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# ON THE BALL

A HISTORY OF FOOTBALL. By Morris Marples. (Secker & Warburg. 21s.)

By H. E. BATES

THE history and social history of football, as I suggested in these columns a couple of years ago, have been much neglected. Though football to most of us seems as English as Dickens, brass bands and Yorkshire pudding, and though millions of people all over the world are passionately and fanatically interested in one or other of its several forms, far more interested even than in politics or their chosen religions, the game has inspired on the whole a scanty and feeble literature, much of it, as Mr. Marples points out, "no more than anecdote or gossip" or a curious brand of Saturday evening journalism ("Smith shook the rigging with a rasper").

Serious writers, perhaps put off their stroke by this sort of thing or by a fear of being identified with Kipling's "muddled oafs," have turned from the vast social interests of this ancient game to look mostly on the more obvious pleasures of cricket. In doing so they have missed the ruder and more vigorous colouring, the street poetry, the pub-and-chapel flavours and the sheer art of a game whose origins lie deep in the centuries.

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NOW comes Mr. Marples, an Oxford man and a schoolmaster, to investigate as far as possible the game's entire history, taking us from the invention as early as 300 B.C. of the Graeco-Roman game of *harpastum*, described as a game of some violence ("Oh! my poor neck!") by the Greek comic dramatist Antiphanes, and having some resemblances to modern Rugby, down to the contemporary ritual of Wembley on Cup Final day, with its odd air of being a revivalist meeting gone wrong, and the annual Oxford and Cambridge tribal war at Twickenham. *Harpastum* was popular in both Greek and Roman worlds for at least 800 years and Mr. Marples concludes that it "must surely have been played in this country by Roman soldiers or officials and perhaps learned from them by Romanised Britons." This possibly accounts for my own feeling, especially in the big arenas like Wembley, that

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Sanctum should now be the laboratory of an engineering school. Perhaps the promised new edition of his complete poems will lead to a final assessment. Meanwhile, as Miss Norman puts it, "we have seen enough in 130 years to know that he outrides exclusive movements, temporal sects, and the kind of interpretation that displays the critic chasing his own tail." Ariel has considerable staying-power.

about half of me is a Roman spectator.

But there are strong reasons for believing also that the game has Celtic and Scandinavian origins and also, surprising though it may sound to the hungry sheep of the penny pools, that it may well derive from "a magic rite designed to promote the fertility of man, beast and crops," as, of course, do many street games.

These pagan roots may well have inspired, even if not consciously, Puritanism's later attacks on the game. Earlier it had interfered with military training, particularly archery, and on these purely practical grounds had been condemned. But Puritanism really set the watch-dogs on it as one of the chief causes of Sabbath-breaking. With an almost fire-eating relish of its own it recorded a shattering act of divine disapproval when

a company of fellows upon a holy day being to play a match at foot ball, one of them was tolling the bell to assemble the rest, some being come into the church the randoze of their seeking, suddenly thundering was scene a black ball come tumbling downe a hill neere by; which took its course directly into the church, there it flew into the bell free and first slew him that tolled the bell, then it flustered about the church and hurt diverse of them, and at last bursting, left a filthy stinke like to that of brimstone, and so left a terror to all such spend thrifts of precious time.

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IT is interesting that two centuries later church and chapel and bible class, as some contribution to the nineteenth century's own delinquency problem of idle hands and the devil, should have done so much to establish, together with the Public Schools, the game as we know it today. Mr. Marples deals well with that part of the history, when Association broke away from Rugby, when Old Etonians could meet Blackburn Rovers on equal terms, when the lovely names of famous teams were invented and clubs were inaugurated under street-lamps, in pub tap-rooms and over tripe suppers. It is interesting also, I think, that it was largely the working classes who took to their hearts the Association game, once in its delicacy thought to be rather cissy and only for gentlemen, and that it was later the Public Schools and the classes they served who made the rougher stuff of Rugby into the one and only game for gentlemen.

As a fanatic of football I am very glad of Mr. Marples's excellent book; as a writer I am delighted that a writer of intelligence has not thought it beneath him to chronicle, with enthusiasm and painstaking documentation, the history of this ancient fertility-rite, if indeed it ever was one, in its many forms. He has done much to set up a standard authority on the game.