

National Sports and National Landscapes: real and imagined

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Introduction: On nations and nationalisms

It is relatively standard practice in sociological and political studies of nations and nationalisms to differentiate between primordialist and modernist perspectives. Central to the former is the belief that the nation has its roots in one or more relatively objective criteria – language, ethnicity, geography, religion - which are almost certain to predate the emergence of the modern nation state and of nationalism as a modern political ideology. The modernist perspective, on the other hand, focuses on nations and nationalisms as modern inventions which emerge in response to new social and economic challenges. Somewhere between those two extreme positions is the view that whilst nations and nationalism are indeed modern, their existence and resilience rely heavily on the existence of certain historic criteria, both real and imagined, upon which nationalists themselves consistently draw.

“Blood and soil” motifs are commonly thought of as the key ingredients of aggressive, xenophobic nationalism. For example, as Vejdovsky (Vejdovsky 10) notes, “Nazi propaganda would use the aesthetics of the pastoral to illustrate the necessity and the ethical justification of a garden like *Lebensraum* (vital space) where the germ of virtue of the Aryan race could be planted, and where it could grow to subdue and fill the earth”. Relatively seldom though is the actual physical character of the nation invoked by primordialists, compared with the frequent invocations of blood ties and

language. Nevertheless, Anthony D. Smith (Smith 56), more sympathetic than most academic commentators to the merits of primordialism, notes the territorial “homeland” component of nations and suggests that “the landscapes of the nation define and characterise the identity of its people”. This line of argument is in turn mocked by those who prefer the modernist interpretation. For example, Ernest Gellner (Gellner 1) satirises the mythical nation of Vodkobuzia, writing that “it is a breathtakingly beautiful country. In the autumn, the wooded slopes of the Manich Depression are ablaze with a colour not even Hampshire or Liguria can match”. Warming to his theme, he continues, “it is also from this area that the most plaintive, most moving folk songs come, commemorating as they do the devastation wrought by the invasion of the Rockingchair Mongols” (Gellner 1). In such ways does the advocacy of primordial categories stand condemned by the modernists, supported to a large extent, in my opinion, by the upholders of the “imagined community” thesis (Anderson 15). One wonders to what extent the latter is in danger of becoming overused such that it has come to represent nothing other than the claim that national identity is all in the mind with no material basis whereas it was initially intended to help us understand the complex nature of national identity formation, weaving together as it does both objective and subjective factors. As a consequence, the “imagined community” approach has clearly come to serve a poststructuralist agenda which, when taken to extremes, appears to deny the structural basis of everything. For Smith (Smith 41), however, “the myth of the modern nation has to be recognized for what it is: a semi-ideological account of nations and nationalism, one that chimes with modern preconceptions and needs, especially those of a mobile, universalist intelligentsia, for whom the nation-state is only a staging-post in humanity’s ascent to a global society and culture”. In the first instance, nations are defined territorially

(although in relation to diasporic national belonging they can also transcend spatial boundaries) and an important aspect of any territorial entity is its landscape.

Viewing landscapes

Rival perspectives on nations are in a certain sense replicated in debates about the understanding of landscapes. As Richard Muir (Muir 2) notes, “‘landscape’ has several aspects and many nuances of meaning”. More specifically, “in experiencing places, we simultaneously encounter two closely related but different landscapes” (Muir 115). First, “the one lying beneath our feet and extending to the far horizon is a *real* landscape; it is composed of rock, soil, vegetation and water, is home to an abundance of creatures and has objective past and present existences” (Muir 115). The other, however, “is a *perceived* landscape, consisting of sensed and remembered accounts and hypotheses about the real landscape” (Muir 115). This underlines the extent to which national iconographies of landscape are closely linked to the wider debates about national identities and nationalisms which were commented on earlier. On one hand, there are the supposedly objective criteria put forward in primordialist explanations of the rise of nations. On the other, we have the modernisation thesis and indeed the concept of “imagined communities” which, when taken to its extreme, posits the view that nations, national identities and nationalisms are largely the products of the imagination. What remains undeniable, however, is that “landscapes play an integral role in the (re)construction of ‘nation’ and, relatedly, ‘national identity’” (Kong and Yeoh 2). Moreover, as Kong and Yeoh (Kong and Yeoh 3) argue, “the power relations that define and contest the ‘nation’ are therefore often played out in and through landscapes”.

Whilst identified most strongly with cultural geography, the importance of place, including landscape, has increasingly been recognised in literary studies. As Thacker (Thacker 56) notes, “the ‘where’ of literature has come to occupy a central place for many critics over recent years”. For Thacker (Thacker 73), “fundamental to a critical literary geography, as to the engagement with representations of space and the impact of lived places upon writers, is the following question: how do all of these spatial dimensions affect what the text means, and how we interpret it?” In many respects, what follows in this paper is an attempt to approach national sports as texts, albeit viewed through a primarily sociological as opposed to a literary lens, which are undeniably affected by spatiality, specifically landscape, and which can only be fully understood by taking account of this spatial context. But let us briefly turn our attention to a rather different form of national text.

The significance of landscape in relation to the representation of nations is seldom more apparent than in the lyrics of national anthems. Whilst some national songs refer to former battles, to leaders and to heroes, and even to the nation as a largely abstract entity, many focus on a national landscape. Some of the results are obvious –

Our beautiful homeland, O so fearless and gracious. Our fathers’ ancient glory, may you be happy forever!

Dear, you are our only glory, Dear, you are our only one, Dear, where you are a plain, Dear, where you are a mountain!

Drava, Sava, keep on flowing, Danube, do not lose your vigour, Deep blue sea, tell the world, That a Croat loves his homeland!

While his fields are warm in sunshine, While his oaks are whipped by wild winds, While his dead ones are hidden in graves, While his live heart beats. (Croatia)

There is a lovely land
with spreading, shady beeches
Near Baltic's salty strand
Its hills and valleys gently fall,
its ancient name is Denmark
And it is Freya's hall. (Denmark)

Thou ancient, thou free, thou mountainous North
In beauty and peace our hearts beguiling
I greet thee, thou loveliest land on the earth
Thy sun, thy skies, thy green meadows. (Sweden)

Or, here we have an example of what one might prefer to call, a 'sub-national' anthem.

Over an Ocean, and Over a Sea
Beyond these great waters, what do I see?
Well...I see the great mountains that climb from the coast,
The Hills of Cape Breton, this new home of mine.
We are an Island, a Rock in the stream
We are a People, as proud as there's been
In soft summer breeze, or in wild winter winds
The home of our hearts, Cape Breton...(Cape Breton Island, Canada)

Given that major international sporting events have become amongst the most common settings for renditions of such anthems, the relationship between sport, nation and landscape already begins to emerge. But, as I shall argue, there is more to this relationship than a coincidental coming together of related phenomena. The process of unravelling this complex relationship begins with a brief examination of the interaction between sport, nation and national identity.

Sport and national identity

At the most basic level of analysis, it is easy to see the extent to which sport, arguably more than any other form of social activity in the modern world, facilitates flag waving and the playing of national anthems, both formally at moments such as medal ceremonies and informally through the activities of fans. Indeed there are many political nationalists who fear that by acting as such a visible medium for overt displays of national sentiment, sport can actually blunt the edge of serious political debate. No matter how one views the grotesque caricatures of national modes of behaviour and dress that so often provide the colourful backdrop to major sporting events, one certainly cannot escape the fact that nationalism, in some form or another, and sport are closely linked. It is important to appreciate, however, that the precise nature of their relationship varies dramatically from one political setting to another and that, as a consequence, it is vital that we are alert to a range of different conceptual issues.

For example, like the United Nations, sport's global governing bodies, such as the International Olympic Committee or the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), consist almost exclusively of representatives not of nations but rather of sovereign nation states. It is also worth noting that pioneering figures in the organization of international sport, such as Baron Pierre de Coubertin who established the modern Olympics in 1896, commonly revealed a commitment to both internationalism and the interests of their own nation states. Thus, whilst de Coubertin could write enthusiastically about a sporting event that would bring together young (male) athletes from across the globe, he was also specifically concerned with the

physical well-being of young French men in the wake of a demoralizing defeat in the Franco-German War.

Whilst in most cases, those nation states that constitute international sporting bodies are coterminous with nations, the fact remains that numerous nations throughout the world, as well as other forms of collective belonging, are stateless and are consequently denied representation in international sporting competition just as they are in the corridors of global political power. When considering the relationship between sports and nationalism, therefore, it is important to think in terms both of nation states and of nations. This also provides the means whereby sport's connection with nationality and also with national identity can be separately explored. It is also useful to bear in mind that sport often acts as a window through which we are able to examine a whole range of social developments and to test a variety of theoretical concepts and perspectives. With specific reference to the relationship between sports and nationalism, observing the world of sport offers insights into the relevance and reliability of such concepts as ethnic (linked to the existence of an exclusive ethnic group) and civic (linked to the existence of a nation state) nationalism and the validity of explanatory approaches to the rise of nations and nationalism, primordialism and modernism included. Sport can also provide important insights into varieties of imperialism, the cultural politics of anti-imperialist struggle and postcolonial legacies. In virtually all of these contexts, it is worth considering the explanatory power of the concept of national sports.

National sports

A discussion of the concept of national sports has particular value for the study of nationalism more generally inasmuch as it necessitates some reference to the main debates in this area (Bairner 163-177). For example, a primordialist interpretation of the origins of nations would allow for the possibility that national sports are bound up with the various criteria which legitimate historic nationhood – blood ties, language, topography, the soil and so on. According to theories linking the rise of nationalism to the exigencies of modernization, on the other hand, national sports are simply part of a panoply of elements that serve to legitimize the nation state. In addition, concepts such as “imagined community” and “invented tradition” can then be invoked in an attempt to explain how efforts are made to bestow some historic legitimacy on what are essentially modern responses to particular political and socio-economic exigencies. Furthermore, the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism may also be invoked in order to advance the case that the national sport is about true belonging whereas other sports that are played within the nation can be linked to what constitutes the civic nation, or more properly, the nation state, but lack the stamp of authenticity. In reality, however, no single approach can fully explain how specific sports acquire national significance.

National sports take different forms and, in so doing, they provide us with interesting insights into the character of particular nations. Indeed, the concept of the “national” sport helps to illuminate the relationship between many of the terms associated with the nation that have already been mentioned. The national sport may simply be the nation’s most popular sport or it may be the sport at which the nation has enjoyed most conspicuous success. Perhaps the nation has made its own indelible mark on

how a specific sport is played or maybe the sport in question was in the forefront of a past liberation struggle that culminated in nation statehood.

For the purposes of this presentation, by far the most interesting category of “national” sports consists of those activities that are peculiar to specific nations or are thought to have been invented in those nations. Their “national” status is ring-fenced by their exclusivity and their priority – echoes here of ethnic nationalism. National sports and games of this type are in some sense linked to the essence of the nations in question even though their actual origins may be pre-national or at least prior to the emergence of nation states. They represent the nation symbolically despite the fact that they may well have demonstrably failed to capture the interest of most of the people who constitute the civic nation and/or the nation state. They are played and watched by people who, in the eyes of nationalists, truly belong rather than by those whose authenticity as national beings is open to question. In addition, activities of this type may well be used by those whose role it is to promote the nation, its products and its tourism industry precisely because these national sports testify to what are presented as unique characteristics of the nation.

This particular view of national sport has long been advanced by Ireland’s largest sporting organisation, the Gaelic Athletic Association, formed in 1884 with a specific remit to preserve the nation’s traditional games and pastimes – including hurling and Gaelic football. Hurling is frequently the sport of choice in the eyes of *Bord Fáilte* (the Irish Tourist Board) or the advertising executives responsible for selling a variety of Irish products, including stout and whiskey. Yet, the hurling’s popularity varies considerably from one county, and even one parish, to another whereas the pattern of

Gaelic football is more even in terms of its presence throughout the thirty-two counties. That said, there are isolated pockets of the country where it loses out to hurling. Furthermore, the right of any Gaelic game to be assigned “national status” is considerably weakened not only because some Irish nationalists opt for other sports, such as rugby union and soccer, but also because the overwhelming majority of the Protestant community in the north of Ireland have resolutely set their faces against the whole Gaelic games movement. It might seem easy to dismiss this difficulty by simply taking these people at their word and accepting that since they do not consider themselves to be truly Irish, their sporting preferences need have no impact on what does or does not constitute an Irish national sport. But this would be to ignore the basic precepts of Irish republican ideology that has consistently sought to embrace not only Catholics but Protestants and Dissenters as well.

In any case, games such as rugby union and association football also have some claim on the right to be called “national” in the Irish context. Despite their British origins, they are played throughout the island. Moreover, although rugby tends to be played by Protestants rather than Catholics in Northern Ireland, both football codes enjoy considerable support from both traditions on the island as a whole. They offer Irish sportsmen and sportswomen the opportunity to represent the nation at international level. Indeed, rugby, unlike football, allows northern unionists the chance to acknowledge their sporting Irishness whilst retaining a political allegiance to the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It should be noted, however, that regardless of any claims that either sport may have to be recognized as “national”, neither has escaped the influence of globalization. The two Irish “national” football teams have both fielded players whose ethnic “right” to belong has been relatively

weak. The same thing has happened in rugby union, which in recent years has witnessed a flood of antipodean coaches and players, some of whom have qualified to play for Ireland despite having accents that conjure up images of Dunedin or Durban, not Dublin or Dungannon.

In both Scotland and England, there are the same compelling reasons as in Ireland why association football and rugby union might be regarded as national sports. However, when I asked my students recently what they believed to be the national sport of these particular nations, they suggested golf in the case of Scotland. For England, on the other hand, the majority opted for football whilst a significant minority, not without good some justification as I shall go on to argue, chose cricket.

The United States and Canada also provide interesting food for thought in relation to definitions of national sports.. One could plausibly argue that the various games and pastimes engaged in by the continent's aboriginal peoples are the true national sports of what became known as North America. Of these, however, only lacrosse has acquired a wider popularity (and that fairly minimal) whilst baseball, a largely invented tradition, has achieved the status of "the national pastime" in the US and ice hockey has been similarly elevated in Canada. In the former, however, it would be foolish to ignore the rival claims of football and basketball.

One could develop these arguments further with reference to virtually every nation in the world. However, using examples solely from the English-speaking world, I wish to conclude with an additional claim concerning the explanatory value of the concept of national sports. This involves relating such sports to the idea of national landscapes

and thereby bringing together each of the main elements of this paper – sport, nation and landscape.

National sports and national landscapes

According to Duffy (64), “the ‘sense of place’ accruing from the ways in which people experience representations of present and past landscapes is a fundamental part of territorial identity and of geographical understanding”. Simon Schama (Schama 7) has argued that “landscape is the work of mind”. A similar point is made by Margaret Atwood (Atwood 59) when she writes, “landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind”. But although the landscapes in the films of such directors as Andrzej Wajda and Ingmar Bergman and in various types of creative writing are in part artistic reconstructions, they nevertheless depict real places. Let us begin our journey in Ireland. A sense of place, and more particularly of small towns and rural communities, is common to the majority of evocations of Gaelic games in Ireland. “You could nearly miss Bellaghy altogether on a night like this, shooting through the place on the way to somewhere bigger. From the main street though, you can just about see thirty footballers chuntering around in their muddy floodlit field. That’s the only sign that this is the epicentre of Derry [Gaelic] football” (Humphries 52). Or, “19 August 1998. A cold day for the middle of August. We had been to another funeral in Beragh that morning and when we arrived at the parish church in Drumquin we had to stand outside in the mizzling rain because there were already so many people crammed inside. As echoed snatches of Philomena Skelton’s funeral mass drifted from the makeshift tannoy through the late-summer Tyrone air, we stood together in small clusters and made uneasy, half-whispered small talk. This

was GAA country and this was unmistakably a GAA funeral ((Fahy 7). In fact Gaelic games are played in urban settings as well as in rural villages. But there persists a public image of Gaelic football and especially of hurling as rural – hence the attraction of these games to the Irish tourist industry.

Ruralism is also at the heart of cricket's claim to be England's national sport. As with Gaelic games, cricket is by no means confined to rural settings – indeed, the main venues for international cricket are nearly all located in major cities, including London, Birmingham and Manchester. Those who comment on cricket, however, are commonly drawn to the sport's rural roots. Former British Prime Minister, John Major, evoked both sport and landscape in seeking to define the essential characteristics of “Englishness”, asserting that England would remain “the country of long shadows on county (cricket) grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers” (Maguire 414). There was nothing new in this for us Jack Williams (Williams 8) reports, “exultations of cricket were often embedded in discourses of English pastoralism”. More specifically, “the pastoral dimension of cricket was very much associated with how the countryside in the south of England was imagined” (Williams 9-10).

In the case of golf's proposed status as Scotland's national sport the association with sport, nation and rural landscape is even more obvious. It is true that golf courses exist within the boundaries or on the immediate outskirts of major cities and towns. Most however are situated some way distant from the major conurbations and in fact many of Scotland's best known courses are located along the nation's coastline. To travel by train from Stranraer in the south west of the country to Glasgow by way of

the Ayrshire coast, for example, is to pass through what seems at times to be a single, never-ending golf course.

Michael Murphy begins his mystical paeon to the game of golf with a description of what might be regarded as an archetypal Scottish course. “There, on the shore of the North Sea”, he writes, “lies a golfing links that shimmers in my memory – an innocent stretch of heather and grassy dunes that cradled the unlikely events which grew into this book” (Murphy 3). In contrast with the manufactured courses which have long been the norm in the United States, Japan and increasingly in the United Kingdom as well, the Old Course in St Andrews, upon which Murphy’s Burningbush Links are based, was, in the words of James Dodson built by no man, “shaped only a bit by Old Tom Morris and others, and it therefore abounds in eccentricity: massive double greens, crisscrossing fairways, target lines that seem to shift with the ever-shifting sea winds or don’t exist at all” (Dodson 211).

Turning to the United States and again recognising in passing the competing claims of American football and basketball in terms of their national popularity and origins, one simply cannot ignore the description of baseball as the national pastime. One of the reasons behind this may well be the extent to which the game, even when played in urban settings, is evocative of a rural past. Certainly, far more than most sports, baseball has inspired creative writers, most of whom have made much of the sport’s relationship to what one could best be described as a partly real and partly imagined American pastoral landscape.

Thus, in W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, the basis for the screenplay of *Field of Dreams*, the film starring Kevin Costner, the narrator rejoices in the Iowa landscape where he builds his ballpark in readiness for the return of the disgraced Chicago White Sox players charged with throwing the 1919 World Series. "Keeping my hands buried," Ray tells the reader, "I stirred the earth with my fingers and I knew I loved Iowa as a man could love a piece of earth" (Kinsella 16). In his love of the land – the soil upon which baseball will be played – Ray is by no means alone for as Allen Guttman (Guttman 69) has argued, "many Americans desire nothing better than to dream of a pastoral world where the grass is green, the sun is bright, and the crisp spring air carries the delightful sound of bats and balls". Indeed, even the urban ballpark can be re-imagined as a rural landscape, hence Mickey Rawlins's initial impression of the Chicago Cubs' Wrigley Field in Troy Soos's novel, *Murder at Wrigley Field*. "The field itself was splendid. The turf, a lush mixture of bluegrass and clover, shimmered with life, and the dark earth of the base paths looked fertile enough to grow crops" (Soos 4).

Nowhere though is the relationship between sport, nation and landscape more apparent than in the case of Canada. Doug Beardsley (Beardsley 31) writes, "if truth be known, we delight in winter. In the season in which bears hibernate, and death is everywhere, Canadians come alive...Winter is vitality and energy to us; to come through is an exhilarating experience". The relationship between Canada's winter landscape and sport is then made apparent. Beardsley continues (Beardsley 32), "as boys, it often seemed to us that the coming of winter had but one purpose: hockey". The point is reinforced in John B. Lee's poem, *When I Was a Boy and the Farm Pond Froze*.

When I was a boy
Once every winter the farm pond froze
Wide as a field from fence to fence
We'd go down with skates, puck and stick
And play in the burning wind for days...(Kennedy 59)

According to Ken Dryden and Roy McGregor (Dryden and McGregor 13), “somewhere in our souls is a spiritual Canada. Most probably, its bedrock is of snow and ice, winter and the land. And if we were to penetrate it a little deeper, chances are we would find a game”. This attitude of mind can be linked to broader debates about Canadian identity, most notably concerned with the work of the Group of Seven who, in the words of Erin Manning (Manning 6), “sought through art to create a vision of Canada that would be a departure from their colonial (British) roots, claiming that it was only through a relationship to the land that Canadians could become acquainted with their ‘true’ nature”.

Conclusion

The landscapes that are intimately bound up with defining certain sports as “national” are real enough. They are not the idealised products of some fertile nationalist imagination. At the same time, however, they are only on rare occasions unique to any particular nation and hardly ever typical of the nation in its entirety. These are real landscapes which become inscribed in the imagination of many, perhaps most, members of the national community. At least two generations of British children, of whom I was one, grew up in the post World War Two era intuiting in some sense that the landscape described in the Famous Five novels of Enid Blyton was their landscape.

After ten minutes' rest they all set off again, feeling nice and cool inside.

It really was lovely cycling through the June countryside – the trees so fresh and green still, and the fields they passed were golden with buttercups – thousands and thousands of them, nodding their polished heads in the wind. (Blyton 12)

Yet few us who, like me, were growing up in the industrial central belt of Scotland had never set foot in the southern English counties which Blyton idealised in her children's books.

The rural landscape most commonly associated with Gaelic games is not what the children of Belfast, Dublin or Limerick grow up with and their holidays are more likely to involve flights to Turkey or Spain than journeys into the rural hinterland of their own country. Yet, growing up playing these games is inevitably linked in the imagination with ruralism. The same is true of the pastoral associations of cricket and baseball and of the windswept coastline so often invoked in relation to golf in Scotland. I suspect that one would look in vain for a frozen farm pond in downtown Toronto. Yet here too the link with a rural (and in this case a winter) landscape is inescapable even though hockey is now played professionally in indoor arenas in Los Angeles, Atlanta and Tampa Bay where frozen ponds are even more elusive.

I shall close by suggesting that the relationship of certain landscapes with what have come to be seen as national sports is a hugely important factor in ensuring the importance of landscape in terms of the reproduction of specific readings of the nation. As a consequence the nation, sport and landscape come to be recognised as

interconnected texts which taken as whole offer significant insights into the construction of national identities.

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