Records, language and discourses: new histories of Scottish sport

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Introduction

The second annual symposium of the British Society of Sports History’s Scottish network took place on 29 October 2014, at the Highland Archive Centre in Inverness. The meeting and presentations fulfilled the network’s remit of engaging academics, practitioners, community historians, and journalists in a dialogue on different aspects of the history of Scottish sport – social, political, and cultural. But the discussion went beyond the buzzwords and talking points that are traded in at conferences. Indeed, for those who were at the event, it seemed like an exciting time, as many attendees were participating in newly-curated or newly-funded projects of great importance to the discipline of Scottish history, with sport acting as a crucial theme in many of them. Perhaps part of this adventurousness was due to the time the meeting: six weeks after the 18 September 2014 Scottish independence referendum, where the mantra of ‘exploring new possibilities’ had arguably taken a whole new meaning. But, in the period this introduction has been (in late June/early July 2016), the UK has voted to leave the European Union, and Scotland’s radically different approach to this referendum – one which keeps independence firmly on the table – ensures that taking these new roads may no longer be about just the creation of something new, but the end of some kind of beginning. The phrase ‘exciting times’ does not quite cover the apprehension felt by many, this at the end of almost a decade of austerity in the higher education and museums/heritage sectors and beyond. This collection of articles, based on papers given at the 2014 BSSH Scotland symposium, addresses potential new routes of
travel within the historiography of Scottish sport, and introduces us to new projects and collections. It is intended, once again, to keep us on track: as a starting point for something new regarding the historiography of Scottish sport, and why sport can tell us so much about the place of Scotland in the world, as well as Scots’ own perception of their universe.

The non-football historiography of sport in Scotland
The previous historiography of Scottish sport is not inconsiderable, but is nevertheless dominated by several recurring themes and an uneven geographical and temporal distribution. It is perhaps unfair of Graeme Morton and Trevor Griffiths, in their recent article on trends in the nineteenth-century historiography of Scotland, to state that there has been ‘a lack of sustained investigation into the place of sport in Scottish society’. They are right, however, to state the historiography is dominated by football, specifically the ‘Old Firm’ of Celtic and Rangers, present company included here.1 This collection, then, marks a significant departure from that historiography: here, there are no articles on the association game; and, for the most part, they will not be mentioned within this introduction. In fact, when the author completed his own PhD in 2010, its focus on early west of Scotland association football was somewhat anomalous, given that two other history PhD students at the University of Glasgow, Fiona Skillen and Eilidh Macrae, were moving in a different direction. Skillen’s PhD focused on the development of women’s sport in Scotland during the interwar period, and was based on archival and newspaper material, along with oral history testimonies.2 Macrae’s work, meanwhile, focused on women’s sport throughout the lifecycle: her doctoral research used a wide breadth of oral history testimonies to illuminate the place of girls’ and women’s sport and physical activity within Scottish schools and broader society during the period 1930-1970.3

The historiography of Scottish sport has two major edited collections, neither of which are particularly recent: Grant Jarvie and Graham Walker’s classic 1994 collection Scottish Sport in the Making of the Nation: Ninety-Minute Patriots?, and Jarvie and John Burnett’s patchier Sport, Scotland and the Scots from 2000.4 The first is especially noteworthy for including a variety of authors and perspectives, while the second examines histories of individual sports, again written by individual authors. The history of Scottish sport, as a whole, lacks a comprehensive text like Richard Holt’s Sport and the British which can provide an overall
frame of reference; and, as in Sport and the British, Scottish sport is often part of a wider ‘British’, ‘four nations’ framework within the more sizable texts. In fact, the closest book towards Holt’s end is Burnett’s excellent 2000 volume Riot, revelry, and rout: sport in lowland Scotland before 1860, which has a very different purpose than Sport and the British. That is not, of course, to say that major volumes on ‘British’ sport have not covered Scotland in detail. Wray Vamplew’s foundational 1988 economic history Pay up and play the game: professional sport in Britain, 1875-1914 foregrounds a great deal of its research within Scotland during the period. JA Mangan’s highly influential 1981 text Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school has at its centre a discussion of ‘Lorettonianism’, a muscular educational philosophy on sport which derived its name from the Musselburgh school. More recent articles by Joyce Kay on private sports clubs and the grassroots development of tennis in ‘Britain’ similarly foreground developments in twentieth-century Scotland. The nation is making appearances in more recent, major texts, the best example possibly being Tony Collins’ The Oval World: A Global History of Rugby, in which the development of Borders rugby in Scotland has a starring role. Other recent monographs additionally feature Scotland at its peripheries, including Charlotte Macdonald’s Strong, Beautiful, and Modern: National Fitness in Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Canada 1935-1960, and David Dee’s Sport and British Jewry: Integration, ethnicity and anti-Semitism 1890-1970. So Scotland, even if in a fleeting manner, is making it into broader sports history texts. But again, what are the major themes within the Scottish historiography itself?

The majority of the scholarly historiography on Scottish sport can roughly be divided into six major themes. Gender has already been mentioned, with regard to Skillen’s and Macrae’s work, although – at least within a Scottish context – their work builds upon Irene Reid’s article on the gendering of historic and contemporary Scottish sport, as well as Neil Tranter’s chapter on nineteenth-century women’s sport in central Scotland. The second theme, as discussed before, is class, and is viewed largely through the prism of football. However, there is more here than just ‘the beautiful game’: Tranter’s exhaustive work on class in sport in nineteenth-century central Scotland discusses a far broader array of community sporting activities, and with evidence gathered in census records, newspapers, and Statistical Accounts of Scotland. Similarly, Peter Bilsborough’s MLitt work on the development of sport in Glasgow during the Victorian and Edwardian period sought to
explain the grassroots development of sport at various levels. Vamplew’s, Kay’s, and Jane George’s work on golf interlink class and professional status with gender and space. Win Hayes’ work focused heavily on class, professionalism, and respectability within swimming during the nineteenth century. Civic identity and celebrity were as crucial factors in swimming as they were in football: Walker’s 1994 piece on swimmer Nancy Riach, in the context of the hugely successful interwar/post-war swimming programme of David Crabb at Motherwell, indicate that historians have barely scratched the surface here of what it may be possible to discuss.

Local patriotism was not the only identifier regarding Riach: there was also the third major theme discussed: national identity, either with Scotland as a separate nation from the UK, or Scotland within the UK and Empire. Reid’s and Jarvie’s work have led here: their 1999 article on sport and nationalism is still the seminal piece on the topic, coming out as it did at the re-convening of the Scottish Parliament. Reid’s own work on shinty and nationalism, and Jarvie’s classic 1991 book on the history and mythology of Highland gatherings, were definitive in setting the tone for future studies. Skillen’s and McDowell’s research on the 1970 British Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, for instance, looked at the contradictory issues of ‘Scottish’ presentation and domestic politics within an international setting.

Tied in with national identity is the fourth theme: the Scottish diaspora. Tanja Bueltmann’s recent Scottish Historical Review piece on Highland gatherings in dominion-era New Zealand ties has ensured that sport, national identity, and the Scottish diaspora are discussed well within the academic historical mainstream in Scotland. Some of the oldest, most authoritative work in this field might not even be considered part of the ‘Scottish’ historiographical canon: for instance, to find a book on Scots in Canadian sport, one has to go back to Gerald Redmond in 1982. More recent historiography, aside from Bueltmann’s work, intimates that studies of the diaspora can be indistinguishable from research on sport and Empire; this can be seen in work by Markku Hokkanen and Nick Aplin on Scots and sporting culture in Malawi and Singapore respectively. As McDowell and Skillen stated regarding the 1986 Commonwealth Games boycott, this relationship was not unproblematic. Conversely, Joseph Bradley’s work on the history of the Gaelic Athletic
Association in Scotland, beyond his work on Celtic FC, should keep historians open to the idea that the descendents of migrants to Scotland celebrate diasporas of their own.  

Of course, one cannot discuss migration to and from Scotland without discussing the fifth major theme: **land and Gaeldom**. The research here is the most varied: it features Lorna Jackson’s and Hamish Telfer’s separate works on sport in nineteenth-century Argyll and the north-west coast respectively. It also features the considerable works of broadcaster Hugh Dan MacLennan on the history of shinty, work that also connects with sport in the Scottish diaspora. Alastair Durie, meanwhile, has examined grouse hunting and golf, tied in more broadly with his work on the history of Scottish tourism. Work on land and sport in Scotland, of course, does not just feature material on lands deep within the Gaidhealtachd: John Tolson’s biography of Ayrshire sportsman and patron Archibald William Montgomerie, the thirteenth earl of Eglinton, certainly qualifies. Others have examined specific landmarks in the context of sport. McDowell recently examined the history of Ailsa Craig, and how the island intersects with the worlds of golf, curling, and broader leisure. MacLennan, meanwhile, has discussed the history of the Ben Race, an annual challenge competition held at Ben Nevis. Paul Gilchrist takes a different approach, focusing on outsiders’ meanings of one specific landmark – the Old Man of Hoy in Orkney – as a scaling of it by six climbers in July 1967 was broadcast live in a BBC television programme, an unprecedented media event. The study of the land, and its relationship with Scottish sport, is a crucial one: Jarvie and Jackson together have examined the history of deer forests in Scotland. But activist-turned-Scottish Green Party Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) Andy Wightman’s recent volume on the ownership of Scotland’s land has a significant element which focuses on the history of deer hunting within Scotland. The role, then, that such works can play in informing contemporary policy is immense.

That figures to be the case for the sixth major theme: **education**. Skillen and Macrae’s has previously mentioned. Beyond his famous book, Mangan has also written a chapter on John Guthrie Kerr and his introduction of school sport to the curriculum of Allan Glen’s School in Glasgow, after his 1890 appointment as headmaster. Bilsborough has also written a crucial piece on the introduction of sport to Glasgow schools more generally prior to 1914.
Anderson, meanwhile, has discussed the role that university sport played in the creation of ‘corporate’ cultures at Scottish institutions during the long nineteenth century.37

Still more of the academic work that has been written on the history of Scottish sport is unclassifiable within these broad strokes. Callum Brown’s piece on the references to sport in the files of the Scottish Office during the early twentieth century influenced Skillen and Macrae in their work.38 Richard Penman looked at the alleged ‘failure’ of cricket, in the sole academic history piece on the sport in Scotland.39 Telfer’s doctoral thesis, meanwhile, provides a unique look at the development of cross-country running in Scotland during the Victorian period; its look at sociability amongst clubs – a scene which criss-crossed heavily with football and cricket – was influential on the author’s PhD work.40 There are, meanwhile, two narrative but academically-grounded histories of Scottish swimming: Bilsborough’s small book from 1988, and Malcolm MacCallum’s more recent article on the first half of the twentieth century.41 Curling is surprisingly under-represented: an excellent geography PhD thesis by Fiona Reid is our best academic guide to the history of curling.42 The website of Bob Cowan and the late David B. Smith, in fact, is perhaps the single greatest anthology on the history of ‘the roaring game’.43

The special issue
The first two pieces in this special issue take the historiography of Scottish sport well beyond its usual temporal and disciplinary comfort zones, respectively. It starts off with Wade Cormack’s piece on social control in the rules and governance of early modern sport in the royal burghs in the north of Scotland. Cormack’s piece is part of his ongoing doctoral research at the University of the Highlands and Islands’ Centre for History in Dornoch, and is funded by the Royal Dornoch Golf Club – a rare funded PhD studentship on the history of Scottish sport. Cormack’s article here is part of a much broader research project that, while certainly benefiting the academic historiography, additionally has a significant remit for community engagement.

Golf, as previously discussed, is certainly not a new topic within the historiography. But this issue’s next piece, by Magdalena Warth-Szczyglowska, takes our knowledge of golf in a very different direction by applying lexicographical analysis to the historic terminology used in
the sport. Warth-Szczyglowska’s article is a product of the *Pilot Historical Thesaurus of Scots*, an AHRC-funded project aimed at initiating a digital resource for the historic Scots language. This piece potentially opens a new line of enquiry for historians of Scottish sport; and, in the broader scheme of things, offers another way forward with regard to analysing the language of sport beyond that which historians can offer.

Simon Glassock’s article brings us into the twentieth century, and focuses on a moment in time within Scottish rugby union: specifically, the New South Wales Waratahs’ 1927 tour of Scotland. His piece places Scottish sport firmly within broader dialogues on Scotland’s place within the British Empire. Much of Glassock’s primary research was performed digitally, and such an approach allowed him to examine a wide variety of appropriate Scottish and Australian newspapers. As more collections of newspapers become digitised, historians might well be looking forward to the possibility of similar-themed pieces on transnational histories.

The last paper shifts the geography somewhat to the Highlands and Islands. Gordon Cameron introduces us to the *Bealach na Bà* (‘The Pass of the Cattle’), a single-track road on the Applecross Peninsula in Ross-shire. However, the *Bealach na Bà* was more than just a treacherous thoroughfare: it was a site of sport, especially of motor racing and cycling. Cameron, in his time at the Applecross Heritage Centre, had privileged access to a variety of documents held by the Applecross Historical Society; and, through this material and newspaper accounts, is able to tease out deeper meanings with regard to the road being a well-known landscape of challenge within mainstream sporting cultures.

**Conclusion**

This collection both emphasises previous themes within the historiography of Scottish sport, and seeks to open up new geographic, temporal, and thematic ground. It is far from a complete attempt to do so, but it helps to remind scholars – those who work within the history of sport, those who work in ‘mainstream’ Scottish history, and those who work within other disciplines of sports studies – that innovative work is being done in the field, and that there is still a long way to go. In a time when optimism in the future seems in short
supply, this issue is a reminder that continued investment in our research – of the literal and figurative sense – can pay scholarly dividends. As Scottish sport, along with the rest of the nation, enters a new, uncertain phase, historians will have a crucial role to play in helping to articulate what it all means.


7 Wray Vamplew, Pay up and play the game: Professional sport in Britain, 1875-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


13 See Reference 1.


