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## **Where the ‘real’ meets the ‘conceptual’: the uncomfortable boundary between histories of sport and cultural studies.**

Malcolm MacLean

John Hughson, David Inglis and Marcus Free, *The Uses of Sport: A Critical Study* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). pp. 212. £17.99. ISBN: 9780415269480.

Tony Schirato, *Understanding Sports Culture* (London: Sage, 2007) pp. 150. £19.99. ISBN: 9781412907392.

Brian Stoddart, *Sport, Culture and History: Region, Nation and Globe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) pp. 241. £75.00/£20.00. ISBN: 9780415420792 (hbk)/9780415495660 (pbk).

Garry Whannel, *Culture, Politics and Sport: Blowing the Whistle, revisited* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) pp. 264. £24.99. ISBN: 9780415417075.

For many students, the distinction between sports studies, sports history, cultural studies, and it seems at times sports sociology appears perplexing – possibly as a result of a sense of disciplinary boundary-blurring in recent years that has combined with a growing explicit discourse of vocationalism and a prioritisation of teleological reasoning in British higher education. Many of these students seem to come to undergraduate sports-related programmes from a set of secondary school studies that have marginalised a grounding in the disciplines in favour of subject knowledge and an educational practice that accentuates instrumentalism (a product, in part, of educational teleology which seems to define useful knowledge as that which is required to achieve a pass mark). Alongside this boundary-blurring, history-the-discipline has become embroiled in an increasingly potent methodological and epistemological debate about what we do, although there is less about how we do it than there is in most methodological debates; there is a sense that the methods of history remain for the most part taken-for-granted. This turn has been widely lamented by many in the field, with perhaps the most serious critique being that as the discipline has become “self-referential”, professional historians with training in sceptical approaches to sources and argument have left the subject to amateurs. [1] Margaret Macmillan has argued recently that this abandonment has weakened public understandings of the past and as a result impoverished politics, culture, and our collective public spheres.

This journal has engaged with broader international questions through papers that explore the role and form of the archive in historical praxis, and approaches to less traditional sources. [2] There has been a more distinctively British debate as expressed by an ‘evidence-driven analysis’ approach in dispute with a ‘theory-led analysis’ school – a distinctively British debate mainly because a significant tendency

in British sociology of sport, that influenced by Elias's notion of there being a long-run civilising process in European history, has been more attentive to the past, and willing to engage with history although not convincingly with the conventions of the discipline, than sociology has been in many other national settings. [3] Critics of the Eliasian model have quite properly pointed to the empirical weakness of many of the arguments deployed from within its framework, and in doing so have pointed implicitly to the partial character of historian's source material (both the partiality of authorship and its incompleteness), and the importance of letting the analysis emerge from source material.

There is another aspect of History's empiricism that is less often explicitly stated in our methodological and theoretical debates: this aspect could be described as our attachment to 'real' rather than 'abstract' people (occasional ventures into prosopography aside). This attachment is seldom more explicitly stated than by one of the long-term darlings of cultural studies, the Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci, who, in a letter to his son in 1937, wrote:

I think you must like history, as I liked it when I was your age, because it deals with living men (*sic*), and everything that concerns men, as many men as possible, all the men in the world in so far as they unite together in society, and work and struggle and make a bid for a better life, all that can't fail to please you more than anything else. Isn't that right? [4]

This concern with the real (itself a highly contested notion – for some Lacanians, for instance, the Real is precisely that which cannot be known) alongside struggles for 'a better life' should remind us of the fundamentally political aspects our work as historians (and in part explain Margaret Macmillan's worry). This concern for 'reality' and for politics is part of what the measure against which we should assess these four texts' usefulness for historians of sport. Alongside these concerns with the use of evidence and social contextualisation, there are questions also of their usefulness as teaching texts and their attention to the roles of the writer in constructing knowledge.

### **Presenting 'reality' – assessing evidence**

If Tony Schirato was a historian, he would almost certainly be a 'lumper' rather than a 'splitter'. In only 138 pages of text he manages a broad sweep across sports history and culture – which for historian users is likely to be both its strength and its weakness. Unlike many other cultural studies writers on sport, the few that there are, Schirato brings the eye of a critical fan to his analysis of sport – he treats it seriously as a social practice and as a social institution. He is not, however, a historian;

something we need to bear in mind if looking to use this book in our undergraduate *history* classes for two specific reasons (the case for sociology and cultural or sports studies is very different – in those contexts Hughson’s recent complimentary review is on the mark [5]). The first is that although there is judicious use of historical evidence to explore the development of sports cultures and practices, the brevity of the book, its introductory character, and its seemingly broad market means that this evidence often lacks subtlety and detail. I suspect that this seeming failure to recognise key aspects of historian’s argument is a product of the publication brief and not a flaw in Schirato’s approach in that the texts chosen, and the issues addressed, are so consistently apposite that they, for the most part, suggest a sound grasp of the range of historical literature. The second reason for caution is that there is a shallow critique of historical analysis: for instance, he is arguably over-reliant on Guttmann’s *From Ritual to Record* [6] for his presentation of the broad sweep the transformation of sport from the ancient to the modern, which sits uncomfortably with the care and subtlety with which he reads and presents his review of various theories of games, play and sport in the first substantive chapter.

With what seems a very different objective and publication brief, it is not often that a book presents itself as both contemporary and as a historical text itself, so Garry Whannel’s *Culture, Politics, and Sport* presents historians of the contemporary with plenty of source material. In mid 1980s Pluto Press published several socialist and critical analyses of sport, including Garry Whannel’s *Blowing the Whistle*. It has been out of print for years, but a staple of sports studies courses in Britain. Despite some errors (that we all identify in our own work with the benefit of hindsight) it remains a superb piece of socialist sports and cultural analysis. All praise then to Routledge for republishing it unchanged; for including an essay by Whannel where he reflects on the book and the political and personal circumstances of its creation; and for including two other previously published essays and just under 100 pages of new material. Like Schirato, Whannel recognises that sport “is not a single static or unitary object”, but unlike Schirato goes further to point explicitly to the perilousness of generalisation. [7] For the most part, the tone of *Understanding Sports Culture* means that I suspect that Schirato would also agree with the next part of the sentence: “it is not a universalised set of practices, but always, in any specific case, has a distinct character, growing out of the particular histories, rituals, people and economic circumstances that have interacted.” [8] The effect of this position is that Whannel’s explicit theorising of sports’ cultures and praxis remains securely grounded in the specifics of time, place, space, and context. He is particularly strong,

however, on one of sports' most profound challenges to Gramsci's emphasis on 'real' people in struggle: the cultures and practices of celebrity, which is something sport has done well for a very long time, including through some of its most potent invented traditions. As Whannel notes, with stardom and celebrity we are dealing "politics [that] is not personal [the real], but the symbolic [the hyper-real]", although his continuing socialist perspective keeps the symbolic grounded in the material world. [9]

Should we be at risk of overstating this power of the symbolic, John Hughson, Fred Inglis and Marcus Free remind us that "textual studies do not adequately come to terms with the intrinsic dynamism of sport". [10] This analysis is securely grounded in British cultural studies (I note that the authors capitalise cultural studies, but strangely not sociology, and in doing so risk making it into a discipline and thereby robbing it of its transdisciplinary critical injunction [11]) and, drawing on that approach's debates of the 1970s, is rigorously culturalist in contrast to Schirato's seeming tendency to structuralism – more of a semiotic sort than a kind of theoretical absolutism, the Althusserian "orrery" that Thompson attacked in 1978 and that was hotly debated by the History Workshop in 1979. [12] Hughson has subsequently located *The Uses of Sport* as part of "an on-going project on sport and modernity", and in this aspect joins Inglis and Free to bring Raymond Williams to the study of sport. [13] Again, although theoretically rich the text is notable for its lack of dogmatism and its careful grounding of its analysis in a subtle blending of theory and evidence where there is a willingness to modify, and it seems also to ditch, the theory if the evidence does not fit. Hughson *et al* use Williams and cultural materialism as a framework for reading a cultural analysis of sport, not a model to determine their interpretation. Not only is it a major contribution to the scholarly analysis of sport, it is also a significant contribution to British cultural materialism with has to date shown a tendency to the literary. [14] Many historians may rankle at its theoretical explicitness, but I suspect would have a hard time arguing that that this explicitness overwhelmed the evidence marshalled and the critiques anticipated.

A similar approach to this cultural materialism may be seen in much of the work of Brian Stoddart, who is possibly the best known of these authors to historians of sport. It is a pleasure to see a self-selected collection of Stoddart's essays exploring the culture and politics of imperial and imperialist sport. Stoddart's oeuvre is broad, and although there is a concentration on cricket some of the essays on golf present historians of sport with some of our more intriguing challenges. He brings to his work

a critical practitioner's eye, a keen sense of the importance of sport (in a critique of approaches to sports history that see it as "superficial" or "trivial", he notes that "there was a danger of sport as social history being diverted by sport as 'games' history" [15]), and of sport not simply as reflecting its social order and context, but as constructing that order and its established code of practice (the analysis of the West Australian Turf Club is particularly good in the respect). The impressive thing about this set of essays is not only the care shown in balancing and assessing the evidence but the careful deployment of useful theory to make sense of that evidence – such as the invocation of Edward Said to help make sense of golf in the People's Republic of China. [16] In being a critical practitioner, Stoddart goes so far as to provide a sceptical insider's view of sport as both socially constitutive and as subaltern practice. He also reminds us that view from the outside often obscures the diversity of local experience ("Caribbean cricket' is a useful generic term, then, but should be used in the knowledge of the quite distinct patterns within the region." [17]) and the need to get into both lived and local experience, as well as to be attentive to the specificities of each case. His three essays included here dealing with Caribbean cricket are significant and well-known in this respect, while 'Sport, Cultural Imperialism and Colonial response in the British Empire', originally in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, is a major contribution to our field and projects the seriousness of sports history to a wider community of scholars. However, the standout challenge for sports historians in this collection are the essays on golf, each of which is alert to demands of contemporary and historical political relations, to current aspects of sports, cultural, and media politics, and most importantly to analyses based in political economy. Whereas Hughson *et al* present a sense of reality grounded in cultural materialism, Stoddart brings us a reality grounded in historical materialism.

### **Confronting 'politics'**

It is in this sense of a need to attend to political economy that Stoddart overlaps with Whannel. Both are attentive to the material world of politics as well as the less rigorously understood cultural politics – and more importantly neither sees politics (material or cultural) as an distinct sphere of human activity, in the same way as none of the books under consideration here see sport as a distinct aspect of human existence. One of the real strengths of Whannel's book is that it has allowed him to come back to a formative text of British sports studies and develop an engaged, reflexive critique of *Blowing the Whistle* as a political text. One of the justified

criticisms of *Blowing the Whistle* was that it did not give enough attention to the sheer pleasure of popular culture and sport in particular – not the kind of perverse pleasure that sports followers seem to get from standing in the stadium on a cold winter's day watching their team lose – but the joy of playing as well as the delight that many people (predominantly men) get from being sports geeks. This book, alongside its excellent and sophisticated analysis of the cultures of sport and sport in culture – not always to be agreed with, also reminds us just how much fun, pleasure, and meaning we get from sport. It is this point that underpins Hughson *et al's* critique of textual analysis: that it cannot get to the dynamism of moving bodies.

Whannel's real strength for historians of sport is that this is a timely reminder of the importance of politics and political consciousness, and that we need to be aware of and revisit political economy and struggle. During my reading, I was reminded of two points both of which Whannel cites. Returning to Gramsci, there is a need to combine pessimism of the intellect with optimism in of the will in what we do about making change, and Bertold Brecht's observation that any analysis and struggle must start with the bad new days, not the good old days. [18] Brecht's point is a potent critique of the implicit nostalgia that insidiously weaves its way through much scholarly and popular sports history, and reminded me of another observation of Brecht's: "art is not a mirror to reflect society but a hammer with which to change it". For historians with less of an activist bent, Whannel's and Stoddart's attention to materialist (as opposed to cultural) politics should remind us that our histories of sport are also histories of the making of and opposition to social power, and of inequality – the creation of what Ashis Nandy has called in a colonial setting "secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order". [19] Whereas in many colonial settings, and notably the India that Nandy explores, the secularity of those new hierarchies may be more significant, in more secular settings it is likely that the potential for status, by means other than those conventionally ordained, may be a significant element of sports history we have failed to adequately explore in the quotidian, favouring instead explorations of moments of spectacular opposition and resistance.

Read alongside Schirato and Hughson *et al* the overall sense is not of a choice between material and cultural politics (indeed, cultural materialism denies any distinction between the two), but of their complementarity. All four texts are acutely aware of the links between sports' cultural and political praxis. Schirato, in a manner not unusual in contemporary cultural studies, highlights consumption – and a good case can be made that the last fifty to sixty years (and certainly the period of



increasingly unfettered Anglo-American finance capitalism since the early 1980s) have seen a shift in the logic of capitalism from one centred on production to one centred on consumption. Schirato's emphasis, however, is one where consumption as watching, not playing, is accentuated: in this, his text's politics may complement the others, and seems to exhibit a different sense of the material world. Hughson *et al*, however, develop sports' cultural and political praxis to critique two current strands in sports' role in cultural policy and politics. In a conclusion that draws together many of their key points in a focus on Newcastle's bid to be European City of Culture for 2008 and that has resonances in London's 2012 Olympic 'regeneration' strategy they are scathing about the political uses of culture as a "driving force of economic and social regeneration" where there is both a lack of transparency and a separation of culture and society leading to an acceptance that "equality is moribund in the social realm". [20] A related point that they do not develop is that the culture, including sport, that is invested with this regeneration imperative is narrowly defined, and generally lacking the sort of local specificity Stoddart noted in West Indies cricket, but has been well developed in the London 2012 case by Iain Sinclair's spirited defences of Hackney's histories. [21] A potent parting comment in this discussion of sport-driven social 'regeneration' harkens back to their critique of the also currently fashionable social capital analyses, derived from amongst others Robert Putnam, that sport requires the suspension of "fondness, familiarity and intimacy" [22] which in the case of regeneration and social inclusion arguments becomes the observation that sport "harbours elements of incivility". [23] The argument is that culture-based, including sport, regeneration strategies are flawed on both cultural materialist and historical materialist grounds.

### **Teacherliness**

It is the currency of all four analyses, highlighted by Hughson *et al*'s conclusion, that makes them potentially teacherly, although only one – Schirato – seems explicitly intended primarily as a teaching text. *Understanding Sports Culture* is, paradoxically, perhaps the most problematic for teachers of sports history. The broad sweep and the focus on a long *duree* means that subtlety and diversity in the historical arguments and evidence invoked is limited – which rather than being a weakness, is a strength for those who work with a problem-based approach to learning.

Remembering that the book is not designed for studies in history but for sociological and cultural studies courses, it is useful in encouraging history students to read it not for what is in it, but for what is not, and for sociology students to think historically. It

can therefore be used in a way that helps them critique and debunk inherited myths about the simple, linear, Whiggish development of modern sports practice. There is, in this context, however, one specific challenge that needs to be overcome, and if Schirato is ever to prepare a new edition I hope would be rectified: 'culture' is only ever used in the singular, as if there is a single sports culture. In part, for Schirato, there is only one culture in that he accentuates consumption through watching sport, rather than doing/playing (and I know that he will have a problem with the use of 'doing' there, as if watching is not doing) with the result that there is insufficient attention to some of the "intrinsic dynamism of sport" Hughson *et al* identify – that is, bodily movement. This singularity of culture however undermines the usefulness of the book as a teaching text that provides an assessment of and pointing to sport's comparative ideologies (at this point it is worth noting Hughson's distinction between its usefulness as an undergraduate text for sociology students grounded in that discipline's theories, and graduates in sports studies programmes for whom those theoretical approaches might be less well-known [24]). If there is a second edition I hope also that he will define 'agonistics' – a term used throughout, and unlikely to be known to students, and avoid phrases like "Gricean co-operative principle" [25] – also unexplained.

The other most teacherly title, in its entirety, is Hughson *et al*, but only for more advanced students. As a textbook, it engages with sport-as-sport, rather than particular sports in particular settings, but with a high level of sophistication, subtlety, and sensitivity to diversity. The authors make a powerful case for the importance of understanding sport as culture, and for the cultural analysis of sport. The case is carried through wide reading in and beyond the field of sports studies, considerable research experience across a range of places and subjects, and a nuanced sense of the fit between sociology, history, and cultural studies. It also engages a specific strand of cultural studies that is historically attuned and engaged, although Hughson noted in conversation recently that although it is a Raymond Williams inspired analysis, the more recent *The Making of Sporting Cultures* [26] is E. P. Thompson meets sport, and he explicitly places the latter volume in a space between and incorporating cultural and social history. [27] As a text for history students this would be demanding but worth it – and it should be approached as a critical friend to the discipline, in much the same way as Hughson *et al* do with Richard Sennett's work in their chapter 3.

Whereas Schirato and Hughson *et al* are useful as teaching texts for what they say (or in much of Schirato for what it does not say to historians however useful may be what it says to sociologists and cultural studies practitioners), Whannel and Stoddart are useful for how they say things. Republication of a now over 25 year old socialist interjection into the politics of an increasingly neo-liberal ethic surrounding sport makes more accessible an early source document that allows us to trace a spasmodic socialist critique of sport in late capitalist Britain. As a teacherly text for historians the greatest usefulness possibly lies in the opening essay reflecting on the circumstances of the emergence of *Blowing the Whistle* and on the personal and political factors that contributed to its form. It is an elegant, and in places understated, exploration of the personal in both politics and scholarship, as well as a subtle consideration of the text's continuing relevance to a much changed but fundamentally similar British setting. There are also reminders throughout the text of sports' paradoxical concurrent centrality and marginality to broader political economic developments (such as on pp 200-1 in a discussion of globalisation) – I suspect that our students must often be reminded of sports' fundamental triviality at a time when it is both the centre of their studies in many cases, and it sits alongside other cultural forms in many policy developments as if it is a universal panacea for social ills. They and we also need to be reminded that this triviality does not make it unimportant but is the source of its value: as Stoddart notes of Perth in Western Australia: “sport ... did not just reflect general social developments, but helped shape and sustain the city's social structure, as well as relationships within it”, and furthermore “organised sport played a central role in the establishment and maintenance of a code of social values accepted by most people in Perth society”. [28] As a text, Whannel's should challenge our students to see beyond the facile rhetoric of these snake oil politics to think more carefully about the contested politics of sport as both institutional forms and lived practice. The challenge for historians is to find ways to get our students to recognise those struggles in the past.

Stoddart provides much food for reflexive practice also. Not only is it good to have a number of these papers available again, but each paper includes a reflective note (sometimes several pages long) considering the circumstances of the essay's formulation and development. In addition to providing excellent journal length studies and some high level conceptual thinking about sports history, the collection features several excellent vignettes about problem creation in scholarly work. This is not to denigrate the usefulness of the papers, and their collection in a single location will be a boon to sports historians who teach across a range of colonial and imperial issues,

problems, and areas. It is to note that Stoddart has a good sense of imperial and (post) colonial cultural theory, as well as broad learning and an engagement with sport that he wears lightly, and that many of the pieces here are excellent places to start an exploration of cultural histories of empire(s). There is one major source of irritation in Stoddart's volume: the publishers have not included original sources or dates of publication although the original dates of publication range between the early 1980s and early 2000s, so it jars a little when there are, for instance, present tense references to the Soviet Union. More significantly, it undermines the usefulness of the collection because the dates of publication are often a significant factor in making sense of an argument. This is not the only problem with the production quality: it seems that the references in chapter 10 ('A Transnational View') go out of sync at note 18. Unfortunately, as with other titles in this series the production values are lower than they should be for a major academic publisher.

Each of these titles is useful in different ways for historians of sport. Schirato achieves his aims by providing a useful, provocative, and non-dogmatic text that should be useful undergraduate and graduate sport studies programmes. Whannel and Stoddart should not only provide useful material to students in taught and research degree programmes as well as more advanced scholars on issues to do with how we do what we do as writers and scholars (an issue sorely missing from recent debates about the philosophy of sports history) but also provide a significant challenge to our sub-discipline to re-engage, or in some respects engage actively, with politics and more especially with political economy. Hughson *et al* have provided one of the most outstanding recent contributions to sports studies. Cultural materialism in the UK has tended to be restricted to cultural studies and literary analysis, and even there it has been overshadowed by the dominance of semiotics: this application of the approach to sport should help in the revitalisation of critical analyses of sports practice and praxis. If we fail to attend to these challenges, the sub-discipline will be the weaker for it.

## Notes

[1] Margaret Macmillan *The Uses and Abuses of History* London, Profile Books. 2009. p 35.

[2] Douglas Booth 'Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power? Refiguring the Archive' *Sport in History* 26(1): 91-109. 2006; Martin Johnes "Archives, Truths and the Historian at Work: A Reply to Douglas Booth's 'Refiguring the Archive'" *Sport in History* 27(1); 127-135. 2007.

[3] Tony Collins 'History, Theory and the Civilising Process' *Sport in History* 25(2): 289-306. 2005; Graham Curry, Eric Dunning, and Kenneth Sheard 'Sociological

Versus Empiricist History; Some Comments on Tony Collins's 'History, Theory and the Civilising Process' *Sport in History* 26(1); 110-123. 2006.; Wray Vamplew 'Empiricist Versus Sociological History: Some comments on the 'civilising Process'' *Sport in History* 27(2): 161-171. 2007.; Dominic Malcolm, 'A Response to Vamplew and Some Comments on the relationship between Sports Historians and Sociologists of Sport' *Sport in History* 28(2): 259-279. 2008.

[4] Cited in Harvey J. Kaye. *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1995. p 222.

[5] John Hughson 'Review of *Understanding Sports Culture*' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(1). 2009. pp 123-125.

[6] Allen Guttman *From Ritual to Record* New York, Columbia University Press. 1978.

[7] Garry Whannel, *Culture, Politics and Sport: Blowing the Whistle, revisited* Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. p 145.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p 212.

[10] John Hughson, David Inglis and Marcus Free, *The Uses of Sport: A Critical Study* Abingdon: Routledge, 2005. p 2.

[11] Whannel argues that "cultural studies moved from being a critical irritant within established disciplines to being constructed as a subject in gradually acclimatised, institutionalised and, to an extent, depoliticised forms." Whannel, *Ibid* p 120.

[12] E. P. Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors' in *The Poverty of Theory and other essays* London, Merlin. 1978. pp 193-397; Raphael Samuel (ed) *People's History and Socialist Theory* London, Routledge. 1981.

[13] John Hughson 'The Making of Sporting Cultures' *Sport in Society* 12(1). 2009. p 1.

[14] It should be noted that in North America cultural materialism is often associated with the anthropology of Marvin Harris, and is a very different thing to Marxist inspired British cultural materialism. A useful introduction to British cultural materialism may be found in Scott Wilson *Cultural Materialism: Theory and Practice* Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, while it reaches some of its most useful applications in Alan Sinfield's work, especially *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain (2 ed)* London, Athlone Press, 1997, and *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992. *The Uses of Sport* should be seen as comparable to this work by Sinfield.

[15] Brian Stoddart, *Sport, Culture and History: Region, Nation and Globe* Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. p 25.

[16] *Ibid.* p 209.

[17] *Ibid.* p 98.

[18] Whannel, *ibid.* p 237.

[19] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* Dehli, Oxford University Press. 1983. p ix, cited in Stoddart, p 73.

[20] Hughson *et al* *ibid.* p 184.

[21] Iain Sinclair 'The Scam of Scams' *London Review of Books* 30(12), 19 June 2008, pp 17-23; Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire; A Confidential Report* London, Hamish Hamilton. 2009.

[22] Hughson *et al*, *ibid.* p 69.

[23] *Ibid.* p 184.

[24] Hughson 'Review'. p 125.

[25] Tony Schirato, *Understanding Sports Culture* London: Sage, 2007. p 135.

[26] Published as *Sport in Society* Vol 12, no.1 in January 2009.

[27] *Ibid.* pp 1-2.

[28] Stoddart, *ibid.* pp 27 & 45.