
H-France Review Vol. 2 (August 2002), No. 83

Philip Dine, *French Rugby Football: A Cultural History*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001. viii + 229 pp. Notes, bibliography, appendices, and index. \$65.00 US (cl). ISBN 1-85973-322-0. \$19.50 U.S. (pb). 1-85973-327-1.

Review by Christopher S. Thompson, Ball State University.

Philip Dine's study of French Rugby Football provides a succinct and engagingly written history of the sport, starting with its introduction from Britain over a century ago and concluding with French rugby's recent integration into an increasingly global and professionalized sport backed by large media interests and epitomized by the creation of the World Cup of Rugby Football in 1987. The book is organized chronologically in four parts and nine concise chapters. Part I traces the sport's introduction in Paris and expansion to the provinces before World War I, rightly focusing on the southwest, which remains the sport's bastion to this day. Part II addresses its tumultuous history during the era of the two World Wars. Part III is devoted to the sport's own *trente (ou presque) glorieuses* from 1945 to 1968, when French rugby football was widely celebrated for its style-- *le rugby-champagne* --and international successes. The final section covers the period since 1968, during which time the French Rugby Federation has suffered from internecine strife even as it lurched from its longstanding "shamateurism" to the comparatively tardy development of open professionalism in the mid-1990s.

Dine describes his book as a "detailed case study" (p. 5) that "is intended at least as much as a study of a sporting discourse as of a sporting practice" (p. 8). His main thesis is that rugby football "has actually played a significant role in the imaginative construction of the contemporary French nation" (p. 4), by which he means the construction of French local, regional, and national identities, as well as French rugby's "close association with both the reality and mythology of rurality" (p. 2). He aims to focus on the sport's role in communicating ideology, as a site of sociability, and as a pretext for festivity. And as behooves a cultural historian of any sport, he also promises to address the construction of "gendered personal identities" (p. 4), specifically the role this particularly brutal sport has played in promoting a rugged, physically courageous, and self-sacrificing masculinity.

The amount of material covered is impressive, particularly when one considers that the actual text (not including the endnotes after each chapter) is only about 135 pages long. Dine, who teaches in the Department of European Studies at Loughborough University and is a rugby player himself, is particularly good at the social and institutional history of the sport. We learn that various groups played a critical role in supporting the development of the sport in its early years: aristocratic and bourgeois anglophiles, students of prestigious Parisian *lycées* who established the capital's oldest sports clubs in the early 1880s, university students and teachers who expanded the sport's appeal in the provinces, and organizations founded in this period to promote physical exercise and sport among French youth as a means of addressing France's various ills. The battle between Church and State under the early Third Republic was also waged in sport. Secular sports clubs and federations promoted and played rugby, while their Catholic rivals of the *Fédération Gymnastique et Sportive des Patronages de France*, determined to compete for the bodies (and souls) of French youth increasingly drawn to sporting activities, favored the less violent game of soccer. After this initial period when social elites developed and played the sport, in the southwest especially rugby became the sport of working-class

neighborhoods and then of villages, hence its enduring and intimate association with a traditional, rural *France profonde*.

Dine covers the history of the national championship and the great teams that have successively dominated the sport in France. We learn that teams recruited top players from other towns by promising them jobs in local businesses and industry, a particularly effective enticement in times of high unemployment like the 1930s. Some of the most compelling sections of this study are devoted to important figures, such as particularly gifted players and influential club and federation officials. While he addresses the contributions of numerous individuals, Dine makes carefully considered choices. For example, he discusses in some depth the autocratic Albert Ferrasse, who dominated the national federation from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, not always to positive effect. Similarly, he devotes considerable attention to France's most celebrated rugby player, Jean-Pierre Rives, who played in the 1970s and 1980s, and whom Dine describes as the only player "to have transcended the limitations of his chosen sport by becoming a national icon in his own right" (p. 161). It would have been interesting to learn why Dine believes rugby took so long to produce a celebrity of this order, when other major French sports did so as early as the *Belle Epoque* (cycling) and the 1920s (boxing and tennis).

Dine also addresses French playing styles and reactions to them, from the *rugby-panache* of the *Belle Epoque* to the brutal style of the interwar years to the *rugby-champagne* of the first post-World War II decades. Particularly interesting are those instances when the sport's image was exploited by national politicians for specific ideological ends. During the interwar years, the traditional game of rugby "union," played by at least nominally amateur teams of fifteen players, fell on hard times when its violent style of play led British teams to refuse to play their French counterparts. This created an opening for a more recent version of the sport, rugby "league," played by openly professional teams of thirteen players. Playing a more attractive style and achieving some international success, professional rugby league emerged as a credible alternative to rugby union in France in the 1930s. During the war, however, Vichy decided that the amateur and ruralist values embodied by le rugby à quinze more closely fit its ideological program and, with the ready cooperation of that sport's grateful officials, took concrete measures to reassert the primacy of rugby union. The intersection of the image of French rugby and national political imperatives would reoccur two decades later, ironically enough under Vichy's most resolute opponent, President Charles de Gaulle of the fledgling Fifth Republic. Embarrassed by the poor showing of French athletes at the 1960 Rome Olympics and determined to project an image of "*la France qui gagne*," de Gaulle sought to associate the nation with its stylish and successful national rugby side. Long a vector of regional identity, particularly in the southwest, French rugby thus was exploited in moments of perceived crisis by national governments seeking to impose their particular vision of French values and greatness.

Dine has clearly written a useful general introduction to the history of French rugby football. At times readers unfamiliar with the sport and its terminology may wish he had devoted a few lines to describing how the game is played, the various positions on the field and the responsibilities associated with them. This certainly would have made his treatment of changes in playing style easier to follow. On a purely factual level, Dine twice refers to the 1956 Soccer World Cup in Sweden, in which the French national team finished third; that competition actually took place in 1958. However, these are minor points. Dine has done a commendable job of providing a history of the "practice" of French rugby football over the past 125 years.

Dine's examination of the "discourse" generated by the sport is at times less successful. Certainly the questions he proposes to address in his introduction—issues of representation, identity, and myth—are the ones scholars familiar with the "new cultural history" would expect, and there is no question that the history of sport provides fertile ground for such an approach. What is less expected is Dine's almost total reliance on secondary sources; even the primary sources he references or quotes are nearly always drawn from known materials in previous publications. He thus is dependent largely upon selections

made by other scholars and commentators for his own conclusions, which, not surprisingly, generally echo theirs. Furthermore, Dine's analysis of the content of French cultural production relating to rugby does not always go as far as it might. He notes, for example, that the Toulouse side that went undefeated in 1912 came to be known as "la Vierge Rouge" and was represented by the female heroine "Zézette," a figure scholars associate with the traditional "chaste feminine icons" of France (the Virgin Mary, Joan of Arc, and Marianne) or interpret as "a southwestern warrior princess" akin to the Roman goddess Minerva (p. 48). This is an interesting link between the emerging local rugby culture and national trends; however, Dine does not evoke the broader context of the emerging mass consumer culture of the time, when such female figures were widely employed in contemporary advertisements (on bicycle posters, for example). Nor does he address the gender implications of selecting "Zézette," a female figure both chaste and bellicose, to represent the invincible, hypermasculine rugby players of Toulouse, who while bellicose were unlikely to have been chaste (and even less likely to have wished to be celebrated as such).

The book's brevity—over which Dine admittedly may have had no control—also works against him when he tantalizingly notes the existence of rugby-related cultural production without analyzing its content (p. 61; footnote 6, p. 167). That content might have helped to illustrate how texts, broadly defined, constructed a variety of identities. For example, a more systematic consideration of local and regional sources would have been useful in supporting Dine's well-founded contention that rugby has played an important role in reinforcing provincial identity in the southwest, famously dubbed "Ovalie" in reference to the ball's shape, in opposition to the centralizing primacy of Paris in national life. That region's press and its municipal and departmental archives would yield a treasure trove of "discourse" that would permit a more rigorous historical reconstruction of exactly how rugby came to play this role and whether this role has changed over time. Perhaps Dine should have consulted Anne-Marie Thiesse's work on regionalist literature and the promotion of regional identities in French patriotic discourse, which would have been helpful in considering the contributions of local rugby narratives to the construction of identity in the southwest and other parts of France. [1]

A second problem associated with his failure to examine a wider range of primary sources in greater depth is that sometimes one gets the sense that Dine is telling only one side of the story. Press coverage of sports in France has often been ideologically informed. The communist press, for example, has regularly exploited specific sports-related issues to make broader points about French society that serve its ideological agenda, as have the Catholic, conservative, and Socialist press. Dine does offer a few quotations from *Le Monde*, *Le Midi Olympique*, and *L'Equipe*, but the cultural historian must also look elsewhere for alternative narratives and discourses about the meanings of French rugby football to the nation and, more to the point, to different groups within the nation. Such an approach would illuminate the role competing ideologies of sport played in the century-old debate about professionalism in rugby union (for example, the left's interwar emphasis on participation—"le sport des masses"—versus what it saw as the capitalist interest in professional sports spectacles—"le sport des as"). It would also reveal how de Gaulle's political adversaries on the left reacted to his blatant attempt to appropriate the success and style of the national team for his own political purposes. Indeed, one might question how well the image of "la France qui gagne" actually resonated among the French public. During those very same years one of France's most popular athletes was the bicycle racer Raymond Poulidor who, despite a very successful career, was celebrated more for the races he lost than those he won. In the process, he became France's beloved "éternel second," a nickname that suggests that many French identified more readily with his perseverance and humility—"la France qui termine deuxième"—than with victory. Furthermore, while noting that rurality was a theme widely discredited by its association with Vichy, Dine does not address the apparent contradiction of de Gaulle's selection of a sport associated with traditional, rural France as the "symbol of a new national vigour" as he sought to transform France "into a modern industrial nation at the heart of the new European Economic Community" (p. 123).

In sum, Dine's study of French Rugby Football is a well-written general introduction to the sport's

history, a synthesis particularly successful in addressing rugby as a "practice." However, the author's reliance on secondary sources necessarily limits the scope and depth of his examination of the discourses inspired by rugby. While he points to all the major issues such a history must address and weaves them skillfully into his narrative, the reader is often left to piece together how the festivity, sociability, and various identities associated with rugby may or may not have changed over the past 125 years. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect a more in-depth treatment of the discourses that have informed French rugby football in a comparatively short book, but these are, after all, expectations the author himself raises in his introduction.^[2] Perhaps a thematic organization, rather than the chronological narrative Dine adopted, would have allowed him to meet these expectations more consistently.

NOTES

[1] See Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Ecrire la France: Le mouvement littéraire régionaliste de langue française entre la Belle Époque et la Libération* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991) and *Ils apprenaient la France: L'exaltation des régions dans le discours patriotique* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1997).

[2] For example, the issue of masculinity is addressed with considerable sophistication and insight by Anne Saouter in her recent ethnography of French rugby in the 1990s, *"Etre Rugby": Jeux du masculin et du féminin* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2000). This work is listed in Dine's bibliography, but he does not seem to have taken into account either its approach or its thought-provoking conclusions in his treatment of the complicated issue of gender in French rugby.

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