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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush by Aims McGuinness

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Chinese, who were intensely aware of the political consequences of every decision, Brundage and Killanin simply repeated their mantra – ‘Keep politics out of sports!’ – without grasping the fact that Coubertin, the revered founder of the modern games, *meant* the Olympics as an institutionalized statement of his liberal internationalist world-view. The ‘two-China’ controversy was, finally, for every one involved, a lose-lose situation.

Xu’s chapter on ‘Ping Pong Diplomacy’ is the book’s best because it provides genuinely new information about the thoughts and actions of Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and the table-tennis coaches and players who actually initiated the fateful negotiations. Xu ably communicates the excitement generated as men who feared and distrusted each other gradually, hesitatingly, found common ground, extricating themselves from an impasse that had existed for over twenty years.

Xu is almost as successful in his treatment of the 1976 Montreal Olympics, from which the Republic of China withdrew rather than compete as ‘Taiwan’. Xu underscores the dishonesty of the Canadian government under Pierre Trudeau, which cynically violated its pledges to the IOC, and the incompetence of the IOC under the ‘leadership’ of Killanin, whose weak protests were no more effective than his weak protests four years later, when President Jimmy Carter blatantly violated the Olympic policies that he – Carter – had put into place.

Although the treatment of the post-Mao era is generally too brief to add anything substantial to previous histories of the modern games, the book’s last chapter, on China’s preparations for the break-through moment of the 2008 Olympics, is informative. Keenly aware of linguistic and cultural nuances, Xu analyses not only the politics of the games but also the rhetoric and imagery that express and communicate the politics.

There is so much to praise in the book that it seems a shame that Harvard University Press did not ask a qualified sports historian to review the manuscript and suggest ways to make an excellent book out of a good one.

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AIMS MCGUINNESS. *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xiii, 249. \$35.00 (US).

THE STORY OF the early United States presence in the isthmus of Panama, in the 1840s and 1850s, as portrayed in this book, is woven around an account of Panamanians’ role in the construction of the Panama railroad, the first transcontinental line in the world. Neither story has been told in this detail, for which we must thank author Aims McGuinness.

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Taking some narrative liberties, McGuinness anchors his book on an incident in 1856 famous in Panamanian history: the war of the watermelon slice. Then backtracking to show how Panama became the preferred route for US and other travellers to reach California during the gold rush, he develops a sweeping history of the US annexation of California, the flood of immigrants into the gold region, US expansion into Central America (businessmen, filibusters, soldiers, diplomats, and so on), and the tensions these developments caused within Panama and with its national government in Bogotá. In the course of the book, he also provides the most definitive picture of the watermelon incident that will likely ever emerge.

Panamanians had long dreamed of restoring prosperity on the isthmus by attracting trade, as it had once done in the heyday of the Spanish empire. But the lack of a safe, economical crossing at Panama frustrated these hopes. In 1848, however, an extraordinary coincidence occurred, in which Colombia (of which Panama was a province) ceded to the Panama Railroad Company of New York a concession to build a railroad there at the same time California was annexed and gold was discovered there. Now the future railroad promised not only to convey cargo and passengers across the narrow ribbon of land, but it would also become the indispensable link between the east coast of the United States and its newly acquired territories on the west coast.

The political situation in Panama has not been told before in this detail, showing how individuals and parties lined up on the major issues of the day: its federal relations with Colombia, its role hosting an international corporation, its conduct of elections under the progressive 1853 constitution, and its creation of a viable government that could protect the citizenry and maintain law and order. Events moved quickly in these years, forcing leaders to take action without fully knowing what situations they confronted or what resources they had at their disposal.

The most powerful cause of the socio-economic tensions that erupted in riots in April 1856 was the completion of the railroad a year earlier and its successful provision of through-service to passengers travelling to and from California. This threw out of work thousands of labourers and persons who earned livings helping passengers cross before the railroad was finished. It also eliminated the lucrative hotel, food, and entertainment business that catered to travellers, once the latter could embark almost immediately on their next voyage. Panamanians, in short, saw their hopes of prosperity evaporate before their eyes.

The watermelon incident itself occurred when an inebriated American refused to pay for a slice of watermelon from a street vendor and insulted him. Weapons were brandished, a chase ensued, and a number of US travellers found themselves caught in a shoot-out between local citizens, police, and railroad security agents. In the end, seventeen died, mostly US travellers. The subsequent investigations led to counter-accusations between the two governments and the landing of US marines for several days. This crucible of violence forged long-lasting traditions:

repeated US military interventions, Panamanian nationalism, ineffectual support from the government in Bogotá, and a heterogeneous mix of peoples along the transit route. Many of these features remained throughout the twentieth century, until the United States turned over the Panama Canal in 1999.

McGuinness tells this fairly complex history with clarity and verve, bringing to life characters we only knew before as vague presences: Mariano and Justo Arosemena, José Domingo Espinar, Francisco de Fábrega, Pedro Goytía, Ran Runnels, Bartolomé Calvo, José Manuel Luna, and others. He shows how Panama was swept up into the vortex not only of the gold rush but also of the transportation revolution and US Manifest Destiny. McGuinness conducted research, that can only be termed exhaustive, in the archives of Panama, Colombia, and the United States. In a coda, McGuinness notes how he almost missed documents Manuel Noriega's people tried to use to build a case against US imperialism prior to the 1989 invasion. Finally, he painstakingly combed the rich newspaper sources from the 1850s; in all, very thorough and convincing research.

My only criticism is McGuinness's unwillingness to draw comparisons with similar incidents in the twentieth century, especially the 1964 canal riots that disrupted relations yet led eventually to a new treaty and relinquishment of the canal. But that aside, I recommend the book to students of Panama, US-Latin American relations, and indeed world history.

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EUGENE SECUNDA and TERENCE P. MORAN. *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. Pp. 231. \$49.95 (US).

THE IMMEDIATE PAST chief executives of the White House, President George W. Bush and Vice-President Richard B. Cheney, have been accused of having improperly sold the country on the Global War on Terror, including an unpopular invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Mission accomplished in 2003 became mission unfinished as the United States government sought to control public opinion at home and abroad. As the United States' image in the world plummeted, the electorate that gave the executive just enough of the benefit of the doubt to maintain power in 2004 eventually turned against the Bush-Cheney powers to persuade both the Democratic and Republican nominees for president to stake their reputations on not being anything like that administration.

In the book under review, Eugene Secunda and Terence P. Moran say that no matter the party, all presidents lie about war; it is in their political DNA to kill off the absolute truth when preparing the public for war. What remains is a basket of half-truths and for-your-own-good omissions that are designed to persuade rather