The Follies of War

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Despite all the forecasted fears of a great invasion, Napoleon Buonaparte never made it to England's shores during his reign. But the English public played out the war by fighting it at home all the same. I refer here not simply to exemplars of visual and literary culture that envisioned Boney's arrival in England, but rather to the sundry practices of fighting—whether in terms of playing at soldiers or through boxing in the ring—that allowed a public at war to engage in battle within the countryside and in the cities. If the Napoloenic Wars were the world's first total war, it was in part because they were staggeringly vast in scale, fought on a sweeping stage, across the entire continent of Europe (and beyond) and on the seas as well. As the two rich and provocative papers on offer here today show us, children and adults both engaged with the Napoleonic Wars by cutting them down to size. That is, they rescaled the conflict so that they might address and reassess it at home on their own terms. By playing at soldiers and remembering as much, or by observing the ring and writing about it, the historical protagonists discussed by Gleadle and O'Quinn render credence and specificity to Johann Huizinga's claim, made in *Homo Ludens*, that "fighting, as a cultural function . . . requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play-quality."[1] On the home front, playing at war took on a sort of "ritual character" wherein protagonists, observers, and critics upheld, and worked through, national notions of honor. Associated in Huizinga's mind especially with the samurai, the qualities of "chivalry, loyalty, courage and self-control" were also essentially English.

Kathryn Gleadle asks, productively and provocatively: "What can historians do with children's play?" Her essay demonstrates that children's play can offer new models of social production, particularly in wartime. Gleadle offers a "trickle-up" analysis where child's play is not just reflective, but constitutive of both social hierarchy and "civic imaginary." By reconceptualizing play, Gleadle thus situates the children of the Napoleonic era as active agents in social and cultural production. As expert "colonizers of small spaces," boys played at the margins at being soldiers, in places like haystacks and fields. But they were hardly marginal actors or passive recipients in the making of wartime consciousness. By playing as volunteers, they engaged in a sort of "interpretive reproduction." Their makeshift regiments, comprised from the still seemingly organic society of the countryside, reproduced the social microcosm. With their great attention to detail, they anticipated the level of scrutiny exhibited today by the most obsessive of re-enactors. Keenly conscious of social hierarchies and social rituals, they employed modes of "high theatricality and mimicking" as they played out "local class relationships" in the constitution of their regiments. Accordingly, the lines between childhood and adulthood, and between play and war, were blurry, for often young boys on the threshold of manhood found themselves engaged in direct action on the battlefield or at sea. If the lines between war and play were murky, so were those between the worlds of children and adults in the years when Britons fretted over the coming of Napoleon Bonaparte.

[1] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, no translator named (1944, 1950; Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 89.

Gleadle's protagonists who played at soldiers united against what they took to be a clear and present danger: the feared invasion of Napoleon Bonaparte. The spectators and commentators examined by O'Quinn solidified notions of Englishness by working through a different sort of occasion: the famed set of boxing matches between the English coal merchant, Thomas Cribb, and the "Baltimore black," Thomas Molineaux. Interlocutors and spectators who wrote about and savored the matches upheld notions of military prowess associated with Wellington's army. But they gave expression to these ideals through engagement with a far more polyvalent threat than Napoleon Bonaparte. Reproduced, and indeed, negotiated, in figurines and graphic art, Molineaux was an exceedingly more complicated opponent than Boney. As a free black, an American, and the bearer of a French surname, Molineaux condensed notions of savagery or sexuality, the legacies of the American war, and the current cross-channel conflict in his very person. At the same time, Molineaux, like Cribb, had the capacity to represent the ideals of liberty. If Cribb embodied an abstract notion of English liberty, Molineaux himself evoked the British promise of liberty for Africans through the abolition of the slave trade. And it was because he was a man and a brother—a "human equal," to use the words of Huzinga—that he was entitled to a rematch with Cribb who may, or may not, have violated the rules of pugilism in the first fight. But to the great relief of the public, the rematch issued a clear victory in the figure of Cribb. The question remains as to whether or not the preparation for the rematch was fair, what with Cribb training methodically in seclusion and Molineaux performing relentlessly for pay. But together, the actions in the ring, and the workings of graphic art, conspired to ensure that Cribb, whose very frame embodied a chaste, yet vigorous English manhood, came out the winner. In her paper, Gleadle asserts that "playing at fighting, brandishing weapons and the like appears to be an almost universal feature of childhood culture in societies undergoing military conflict." O'Quinn's essay indicates that attention to bellicosity, and the spectacle of the match, was not the concern of children alone. Together, both these essays demonstrate a strong association between war, play, and games in the Napoleonic Era. Whether as participants, observers, or interlocutors, the historical actors examined in the two papers today demonstrate that the follies around war allowed those who lived within the conflict to bring the battles home, and so to articulate patriotism. All the while, they interrogated, and, it seems, they ultimately upheld the social order, with its attendant hierarchies of class, gender, and race.

Together, the papers raise a number of questions that have bearing, I hope, on the broader matter of play, especially, but not only, for the long eighteenth century. The first concerns the relationship between the particular and the universal. In what ways do these examples, and the analyses of them, speak specifically to their historical moment? And in what ways do they illuminate broader cultural, psychological, and sociological relationships? The aims of the two authors differ on this point, I should say, but it is worth, perhaps, thinking more broadly about the relationships between childhood and war, or sport and bellicosity, whether in their Napoleonic or transhistorical manifestations.

In many regards, these papers evoke complementary images of a particular moment, and, thereby, of particular configurations among play and war, or sport and state. To my long-nineteenth-century mind, this moment stands in pointed contrast to the terrain one hundred years later. From the vantage point, say, of 1914 or of 1939, the follies of the Napoleonic Wars appear to enjoy a remarkable independence, at least in contrast to similar formations that would take root under the modernized state of the twentieth century. Though they could become brutal and violent, Gleadle's war games, directed for and by children, seem a world away from the regimes of the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, or, eventually, the Hitler Youth. And the rich, seemingly ungov-

ernable cultural production of the Fancy stands in stark contrast to the choreographed Olympic Games, whether in London in 1908 or in Munich in 1936. I do plead guilty to romanticizing and oversimplifying here, but I do so for a good cause: that of allowing us to think about the particularities of the Napoleonic moment and of allowing us, more generally, to consider what happens when play becomes politicized by bureaucracy, state, and mass society. Ultimately, it would seem that this is the moment when play is stripped of fun. Huizinga, for one, characterized the essence of play as fun, arguing, furthermore, that "fun" was a notion that tended to "resist interpretation." More recent scholars, including Victorianist Peter Bailey, might disagree, arguing that fun is, in fact, play commodified, stripped of its spontaneity and subjected to the regimes of industrial capitalism and rational recreation. This detour aside, it is worth considering, at least, when play stops being fun—and if it is necessarily fun to begin with.

The relationship between play and fun is just one of the general lines of inquiry that these papers allow us to explore. Another broad avenue for thinking has to do with the rules of the game—and what making and breaking these rules allows. In *Homo Ludens*, Huzinga noted that the ideal of "fair play" separated civilized societies from savage ones. This is certainly an understanding that the nineteenth-century British would bring to their empire. Or, at least, to their writings on it, if not to that Empire's workings on the ground. And, among some apologists for Empire during the epoch of decolonization, there was the conviction that, if nothing else, the British Empire had "taught the world to play"—if not at boxing, then at the team sports that took root in the nineteenth century, including cricket, rugby, and football. Certainly, it was a notion of "fair play" that propelled the rematch between Cribb and Molineaux. And we also might assume that the children who played at war brought plenty of rules to their endeavors. But perhaps part of the fun was in breaking the rules. Or maybe they played at war to break its rules, which had, historically, implied civility, without sanction. Alternatively, they may have found in the boxing ring a contained space that sanctioned committing, or relishing, acts of excessive force. In this line of thinking, a few more questions: In what ways did the war game or the boxing ring become an arena for bullying and sadomasochism, so foreshadowing the dynamics of homosocial groups sketched by later Victorian writers like Rudyard Kipling, to name just one? Drawing from the longer trajectory of scholarship on child's play and sport, as it would coalesce in the nineteenth century into the literature of muscular Christianity and later, into the club or the magazine, we might too consider where the homosocial—at play in both contributions—bleeds into the homosexual, whether as identity and act? What sorts of pressures, in short, does the all-male world, in its various formations, exert on "fair play"? How does it come to shape and contort the very rules of the game?

One final line of questioning might allow us to consider the relationship between play and the social order. Granted, neither paper under discussion here suggests that acts of play in wartime worked simply to reflect the social order. Still, our accounts demonstrate that child's play and boxing matches worked, when all was said and done, to patriotic effect. Writing about John Ruskin's own thinking on war, Johann Huzinga noted the centrality of displays of "loyalty" to performances of war. But might playing at war work in a different direction? That is, were, and are, there occasions where war games and sporting contests operate to critique or question the aims of War? And might these occasions allow critics to express their misgivings, even while adhering, on the surface, to the rules of the game? Or might these events at least enable fraternization outside of the lines of War? The bit of history that comes to my long-nineteenth- century mind here is the much mythologized "Christmas Truce" Soccer Match of December 1914. On the one hand, this event, which some have claimed to be apocryphal, suggests a pretense of hu-

manity on the part of the commanding officers. But it has also been employed to demonstrate the senselessness of slaughtering brothers on the Western Front. There must be plenty of other events, less documented and discussed, that work with these very tensions. Regardless, these papers suggest that it behooves us not to dismiss, all too summarily, the follies of war.