

Citation style

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The title of Nicholas Piercey's book is honest with regard to some of its ambitions: namely, this is not a history of Dutch football previous to 1920. Its aim is very different to providing a linear history of the early years of the sport in the Netherlands: instead, it is to give historians of sport a primer on both the challenges of archival research in the history of sport, and the limitations of long-form history. Piercey's conversational tone is accordingly very different from that used in typical historical monographs, one which he would say attempts too hard to create some kind of objective reality to fit a narrative which might not have existed in the first place. If his aim was to write a book (based on a PhD thesis) which is provocative and forces readers to think about many of the issues raised by having to make sense out of archival research, then he has largely succeeded. And, as UCL Press's price for the paperback edition is fairly cheap (not counting an open-access PDF of the text, which can be accessed from some universities), there is no reason why those scholars wanting to examine these issues should not get themselves a copy of Piercey's volume. Whether or not it will be to everyone's tastes is another matter. There are some fairly sizeable qualifiers with Piercey's work, namely with regard to the other major aim of his book: seeking to engage both historians and a wider audience with the potential postmodern approaches to history have to offer. On the contrary, some of Piercey's approaches towards that end here might actually discourage that.

Along with a sizeable introduction and a shorter conclusion (more on those later), the title hints at the basic structure of the book: there are four primary 'histories' (chapters two, three, four, and five) which ostensibly have four different foci on early-20th century football in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. These two cities were not chosen at random: not only are they the Netherlands' two biggest cities (and arguably two biggest football towns), but they have radically different post-Second World War histories, in terms of the preservation and rebuilding of infrastructure. In his first chapter, Piercey posits these post-war developments as a means of understanding that, as in the UK, football's history (or 'histories' perhaps, in this case) can be used as a means of understanding social change within rapidly-altering urban environments. There were plenty of places to play football in ostensibly municipal grounds in pre-First World War Rotterdam, but more densely-populated Amsterdam was a different story altogether. In both cities, a combination of public money and private subscriptions from wealthy donors ensured that one first-class football stadium in each city would be built. Piercey correctly identifies the football stadia's influential patrons as being interested in what they would see as a kind of social improvement, an interest which undoubtedly involved a means of steering the moral message and civic identification of sport. In any respect, the Sparta Stadium in Rotterdam (home to the club of the same name) was viewed as a greater success than the new Sportpark in Amsterdam, whose poor turf and surrounding infrastructure was seen to be indicative of a less well-managed city, in the run-up to the War. The first 'history' works roughly within the form and framework of more traditional histories, as does the chapter four (the third 'history'), which examines the discourses (very much in the Foucauldian sense of the word) prevalent in the Dutch sporting media of the period. The subaltern discourses, as Piercey identifies them, include the construction of civic identities, 'amateurism' (around what unsurprisingly is a class-based fulcrum), timing, and discipline. The major sports papers in the west of the Netherlands were crucial in creating dialogue, of course, but it also had the effect of legitimising the country's fledgling national football association, the Nederlandsche Voetbalbond (NVB), as the central power within in early Dutch football.

The two other 'histories' will cause a far bigger stir. Within the history of sport (if we can refer to it as a 'discipline' rather than an 'area' within history, sport studies, or both), the precedent for the form, tone, and purpose of these two histories exists within Synthia Sydnor's still-controversial 1998 *Journal of Sport History* article on the history of synchronised swimming.⁽¹⁾ In chapter three, Piercey recalls his own experiences in attempting to research the biographical information of many of Rotterdam's leading

footballers in 1914, the period in the immediate run-up to the start of the First World War, in which the Netherlands would eventually declare its neutrality. Attempts to obtain this information were understandably difficult, so Piercey's means of introducing these biographical details – and arguably enrich them – is to freeze-frame the lives of several footballers at the beginning of August 1914, examining where they might have been on a given day, their daily routines, and their relationships with other people. Piercey admits that elements of this are fictionalised: they are a means of speculating when only some pieces of the puzzle exist. It may be beyond the remit of this review to determine whether or not this 'history' meets some kind of literary standard, but it is nevertheless an intriguing experiment. The fourth 'history' (chapter five), meanwhile, features an ultimately fruitless quest by Piercey to ascertain what, if any, references to football are made in the diaries of Cornelis Johannes Karel van Aalst, the director of Amsterdam's Sportpark project. van Aalst was heavily involved in sport in the city, but was probably more known within civic circles for his links with Dutch international trade. Despite Piercey's initial excitement at discovering these diaries, the only connection they had with anything related to football was van Aalst's lobbying on behalf of JC 'Kick' Schröder, a former footballer for early Amsterdam club RUN Amstels Progress (RAP), who had become editor of *De Telegraaf* and had run afoul of the country's fuzzily-defined wartime neutrality laws, which forbade the press from expressing support for either side of the conflict. Piercey's two non-traditional histories do very well to introduce the political context which football took place in during the time period. They certainly present several alternative means of writing histories.

So, in many respects, Piercey's book is a success, if not always in providing a coherent recreation of football in Amsterdam and Rotterdam during the period, then at least in completing quite a bit of what he actually sets out to do: get those reading his book to ask questions about how they research history and how they end up composing it with the spare parts one finds in archives. Yet, he has another aim at which he is arguably less successful: democratising the form. Piercey believes that thinking about these other questions can allow history to be used as a medium for more radical, progressive reinterpretations that involve non-specialists. That, of course, is absolutely true. Piercey, however, takes a militant approach towards policing the boundaries between history and 'History': the thing that historians do at university (more on this point in a minute). The introduction and conclusion contain a lot of linguistic red herrings such as this, and it is questionable whether the punter on the street is going to be interested in how academics label the internal architecture of their workplaces and structures. I do not think, in many respects, most history academics based at universities would even dispute these problematic relationships, so reiterating a seemingly obvious point has the effect of making academics seem obsessed with themselves. Outwith the introduction and conclusion, Piercey still needs to find a more direct language to communicate in. If recent events have proven that postmodernism's critique of 'truth' and 'facts' seems fully on point, its scholars have still not found a language to communicate in that is any more convincing than the 'mainstream' academic 'histories' they decry. I, for one, cannot see Albion Rovers or Stenhousemuir supporters, enjoying pies and Bovril out on the terraces on a cold, wet Saturday in the Scottish winter, paying too much attention to a debate about whether or not 'history' needs to be capitalised in different contexts.

Speaking of which, Piercey states that he is 'sceptical' of 'History'. In his mind, academic historians are gatekeepers of knowledge, and the way in which they research and compose history perpetuates a highly exclusive hierarchy. The history of sport, he states, has been too empiricist, and especially conservative and resistant to change. That might be so, of course – we have all experienced the problems of research described in Piercey's body text – but he does not actually cite examples of journals or academics' work which he finds insufficiently radical. In Piercey's introduction, his one in-text discussion of the historiography of sport is to Douglas Booth's 2005 book *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History*, considered one of the seminal postmodern texts on the history of sport.⁽²⁾ Thus, historians of sport can

assume that Piercey is including you and me within the ‘royal you’ of historians who are too square to understand what postmodernists are trying to do. Booth’s work has been critiqued by the likes of Tony Collins, Allan Guttman (a bit too harshly), and (most eloquently) Martin Johnes, who shares many of the same criticisms of postmodernism with this reviewer. (3) However, a blanket criticism levelled by Piercey on a whole group of people working within a certain area implies that there is no need to listen to any of these authors anyway. A passive-aggressive approach towards critiquing a discipline/area does not actively seek any kind of debate, or indeed any meaningful critique of other work which exists on a given topic. It does not allow for the possibility that there is, in fact, any kind of pre-existing debate on conclusions, language, historiography, and form which is already taking place within the journals and monographs in that area. Excluding what appears in the endnotes, the authors that Piercey speaks of in the introduction are almost exclusively postmodern historians and theorists. It leads one to conclude that, despite attempting to engage other academic historians or democratising the production of history, Piercey’s primary audience is within postmodernism’s own echo chamber. Is the purpose of this book to revolutionise the way that histories of sport are researched and written, or is this solely an intellectual exercise? Piercey has managed to convince himself of the novelty of his own work – and elements of it are highly original – but it does not exist in a vacuum. Some of the most beneficial aspects of postmodernism’s influence can be seen in current generation of academic historians via their social media and blog posts, many of whom speak a great deal – and, like Piercey, in the first person – about the challenges they face regarding historical research and writing. Nowhere is digital media mentioned by Piercey, a development which arguably does change and add reflexivity to the productions of histories and historians, while conversely increasing the frequency at which ‘alternative histories’ (a la Kellyanne Conway) can be made easily available via a re-tweet. And of course, despite Piercey’s admitting nerves about writing his ‘history’ of the Rotterdam football players, his book (to give one example) was released 32 years after Natalie Zemon Davis’ *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a book which has caused many an argument on the subject of historical ‘storytelling’ in undergraduate history writing/historiography modules.(4) If this is old news for history students, those coming to the history of sport from outwith history might have a different perspective. For instance, despite Piercey’s increasing suspicion throughout the book of the inherent power of sport as a force for social good, trained sociologists of sport (many of whom publish articles within the history of sport umbrella) may wonder why it took Piercey so long to finally reach a definitive conclusion about what Jay Coakley refers to as ‘The Great Sport Myth’.(5) There is a lot to recommend *Four Histories About Early Dutch Football*, in that it does manage to accomplish a great deal of what it sets out to do. Academic historians of sport will relate to many of the problems Piercey has faced when putting together his histories, and the book is accordingly useful for thinking about what alternative futures of the study and writing of history might be. It also effectively uses sport to provide snapshots of urban Dutch society at a crucial juncture of 20th-century history. The challenge for Piercey, then, along with other postmodernists, is to find a more populist, less alienating way of framing some of the debates which they believe need to take place within history-at-large and academic history. Finding some kind of common language is crucial here, especially on a topic which has considerable resonance outside of academia, and a steadily increasing interest within it. Postmodernist histories of sport should not just be critical of other academic histories. They should ask the same critical questions of their own form and practice as of those within the ‘History’ practice; namely: What is the relevance of our work? Who are our primary and secondary audiences? How does our work explain the world we live in, and where might we be heading? If Piercey’s work takes us down that road, then we will know it has succeeded.

Notes

1. S. Sydnor, 'A history of synchronized swimming', *Journal of Sport History*, 25 (1998), 252–67.
2. D. Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History* (Abingdon, 2005).
3. T. Collins, 'Work, rest and play: recent trends in the history of sport and leisure', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42 (2007), 397–410; A. Guttmann, 'Review essay: the ludic and the ludicrous', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25 (2008), 100–12; M. Johnes, 'Archives, truths and the historian at work: a reply to Douglas Booth's "Refiguring the Archive"', *Sport in History*, 27 (2007), 127–35.
4. N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1984).
5. J. Coakley, 'Assessing the sociology of sport: On cultural sensibilities and the great sport myth', *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*, 50 (2015), 402–6.

Author's Response

Nicholas Piercey

I would like to thank Matthew McDowell for providing a fair and balanced review of my book. He notes two of my main aims (to provoke readers to consider the nature of history and archival work, as well as engaging a wider audience in this debate using sporting history as a medium to do so) and I am particularly grateful for his engagement with both of these themes, his appraisal of the proposals that I have presented and his warm and considerate comments as well as his critique of my success in meeting both aims.^(1a) Although, naturally, I do not entirely agree with all of his perspectives, his review has helped me gain a greater appreciation of my own place within the field as well as some personal concerns which were perhaps lurking under the surface of the book. These undoubtedly changed the way I presented my histories and will inform how I approach my own work in future.

McDowell notes that: (1) I take a 'militant' approach to my consideration of the differences between 'history' and 'History', between mere writing about the past and the practice of professional historians in universities and elsewhere; (2) that I encompass all historians within my critique of the field by virtue of not providing specific references or examples of those with whom I disagree, providing an at times 'passive aggressive' approach and; (3) that I overplay the novelty of my work by not acknowledging the wider debate. In regards to these critiques, while I certainly did not consciously intend the second or third, I have to concede that – especially in the introductory chapter – this can be the case. It is worth me being explicit immediately in regard to the second point by saying that I certainly do not wish to lump all historians (of whatever form) together or to treat all historians as ignorant of theories and challenges to the field; if this is the impression I have given, then this is not one I would want to further.

Dealing with the first two points, McDowell sees the tone in places as being passive aggressive or militant towards other historians. This is perhaps a reflection of my own uncertainty about my position within the field of history (or perhaps sports history or Dutch history); the uncertainties of an Early Career Researcher in an uncertain career market, constructing his first book (from a sprawling doctoral thesis), at the margins of the fields of both history and sporting history, after nearly a decade of research and with changing opinions, ideas and aims. At the time of writing this book, my perspective of the historical field was coloured by my own conditions – just as my perspective on sport was too. A perspective of being on the outside, of not quite fitting in and struggling to find a place within professional academic History. At times, I try too much to resolve this uncertainty by demonstrating my worth to the field while also being frustrated at my place within it. As de Certeau notes, the place of the author is vital in the historical production (2a); in this work perhaps it was even more important than I had realised.

That I chose not to address specific historians' work was a deliberate choice. I am aware of most of the works McDowell cites (although not all, and I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to engage with those I am not aware of – coming into contact with new ideas and

theories was another personal aim in constructing this book). However, I was acutely conscious of the antagonistic personal debates between ‘postmodernists’ and ‘traditionalists’, epitomised by responses to Keith Jenkins’ work, and wanted to avoid this form of personal attack at all costs.(3a) Instead, I hoped to outline how I believe history could (and in my case did) operate. That the first chapter focused on my own methods and ideas was intended to allow the reader to critique or follow my approach, to see where the gaps would be in the histories constructed.

While I disagree with McDowell about ‘linguistic red herrings’ and stand by the theoretical ideas behind my work, I will concede that by taking this approach, which is indeed sometimes provocative and lapses into the polemical, and by not referring to newer debates in historiography or sporting history explicitly, it can give a sense of an attack against something without a defined target or a defence against something which seemingly isn’t there. Though I certainly intend to be provocative, I did not want to be provocative just for the sake of it. At times, my attempt to be provocative may work against the idea of history as a reasoned debate, which I passionately believe in and with the benefit of hindsight, it is an approach which may not work as effectively as I would have liked.(4a) This is certainly one of the gaps in this work and something that I will consider in future. Perhaps it can be put down to youthful exuberance! I do hope, however, that this theoretical introduction will still be of use to readers to consider the historical proposals which follow, to reflect on where they have come from and perhaps to think against them and propose new challenges.

Addressing the third point, McDowell notes that ‘Piercey has managed to convince himself of the novelty of his own work’. I found this sentence particularly striking, not because of the critique, but because it was precisely my lack of certainty about the work which has perhaps led to ‘novelty’ being overstated. My uncertainty in the field and desire to demonstrate that my work is something new (and as any historian who has filled in a request for funding knows ‘new’ means ‘relevant’ and ‘good’) has led to an overstating of its novelty. Indeed, as I state in the introduction, no work operates in isolation and while I believe aspects of this are novel, such as the collection of postmodern theory and practice, of different approaches to Dutch history, as well as the topics presented (which I believe do provide the reader with new perspectives on Dutch sporting history), I would certainly not wish to suggest this work operates within a vacuum. If this is the tone of some parts of this book, then it does both a disservice to the many historians who do valuable work across the field(s) and indeed my own view of the concept of ‘novelty’. Perhaps, the current climate for ECR’s, where constant job applications, funding requests and the need to demonstrate novelty and difference as a badge of relevance, has left another mark on this work I that had not noticed.

This book may try too much to appeal to different audiences; this book is intended to be both popular and academic, to contribute to historiography, to Dutch history and to sporting history (in that order!). Whether or not this book succeeds in its aims of bringing historical debate to a wider sporting audience (or indeed sporting history to a wider audience of Dutch historians) is something only time will tell. I, too, would doubt whether fans on the terraces will be discussing this work (and indeed I wouldn’t want to ruin a good game of football in this way!). However, as chapters three and five of my work hoped to demonstrate, there are numerous different individuals involved in the game of football. Many discussions about sport take place away from the terraces and many of those who take part are inquisitive and interested in how sport interacts with wider society and the world around them and about how stories about sport are made; these are people whom I believe could be better served by the range of sporting works available and it is in part this audience I hope to reach.

At the heart of my book is a belief that history is about sensible and measured debate about the past and how it influences and constructs the present and future, but one which also needs to be constantly challenging itself; I am grateful to McDowell that he has engaged with this and for the opportunity to reply to his comments. I hope that I will have the opportunity to discuss the proposals put forward in this book with others in a similar fashion. While he and

I clearly approach history from slightly different theoretical perspectives, I would wholeheartedly agree with his final sentiment. It is indeed imperative for me (I would not want to speak for others here) to find a common language to communicate my ideas about history and sport, which I believe are of importance to the world we live in today; to show how the world around us can be constructed and changed through the application of power and to promote the idea of open and honest personal reflection as part of the historical process, not only something that takes places beyond the eyes of the reader. If I have not quite succeeded in this aim in this work, then that is all the more reason to try again!

Notes

1a. I would just add that in addition to its availability at low cost from UCL Press it is freely downloadable without cost via this website <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/four-histories-about-early-dutch-football> [accessed 23 April 2017].

2a. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York, NY, 1988), p. 57.

3a. An appraisal of Jenkins' work, some of the criticisms of it and links to these, can be found at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1266> [accessed 23 April 2017].

4a. That it has provoked a response and a challenge to my ideas which will help me consider my approaches in future, which was also a key aim of the work, is, however, clear.