

Tom Brown's Schooldays – quotes from Walter Scott Publishing, London nd

In 1857, Thomas Hughes, (1822-1896) who had attended Rugby School when Thomas Arnold was headmaster, published the novel entitled, *Tom Brown's School Days*. The book sold 11,000 copies in the first year – an astonishing number of copies in that era. At Rugby, Hughes had been an enthusiastic cricketer. At Oxford he had represented the university both in the boat race and the Varsity match in cricket. He was a man who believed passionately in the moral and physical value of playing games.

It is hard to overestimate the influence of *Tom Brown's School Days* – which Theodore Roosevelt viewed as one of two books every boy should read. It has been said to have “revealed a view of the moral value of sport which was increasingly adopted in the second half of the nineteenth century”¹ and to have made the modern public school what it is.²

Thomas Hughes was deeply influenced by his time at Rugby School. Is Tom Brown a self-portrait and the headmaster based on Hughes's head, Thomas Arnold? While Hughes denied this, Tom Brown is generally thought to have been to a significant degree a self-portrait³. Hughes, for example, had played in an exciting cricket match against a visiting MCC side in his last year at school. This experience is replayed in the novel, as Tom Brown's last match.

The value that Hughes saw in sport was much greater than Arnold ever did. Richard Holt states that, “the great Thomas Arnold of Rugby, who was mistakenly idolized by subsequent advocates of public school sports, had no time for games himself”⁴. David Newsome goes even further in describing some of the things that Arnold was later given credit for as “largely distortions of Arnold's original intentions”.⁵ GEL Cotton, a master at the school is thought more likely to have been responsible for the importance of sport in the school. It was Hughes, rather than Arnold who imagined that piety and manhood were learned on the cricket field and the football pitch.

The value, which Hughes found in team games, comes out in the following passage, in which a master and Tom talk at the cricket match:

“The discipline and reliance on one another which it teaches is so valuable. I think’, went on the Master ‘it ought to be such an unselfish game. It merges the individual in the eleven; he doesn't play that he may win, but that his side may’.

‘That's very true’, said Tom, ‘and that's why football and cricket, now one comes to think of it, are such much better games than fives or hare and hounds, or any others where the object is to come in first or to win for oneself, and not that one's side may win’’. [Page 28]

The attitude is re-enforced by the House-captain's team talk during the football game, “there shall be a warm seat by the hall fire and lots of bottled beer tonight, for him who does his duty in the next half-hour” and “This is worth living for; the whole sum of schoolboy existence gathered into one straining; struggling half-hour, a half-hour worth a year of common life”. [Page 99]

Afterwards the victory is interpreted in terms of team spirit: “We've more reliance on one another, more of a house feeling, more fellowship than the school can have. Each of us knows and can depend on his next hand man better – that's why we beat 'em today”. [Page 110]

¹ Fair Play: Ethics in Sport and Education. Peter McIntosh, London: Heinemann, 1979, Page 28.

² Thomas Hughes, EC Mack and WHG Armytage, London, 1952, P100-1

³ See for example, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought*, Norman Vance, Cambridge University Press, 1985, Page 134-137

⁴ *Sport and the British - A Modern History*, R Holt, (1989 and 1992). Oxford: Oxford University Press, Page 75

⁵ *Godliness and Good Learning. (Four studies on a Victorian ideal)*, D Newsome, London 1961, Page 200

The values that Tom took to Rugby School are expressed both by his father, Squire Brown, who “believed honestly that the powers which be were ordained of God and that loyalty and steadfast obedience were men’s first duties” [page 47) and in his own actions in the inn on the way to school where Tom “knelt down and prayed that come what might, he might never bring shame or sorrow on the dear folk at home”. (Page 64)

They were pretty much unchanged by the time he left, when Tom was asked what he wanted to achieve at Rugby, “I want to be A1 at cricket and football and all the other games, and to make my hands keep my head against any fellow, lout or gentleman. I want to get into the sixth before I leave, and to please the Doctor; I want to carry away just as much Latin and Greek as will take me through Oxford respectably”. [Page 282]

The message that bullying and the like can only be removed from the school by fighting and beating the bully is expressed several times [eg Page 110, 152ff, 210, 271]. Fighting was an important part of manliness.

The climax of the book is the cricket match between Rugby and MCC. The way it is dealt with is bizarre to the modern reader. How the game ends is unsatisfactory. School need 9 to win with 2 wickets left but the omnibus to take the London team to the station arrives and it is decided that there will be only one more over. Game is “drawn” but MCC are declared winners as they had a first innings lead. No comment on any of this. Moreover the chapter tells us nothing about what Tom Brown contributed to the game.

On first thought, it may be hard to see how a novel about bullying, fagging, and corporal punishment in a public school in Victorian England has any relevance to modern sports ministry. Yet historians see the book as a turning point in the Christian attitude to sport.

What cannot be denied is that, however it started, the influence of the Muscular Christianity movement on the unfolding of the relationship between Christianity and sport during the next 150 years would prove to be immense. The argument for the moral value of sport, which was increasingly accepted in the second half of the 19th century and beyond has its origin in the thinking and writing of the early Muscular Christianity movement.

[See also: Tom Brown and sports ministry in downloads/articles](#)