretence of learnedness. Meandering through a host of topics including a philosophical and almost etymological examination into the nature and meaning of "leisure," "recreation" and other difficult terms, Payne displays a mastery of circumlocution. Any thesis statement that might at one time have existed was clearly hunted out--probably as an act of work rather than leisure--by the final draft. Actually, it was not killed outright, but was sent scuttling to the final paragraph where it hides disguised as a conclusion. The lack of rapport exhibited in the

introduction is made painfully clear by the clumsy transitional sentence: "Obviously not all these changes affected the recreation and leisure habits of the fur traders." (52) Beside the circuitous and pointless introduction, the remaining body of text lacks, to some degree at least, certain coherence: Payne moves with apparent logic from physical to sedentary activities to recreations which were "neither sports nor games" (57)--travel is one example--but then proceeds to skating and swimming. The already noted problem of repetition is another indication of the somewhat flighty structure.

The chief failing of Payne's essay, however, is lack of depth. Essentially we are offered little more than a catalogue of sports and leisures, offering no surprises and infrequent analysis. Many accounts of fur traders might indeed have excluded mention of recreation, just as Suetonius failed to mention Augustus' toga, but we hardly assume he therefore went about in his birthday suit. Are we really to be surprised that the people of York Factory swam in the river? That they skated on ice? That they played cards and drank alcohol? Are we really offered any real insight by such revelations? Indeed, it seems as if Payne positively avoided any interpretative analysis of the information. The adoption of hunting by the officers as a leisure activity, for example, demonstrates the continuation of a long standing English custom. What was appropriate for the landscaped and manicured English countryside with its scarcity of game and abundance of idle landlords is not necessarily apt for the uncultured terrain of Canada. Does this suggest a difficulty in coming to terms with the new context of a new continent; further support of an orphaned class system; or something altogether different? Is the push towards temperance in York Factory nothing more than a breaking wave sent splashing from the shores of Victorian England, or a local recognition of the problems of alcoholism learned from the destruction of native dignity? In other words, is this evidence of a developing sense of national guilt? We learn nothing from the statement that people of York factory swam, but we might learn something from the mortal accident where a white woman and a native woman ". . . much respected by Europeans" swam together. Payne offers this gem without even a passing comment. It is proof only that people swam and that swimming was dangerous! Besides this inability to explore matters that really might offer insight, Payne makes a number of statements which reveal nothing more than his own bias. Boxing, for example, is described as a sport, but brawling ". . . ought not to be dignified by [such a term]" (56)--even with an audience present. Officers took to snowshoes as a leisure, but the men, Payne hazards, saw it as work. In a similar vein, only officers saw hunting and fishing as leisure. Both these statements are made despite York Factory being a community which in many ways resembles a pre-industrial village where, by Payne's own admission, leisure and work were not unduly separated.

The elusive thesis statement, finally suggesting that a new and different picture of fur trading communities might be painted, is dependant, of course, on the narrowness and ignorance of the former view. By providing little more than a catalogue of sports, Payne essentially reveals himself to be more of an antiquarian than a historian, and the pedestrian nature of the facts presented serve rather to confirm our original idea of fur trader life than provide a new enlightened picture.

Works Cited

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