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Getting to Grips with Wrestling History and its Uses for Literary Scholars[1]

Abstract: The history of traditional wrestling is arguably little known amongst many literary scholars, and yet the sport features in a number of historic literary texts, including some by Shakespeare, Chaucer and Thomas Hardy as well as more recent authors such as Winston Graham. This review article suggests that a literary scholar might benefit from learning more about the sport's history. Mike Tripp's *Cornish Wrestling: A History* is an examination of a little known and, currently, little practised sport which was once popular in both England and amongst the English diaspora, featuring in a number of nineteenth-century English novels, such as R.D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone.* The review shows how Tripp's detailed history of the sport might be used to illustrate potentially useful details in selected literary texts, which might otherwise be obscure to a literary researcher, including examination of the wider culture and practice of wrestling in the English West Country, and remarks on how the history of Cornwall can explain the sport's presence and role in various literary texts.

Keywords: history of traditional wrestling, nineteenth-century English novels, R.D. Blackmore, history of Cornwall, English West Country

In his article about sport fiction *Texts, Audiences and Postmodernism: The Novel as Source in Sport History* (2007), Martin Johnes makes the point that sport is shaped by those cultural and sociological factors around it, and literary fiction about sport may inform a reader about historical attitudes and practices. It would be beneficial, therefore, for any reader or researcher of historical novels to have some background in the social and cultural history in which the text is set. For those interested in fiction in nineteenth-century English literature, Mike Tripp's *Cornish History: A History* could prove a surprisingly useful read as it provides a very sturdy

[1] Tripp, Mike (2023), *Cornish Wrestling: A History.* St Agnes: Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, pp. 185, ISBN 978-0-902660- 54-0.

background to the society in which the sport of Cornish Wrestling was practised, something which is the setting of numerous novels of the English West Country, including writers such as Thomas Hardy, R.D. Blackmore and, more recently, Winston Graham (*Poldark*). But how would such a work as Tripp's benefit readers and researchers alike?

In 2001, Professor Mike Huggins of the University of Cumbria mentioned Mike Tripp as a "current PhD student" who showed the rise of academic interest in Britain towards wrestling (Huggins 2001: 36). *Cornish Wrestling: A History* is based on Tripp's 2009 PhD thesis, which has long been a popular piece of work amongst researchers of wrestling. It is a very solid piece of historical research, utilising original source materials, as well as later research, to explore such diverse aspects of the sport as the development of the style, the changing competition environments and the shifting social situations which affected not only the sport but the community structures within Cornish society itself, including migration, religious, political and economic shifts.

Cornwall, in the South-West of England, is a county with a fascinating history and a culture which differentiates it from other parts of the country, even its neighbouring counties. Perhaps better known to many readers from TV series such as *Doc Martin* and *Poldark*, Cornwall comes under what are popularly known as the "Celtic" regions, having its own Brittonic language which was widely spoken until it was declared extinct in late the eighteenth century, and which is now undergoing a revival. The county historically had a strong tin mining industry as well as agricultural and fishing communities (which still remain). It also has its own form of wrestling. Cornish Wrestling is a distinct style peculiar to Cornwall. It differs from other remaining regional styles in Britain in that it is what is known as a jacket style, where competitors wear a special jacket which is gripped by each wrestler (as can be seen in such sports as Judo). It is a standing style, with no groundwork, unlike modern Olympic styles[2]. Historically, it was related to similar styles in neighbouring West Country counties, especially Devon, and later spread to regions such as the Americas, South Africa, and Australia. Today, however, it is practised by a relatively tiny number of people, even in its own county. It is this history, intertwined with the social history of Cornwall itself, which Tripp examines.

To many people, it may come as a surprise how popular wrestling was in pre-twentieth century Britain, it being a major spectator sport and practised

[2] This is why characters such as Jan Ridd in R.D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*, or Henchard in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* do not continue wrestling on the ground after throwing an opponent.

widely across the country, with several regional styles. It is recorded in such places as ancient stone crosses, carved wooden medieval misericordia in a number of English churches (Tripp 2023: 23–25) and, as Penjak and Karnincic have written (2013: 49–55), a number of important English literary texts, including *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Elsewhere it was depicted in the ballad tradition, some examples of which Tripp includes in his work (Tripp 2023: 57). By the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the rise in tourism to areas such as the Lake District prompted interest in traditional rural sports, such a Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling, which is distinctly different to Cornish Wrestling, as seen in Charles Dickens's account of wrestling at Windermere, in *Feats at the Ferry* (*Household Words*, Feb. 6, 1858). A number of significant authors, including James Hogg, Walter Scott, R.D. Blackmore and Thomas Hardy, included wrestling scenes in some of their works. Additionally, some wrestlers were well known sports personalities, even having cigarette cards printed with their pictures on and being written about in instruction manuals (Tripp 2023: 83). Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, interest in regional traditional wrestling had peaked and gone into decline. As early as 1908, Sabine Baring-Gould mentioned in his *Devon Characters and Strange Events* that Devonshire Wrestling, the close relative of the Cornish style, was a thing of the past (Baring-Gould 1908: 528). Cornish wrestling, like other regional styles, also went into steep decline throughout the twentieth century and now exists as a tiny minority sport, struggling to survive. Curiously, despite the widespread popularity of wrestling throughout the centuries, Tripp's book is one of only a handful of histories of traditional, regional wrestling styles in Britain, most of which are over a century old[3], and the only major history of the Cornish wrestling style.

The book begins with a comprehensive outline of the work, meaning the reader can easily find sections which may interest them specifically. The first chapter defines Cornish wrestling and its relations with other styles, such as those of the Olympic Games. This is particularly important for any reader who may have images of WWE as their only source of reference. Tripp also outlines some of his research methods, including his close analysis of newspaper articles, something which provides some fascinating details which a scholar of nineteenth-century literature (for example) might recognise. The work then examines the origins of the style, noting the lack of detailed evidence about how Cornish wrestling looked prior to the

[3] An exception to this is Roger Robson's slim history of Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling (Robson 1999).

Medieval period. Citing historic literature such as that of Geoffery of Monmouth and legends of giants, Tripp negotiates the hazardous path of separating fact and myth in examples of wrestling in early English history, before moving on to the development of the sport over the following centuries, its emergence in London as a popular spectator sport, and its spread around the world as a result of emigration, which also contributed to its eventual decline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He also examines recent attempts at revival of the sport.

While the book is a superb piece of historical research, how then might it be of use to researchers of English literature? As mentioned previously, there is a significant library of work in nineteenth and twentieth century English literature which incorporates wrestling into the storyline, specifically Cornish and West Country styles, such as those of Devon and Dorset. While Tripp does not explore this literary interest to any great extent, he does highlight its appearance in Michael Drayton's poem *Poly-Olbion*, with a reference to two wrestlers appearing on the Cornish banner at Agincourt (Tripp 2023: 27), John Leland's poem *The Genethliacum* (Tripp 2023: 26) and suggests the wrestling scene in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (Act 1, Scene 2) may have been inspired by Cornish wrestling (Tripp 2023: 28). Tripp also notes that Thomas Hardy had a keen interest in local newspaper reports (Tripp 2023: 95). *Cornish Wrestling: A History* provides a significant amount of historical and cultural knowledge which may help a literature researcher better understand the context of the work. For instance, whereas a modern reader might not appreciate the widespread appeal of wrestling in the past, Tripp's research could, for example, contextualise certain scenes in Blackwood's 1864 novel *Clara Vaughan*. Farmer Huxtable's match with a Cumbrian wrestler in London (Blackmore 1889 [1864]: 365–371) illuminates several aspects mentioned in Tripp's history; the popularity of wrestling in the capital, the interest in matches involving mixed styles as well as the corrupt match fixing, known as faggoting, which led to the downfall of much of the regional and traditional wrestling. Similarly, the brief mention of Cornish and Devonshire Wrestling in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, "Wrestling matches, in the different fashions of Cornwall and Devonshire, were seen here and there about the market-place" (Hawthorne 2023 [1850]: 191), reflects the large-scale emigration from Cornwall and the West Country and the spread of Cornish Wrestling to the English diaspora, something which Tripp gives considerable coverage in his seventh chapter, dedicated to the decline of the sport in England. It should be noted, however, that Hawthorne's novel is set in a period before the main emigrations which are held partly responsible for the decline of the sport in its native land. Likewise, the opposition of the Methodist churches towards wrestling, dealt

with in the same chapter, may go some way to explaining the rejection of the sport by a former champion upon his embracing religion in Arthur Quiller Couch's short story *Wrestlers* (Quiller Couch 1896: 109).

One major event in the history of Cornish and Devonshire Wrestling, which Tripp examines is the practice of challenge matches, particularly the famous 1826 match between Abraham Cann of Devonshire and James Polkinghorne of Cornwall, the outcome of which is, allegedly, still a bone of contention in the two counties. It is notable that the importance of this match in English society of the time must have been considerable as there are portraits of both wrestlers, several ballads, one of which is included in Tripp's appendices, and the fact that the story is related by Sabine Baring-Gould in both his works on the characters of Cornwall (Baring-Gould 1909: 54) and of Devon (Baring-Gould 1908: 514) over ninety years later. The match arguably influenced R.D. Blackmore's numerous, and often highly detailed accounts of Devonshire/Cornwall challenge matches in his novels, particularly *Lorna Doone*, *Perlycrosse*, and *Clara Vaughan*. The latter is particularly relevant as Farmer Huxtable beats the Cumbrian wrestler using a throw called "Abraham [Cann]'s staylace" (Blackmore 1889 [1864]: 370). As a point of interest, the difference between the two styles was that the Devon wrestlers wore hardened shoes, as opposed to the barefoot style of Cornwall, and were notorious for kicking. Tripp's detailed examination of the match and its importance would be of great use to scholars of Blackmore's work particularly. Tripp was hoping to write a more detailed book on the Cann-Polkinghorne match and was working on it prior to his untimely death in 2024.

Cornish Wrestling: A History is a very well structured and accessible work with numerous illustrations and several appendices. While much of its content, understandably, deals with technical aspects of the sport, such as numbers of fixtures, rule sets, lists of events, which are likely to be of more interest to sports scholars, there is a wealth of cultural and social information which the literary scholar will find exceedingly useful. It serves as a much needed text about a much neglected aspect of historic English culture. As such, it is a worthy monument to the scholarship of the late Mike Tripp.

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