Cockfighting in Britain Since the Enlightenment

Alexander Sutherland

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For my Parents

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About the Author

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Cockfighting is known to have existed in Britain since Roman times. The cock itself has a long history in ecclesiastic symbolism, from being a representation of God in the early Church, then as a symbol of clerical vigilance against sin and as a pontifical emblem linked to Peter's denial of Christ. As such the cock became the subject of morality plays during the Middle Ages as an example of the ideal type of penitent. This gave rise to the practice of cock throwing and cockfighting at Shrovetide as symbols of scourging carnal sin. Both practices were enjoyed by all ages and by all classes from the monarchy down. Cockpits were built at great expense, first in London and then across the land, so that social elites could enjoy cockfighting in some comfort, while the less well-off made do with more rudimentary surroundings. From its early metropolitan days, cockfighting had rules that governed all aspects of the sport. These were drawn up by men at the upper levels of society. Cockfighting became a national secular pastime, organised for economic benefit rather than religious symbolism. Schoolboys engaged in cockfighting and cock throwing under the direction of their masters as part of their carnival pursuits. The master enjoyed a pecuniary interest by charging the boys a 'cock-penny' to take part, a necessary supplement to an often-meagre salary. A succession of seventeenth-century aficionados wrote encyclopaedias on the subject which advised cockers on how to breed birds successfully and care for their charges after battle. Cockfighting enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the horse-racing fraternity, this ensured that personal, intercity and inter-county matches were advertised, as were their results, in the racing calendars that started in the late 1720s, by which time cockfighting was very much established as an acceptable social pastime.

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All these aspects have been addressed by the author in a companion volume, *Cockfighting in Britain from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*. Together, the chapters in that study explore the culture, significance and purpose of cockfighting, the sport's impact on society, its political and economic dimensions, how cultural and societal changes influence its practices. The central premise of that study is that cockfighting remained an integral part of British culture for nigh on two millennia because of the cock's enduring association with the Church, and the patronage of elite sections of society who took pleasure in participating in cockfighting, having imbued it with an honourable pedigree traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome.

Whereas prior to the Enlightenment it was the rigidity of thought from centralised authority that sustained cockfighting, it is the principal argument of the present study that post-Enlightenment, having shaken off old long-held beliefs and superstitions, and adopted new ways of looking at the world, it was the varieties of cultures exposed by social upheaval during the era of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions that facilitated the continuation of cockfighting among sections of the community which did not, and do not, conform to accepted norms. There was no concerted way of relating to cockfighting, despite the cock's apparent change in moral status occasioned by scientific, religious and philosophic reappraisals of the nature of cruelty and pain.

The present work takes the study forward—examining, analysing and interpreting the same key themes in the period from the eighteenth century to the present. The rationale that underpinned the earlier study remains the same. Cockfighting in Britain as a topic of study has been under researched. There have been few attempts to cover a single sport over a long period, although Emma Griffin's *Blood Sport: Hunting in Britain since 1066* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2008) recounts that long and contentious history and offers fresh perspectives on today's conflicts. By contrast, Dix Harwood, in *Love for Animals and how it developed in Great Britain* (New York: Columbia University, 1928), looks at how the anthropocentrism typified by the ecclesiastical and educated elites contrasts with the anthropomorphic sentiment, often extreme, shared by many people and expressed through literature and poetry. Harwood's book, the original hard to come by, was 'rediscovered' by Keith Thomas, for his *Man and the Natural World: changing attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1993) has been republished by Edwin Mellion Press, Lampeter, Wales and Lewiston, New York, 2002.

In their different ways, these three books, all highly praiseworthy, should be required reading for anybody interested in the history of human-animal relations.

Bloomsbury Academic has published *A Cultural History of Sport*, a six-volume series that provides an extensive history of sport from classical antiquity to the present day. Each volume covers different historical periods and themes related to sport. Among the few books specifically about cockfighting are Alan Dundes, (ed.), *the Cockfight: A Casebook* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) and George Ryley Scott, *History of Cockfighting* (Originally published by C. Skelton, 1957). World of Books produces a History of Cockfighting Series which are printed to order. This includes reprints of older books on English cockfighting, all of which have been cited in this work.

Where this volume differs from its companion is the importance it attaches to the ethical relationship between humankind and animals and the fundamental issue of animal rights. The concept of animal rights was in its infancy prior to the Enlightenment but during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries advances in science, new philosophical ideas, and alternative interpretations of scripture, were joined by the works of poets and reformers of different stripes to change cultural and societal attitudes to bring animals into the moral fold. We now live in a world where the treatment of animals in sport is contentious, reported in the media and addressed by scholars, especially those engaged in the study of animal ethics, an emerging and expanding discipline occupying the minds of many. Books in Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature treat the subject as do books in the Palgrave Macmillan Animal Ethics Series. Among the authors on animal ethics, in a not-exhaustive list, that have been cited from these series and elsewhere, are Andrew and Clair Linzey, Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Joyce D'Silva, Roger Scruton, Rob Boddice, Sue Donaldson & Will Kimlicka and Lidia De Tienda Palop. Their contributions are dealt with in the relevant chapters.

Until such time as prohibited by law, interested parties had little difficulty in finding a venue to partake of a cockfight. Municipal cockpits existed across the land. This was especially true of London where they proliferated. The artist, William Hogarth, an astute observer of human nature, depicts the Royal Cockpit in his print, 'The Cockpit' (1759), to expose and ridicule the vices of contemporary society, as did the caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson (1808), both indicative of a disdain for cockfighting that could be openly expressed.

One of the best accounts of the atmosphere in a nineteenth-century cockpit is provided by Edward Herbert in a finely detailed letter to a friend in 1822. His account is quoted at length in the next chapter. The relatively high cost of admission, he notes, did not deter the dedicated cocker however poorly dressed. On studying the audience, he thought them mature in age and concluded that the young were not interested. Although he retracted this view on meeting the son of one of the feeders who was following in his father's footsteps, there seems to have been a kernel of truth in his original assessment that cockfighting was enjoyed by an ageing population. By the time of his visit, cockfighting was going out of fashion.

While theologians and divines were slow to consider changes to the maltreatment of animals from a religious perspective, other thinkers were arguing against it from a philosophical or scientific point of view. The founding of the Royal Society in 1660 provided a stimulus to scientific enquiry that was already rocking the certainties of the established Church. The lines between man, beast and God that lay at the heart of salvation were blurring. A broad mind was required to view the world in this new light. One of the earliest to express such views was Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, who thought that man should have an 'affection of benevolence and love towards the whole' and not just his own kind.[1] His views were well received by philosophers on the continent but less so by clerics at home who railed against his new ideas. Among philosophers who condemned animal cruelty were Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. Utilitarian philosophers thought that feelings of compassion and kindness in the human breast led to morally appropriate behaviour and increased the sum of happiness in the world. Jeremy Bentham had only one yardstick: 'The question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, Can they *talk*? But, Can they *suffer*?'[2]

Poets, novelists and artists espoused this new attitude to animals. James Thomson wrote of a world where all living things were appreciated for their own sake, and where God works out His scheme in 'boundless love and perfect Wisdom'.[3] His poems were highly influential for a century

[1] Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Edited by Lawrence E. Klein, for Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. (Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 226.

[2] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, printed in the year 1780* (London: T. Payne and Son, 1789) p. cccix.

[3] Dix Harwood, *Love for Animals and how it developed in Great Britain*. (New York: Columbia University, 1928) p. 135.

after their appearance in 1726–1730, giving rise to a perception of animals endowed with anthropomorphic attributes. This drew them closer to humanity and it became increasingly difficult to treat them differently from fellow humans. This 'sentimentalist' movement, grounded on feelings of tenderness, sadness or nostalgia, found voice in the novels of Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith and Henry Mackenzie among others.

Critics thought the movement fundamentally self-indulgent. Henry Fielding, novelist and dramatist, satirised their novels in his own early works. Essayist and philosopher, William Hazlitt, responded to the 'sickly sensibility' of the hymnodist, William Cowper, by arguing that it prevented those so disposed from any practical engagement in pursuit of their cause. Hazlitt's desire for a more robust approach to nature was provided by Robert Burns, who acted as a bridge between the sentimentalists and later Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, et al. Many of Burns' poems show his concern for animals. He was not a sentimentalist in the mould of Cowper; he recognised the need to slaughter animals for human consumption but objected to shooting for mere sport. Concern for the wellbeing of animals was only part of a general urge towards compassion blossoming amid the urban-industrial transformation of England. That, and the need to change the leisure pastimes of the working man to fit the new order of factory timetables.

One consequence was the suppression of 'plebeian' blood sports. Cock throwing, a relatively easy target, was the first to come under sustained attack and the first to be universally quashed. Shorn of long-forgotten religious symbolism, it was a minority sport, usually practiced by schoolboys, and very much considered a 'plebeian' activity. As such, it was susceptible to attack from detractors and since it had no persons of influence to defend it could be put down without attracting too much resistance especially since it was only one of several amusements enjoyed at holiday times and other diversions could be found to compensate for its loss. The practice of cock throwing showed a healthy resilience but by the end of the eighteenth century it had largely been put down thanks to local ordinances and without the involvement of the government.

Despite cock throwing's demise, the prevailing attitude to outlawing animal cruelty was still largely one of indifference and when a movement did emerge it stemmed from several sources not all imbued with unalloyed altruism. It was part of an effort to reform the behaviour and improve the lot of the working-classes; it owed a debt to an expanding scientific

understanding of the relationship between people and animals, and there was the pragmatic concern that blood sports threatened the discipline of workers in the mills. Opponents were also scandalised by the gambling, drinking and unruly behaviour that accompanied such events and the fact that they often took place on the Sabbath. Reformers faced opposition from public indifference and resistance from vested interests. Translating good intentions into effective changes to entrenched social behaviour was a long-drawn-out process but as England moved from a predominantly rural society to an urban and industrial society the seasonal rhythm of agricultural life was replaced by a life of strict observance of the factory clock. Blood sports did not fit into this modern world since their duration could not be controlled by the clock but relied instead on the endurance of the animals.

Laws against cruelty to animals were resisted for years. With regards to blood sports, supporters claimed they were a tradition of long standing and did not adversely affect the character of participants. Bull baiting, a particularly wild event when bulls were chased through the streets of towns with widespread damage to people and property, and the inevitable gory death of the bull, had its champions in parliament. The first law to address the issue was the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act 1822, where 'cattle' was defined as a range of domestic animals including sheep and oxen. The law had failings, omitted from the wording were bulls and cocks. This was remedied with the passage of the Cruelty to Animals Act 1835 but even this had faults and both the 1822 and 1835 acts were repealed and replaced with a much more comprehensive Cruelty to Animals Act 1849. Although not eradicated, bull baiting, dog fighting and cockfighting became illegal. The laws against cruelty to animals showed a distinct class bias. No effort was made to curtail the field sports enjoyed by the landed gentry and the upper echelons of society. The animal protection movement was seen by working-class sections of society as an attack on individual freedom; they construed it, as they did the temperance and the Sabbatarian movements, as divisive and unwarranted interference in their affairs—a view shared by philosopher and libertarian John Stuart Mill. Early humanitarian reformers offered little alternative recreation other than going to church and until the advent of mass spectator sports like football and rugby, the void was largely filled by sporting aristocrats and publicans who between them provided a range of diversions including drinking, gambling, horse-racing, boxing and illegal cockfighting. Only a

paradigm shift in general cultural practices could eradicate the worst excesses from society.

Some of the complex problems faced by an emergent middle class could be solved by a social order aimed primarily at moulding a labouring class amenable to new disciplines of both work and leisure. The American sociologist, Edward A. Ross, was among the first to provide a comprehensive sociological theory based on his central precept that social order is the product of a wide array of phenomena, which he divides into two broad categories and summarises as ethical and political. Societies, he argues, are regulated by both. The dominance of one instrument of control over the other depends on how a society is constituted. The wider the gulf between classes, between rich and poor, the more political are the coercive regulatory instruments, driven by prejudice or fear: the more homogeneous a society, the more ethical are the regulatory instruments, which are milder, more enlightened and fairer. Social commentators such as Paul Landis believe that order in society is consensual and that it is as strong as its shared values. As family ties were weakened by the migration of people in search of work and self-betterment, so other means were needed to ensure social stability. Landis emphasises the importance of education as the best means of achieving this.

Several agencies were engaged in exerting social control. Religion was still a power in the land, newly established police forces worked in tandem with magistrates and the courts; charities, civil servants, social workers and philanthropists, temperance and recreational reformers, all contributed to this new social order. Thousands of people, from the great and the good to the children of working-class parents, joined organisations such as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Cockfighting in municipal pits disappeared, working class men could attend football and rugby matches and preferred to take their families on the train for a week by the seaside and enjoy the piers and amusement parks that sprang up around the coast rather than attend the local wakes, as these faded and died out. They could also visit the theatre or the music hall where they could join in singing the popular songs of the day. Despite the many successes of disparate groups to refine the manners of the poorer elements of society, cockfighting had not been very properly put down and the efforts of the authorities to suppress it resulted in some noteworthy and sometimes bloody encounters.

While changes in normative behaviour ensured that the overwhelming majority in society deemed cockfighting reprehensible, a minority refused

to give it up and it remained a dangerous game for the humans involved not least for the animal protection inspectors and police who were trying to stop it, with at least one recorded death where, much to the disgust of law officers everywhere, only one of those involved was sent to prison for six months with hard labour, the harshest sentence meted out to any of the defendants in the case. Cockfighting had always been a dangerous place for human participants. The risks of theft, cheating, nobbling the birds, welching on bets, injury from drunkenness, were ever present. This was particularly so at unregulated cockfights. One well-organised cockfight that attracted widespread attention involved two aristocrats, one of whom, the Hon. George Charles Grantley Berkeley, challenged Peter John Fane, Count De Salis, to a duel on a matter of honour, having blamed him for notifying the police in advance of the event. Their differences were played out in the magistrate's court and in an exchange of letters to the London papers. They were fined for arranging the duel which was averted. Apart from Grantley Berkeley, whose charge may have been politically motivated, only lower-class participants were charged with cockfighting offences in this highly publicised case, despite titled gentlemen and members of Parliament being named as defendants.

Ireland was the most dangerous of all the countries in the British Isles where cockfighting took place. Violence between the authorities trying to maintain law and order and proponents of cockfighting was commonplace and nowhere more obvious than in the predominantly Protestant north where the Catholic minority wanted to maintain their age-old practices. The Belfast Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals was a Protestant organisation and secured convictions against largely Catholic participants. Some of the cockfights were attended by crowds of thousands and had all the trappings of fairs. In an often-drunken atmosphere, riots between religious and political factions were frequent.

Despite the efforts of law enforcement and animal protection societies, organised cockfights continued to take place across England. Improved transport links meant that intercity and inter-county rivalries took on an international dimension. These difficulties were highlighted in an exposé by an undercover reporter of a cockfight between English and Irish cockers at Aintree racetrack near Liverpool on 15 April 1875. Many of the men who appeared in the dock were serial offenders drawn from the upper classes and military officers who were not deterred by the paltry fines imposed by magistrates. Complaints about the leniency of the penalties provoked strong condemnation in the press and questions being asked in

the House of Commons. A defence of cockfighting by a sod 'n' turf-loving Admiral Henry Rous in *The Times* was greeted with derisive counterarguments from journalists and correspondents alike. These public exchanges did much to galvanise the authorities into taking robust action to stamp out cockfighting once and for all.

One group of men for whom cockfighting was an integral part of their leisure hours was the coalminers. Living in close-knit communities, often isolated from outside influence, they saw themselves, and were seen by others, as a breed apart. They continued to participate in cockfighting in English, Welsh and Scottish communities until eventually compelled to give up by external pressures. Among them were preachers from the Methodist Church who took their evangelical message into the heart of the mining communities where they won many converts, pit owners enforcing penalties for infringement of rules that they themselves had set as they tried to promote uniformity and efficiency in working practices, the presence of a regular police force ever willing to clamp down on disorderly behaviour and the arrival of the railways into once isolated villages, enabling the miners and their families to seek entertainment elsewhere.

Cockfighting in Scotland was a microcosm of the sport in England although there was no consistency about which religious festival was favoured for engaging in the activity, taking part in different parts of the country at different times with some adhering to the old Julian calendar. Although carried out in rural communities, and in the streets of towns, it seems to have become a regulated pastime later than in England. The principal towns had their cockpits, and it was part of the side entertainment at race meetings. Cockers participated with the same historical and theological justifications as their English counterparts, against the same religious, philosophical, scientific reasons for objections by scholars, activists and poets. The laws against it were the same as those in England and Wales, albeit usually enacted a year later. These laws were subject to the same legal challenges on technical grounds by defenders of cockfighting and the same complaints about the leniency of sentencing by the same disparate range of opponents. As late as 1892, the Law Lords in the Court of Appeal used its claimed elitist origins in the martial world of ancient Greece and Rome as a defence against prosecution.

Cockfighting in many Scottish schools was often highly formalised, and its supervision extended to places of higher learning. When St Andrews University was founded in 1413, the authorities acknowledged the existence of time-honoured customs, and an early edict limited the time spent

in cockfighting at Carnival-tide. In 1696, Robert Blau, who ran a private school in Edinburgh, published a book of Latin orations and verses to help schoolboys learn the language and give them confidence in public speaking. Among them was a lengthy oration extolling the martial virtues of cocks and cockfighting. When the fighting is over, the victorious schoolboy is declared King of the Cocks, and a speech is given on his *Inauguratio Regis Gallorum*. Latin terminology on cockfighting appeared with remarkable consistency in schools large and small, across Scotland, for the better part of the next one hundred and fifty years. Throughout William Coldstream's period as headmaster of Dunblane School from 1743 to 1786, he kept detailed records of the annual cockfights and the order of battle is variously described as '*Ordo Gallorum Gallinaceorum*', '*Ordo Gallorum Pugnacium*', '*Ordo Pugilium Gallorum*', or less straightforwardly as '*Ordo Bellatorum Hilarius*' or '*Gallomachia*'. By the end of the nineteenth century cockfighting in Scottish schools was confined to being enacted in children's games although vestiges remained of the rituals and duties once performed, with names like 'Rexa-boxa-King', or simply 'Rexa', and players designated 'King' or 'Queen'. Variations were played across the country. The game of *Regibus* was played in the Northeast. The allusions to cockfighting have now been lost; such games are now simply known as tig.

Cockfighting had died out as a spectator sport to such an extent by the beginning of the twentieth century that spurs and other paraphernalia could be openly sold at Sotheby's as 'rare curiosities'. Colourful prints could be bought and sold. The cock was still prized by poultry breeders but was now bred for show, his martial bearing and plumage were what gained the judges' approval. The debate over the moral status of animals had remained peripheral to philosophical thinking since the appearance of Henry Salt's *Animals' Rights* and David Ritchie's *Natural Rights* in the late nineteenth century but Peter Singer's 1975 publication *Animal Liberation* reignited the old arguments about their moral status. Tom Regan in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) argues that mammals have basic rights; eating them or performing harmful experiments on them violates these rights. John Passmore, among others, begs to differ. Proponents of animal rights ignited a popular movement. While theoretical principles are debated in the forums of academia, the emotive issue of what constitutes animals' rights is increasingly contested through the various

platforms of social media in the form of affirmative, often violent or disruptive, action and often within a framework of environmental issues more generally.

Cockfighting continues to the present day, largely confined to the periphery within minority, marginalised groups who may not necessarily share the same social norms as mainstream society. The police and animal welfare and environmental groups fight to prevent it. Both proponents and opponents use modern technology and social media to further their contested aims.

CHAPTER 2

A Swell's Day Out

Introduction

By the eighteenth century, cockfighting had been practiced in Britain for the better part of two millennia. Prohibited by law during the Interregnum following the execution of Charles I in 1649 until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, and condemned by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritans who wished to rid the Church of England of lingering Roman Catholic practices, it had otherwise been encouraged and facilitated by secular and spiritual authorities alike. It was enjoyed as a cultural pastime by all levels of society, either, in its early days, as part of religious festivities, or as an amusement that afforded scope for the pleasure of breeding game cocks on the one hand, for gambling and drunkenness on the other. As a blood sport, it attracted opprobrium from a few isolated voices from across the social divide. By the Age of Reason, these voices had formed a chorus which had gathered sufficient momentum to begin supplanting religious, philosophical and cultural orthodoxies with new ways of looking at humankind's relationship with the cock, with animals and with nature more generally. A reappraisal of our understanding of cruelty and pain was central to this change.

Cockpits existed at some time or other in various parts of London with several having been designated 'Royal' since Henry VIII built the first at Whitehall Palace in 1536. Successive monarchs frequented this venue until Jacobean times when the building was converted into a private theatre and

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apartments for the Royal Household. Charles I had the Whitehall cockpit extensively remodelled to a design by Inigo Jones and the first play in the revamped cockpit was performed on 5 November 1630, the anniversary of the 'day of deliverance' for those who cared to cast their minds back to the events of twenty five years earlier.[1] Among the residents of the Cockpit was Oliver Cromwell, after Parliament bestowed it on him in February 1650. The family lived there, with reluctance on the part of Mrs Cromwell, for the next four years. During that time all correspondence, private and governmental, was written to and from 'The Cockpit'.[2] Cromwell occasionally used the Cockpit thereafter to entertain guests 'with rare music, both of voices and instruments, till the evening. His Highness being very fond of music'.[3] Following the Restoration in 1660, Charles II had new dressing rooms added, and it was used for plays and elaborate masques until damaged in a fire in 1697, being afterwards converted into the Privy Council Office. The address 'given at the Cockpit', continued to be used for Treasury proclamations, and Treasury minutes continued to be headed 'Cockpit' until around 1780.[4]

Charles II required a pit nearer to St James' and a Royal Pit was built on Birdcage Walk on the south side of St James's Park (the steps leading from Birdcage Walk into Dartmouth Street still retain their original name, the Cockpit Steps), where the great county and other mains were fought until 1816, when the governors of Christ's Hospital to whom the lease belonged refused to renew it. There was a cockpit in Shoe Lane, Holborn, visited by Pepys; the one in Jewin Street, spared by the Great Fire of London in 1666 and used by a congregation for services until their church—one of eighty-seven lost in the conflagration—was rebuilt; the one in Drury Lane, Covent Garden, converted into the Phoenix or Drury Lane Theatre, where stage plays alternated with cockfighting matches and scene of the apprentice boys riots of 1617; and another in Pickled-Egg Walk (now Crawford Passage), near Smithfield. The Royal Cockpit, visited by Zacharias von Uffenbach in 1710, was transferred to the back of Gray's

[1] Fran C. Chalfant, *Ben Johnson's London: a Jacobean Placename Dictionary*, (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1978) pp. 56, 199/200.

[2] Thomas Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches; with elucidations*. Three Vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856) Vol II, pp. 147, 313, 375/6; Vol III, p. 10.

[3] Carlyle, *Cromwell's Letters,* Vol. III, p. 260. Entertaining on 20 January 1657.

[4] Peter Cunningham, *Handbook of London, Past and Present* (London: John Murray, 1850) p.133; John Timbs, *Romance of London: strange stories, scenes and remarkable persons of the great town*. Three Vols. (London: Frederick Warne, 1865), Vol. II, p. 240.

Inn Walk, where mains of cocks were fought certainly until 1752. Other pits were to be found in Aldersgate Street, near the Barbican; Bainbridge Street; off Catherine Wheel Yard, near Spitalfields, East London; in Great James Street, Holborn; in Cripplegate; in Old Gravel Lane, near Blackfriars; in St. Georges-in-the-East; and at the New Vauxhall Gardens. A pit in Endell Street, Long Acre, is reputed to be where the last great mains were fought openly in London up until 1835 and the passing of the *Cruelty to Animals Act*, although that claim to fame has also been made for the 'New Cockpit Royal' in Little Grosvenor Street, Millbank.[5] The Royal Cockpit in Birdcage Walk was demolished in 1816 and replaced by a Royal Cockpit in Tufton Street, Westminster and although monarchs had ceased to frequent such places, the Royal coat of arms was emblazoned above the door.

* * *

A swell in London would have had little difficulty in finding a venue where he could join 'the fancy' in pursuit of his favourite pastime. If the sport of cockfighting was good enough for kings and good enough for society ladies, it was good enough for curious schoolboys. When Sir James Grant, 'the Good Sir James', was a pupil at Westminster School, his tutor William Lorimer broadened his education by taking him to the theatre to take in plays, they made regular visits to coffee shops where young James enjoyed expensive 'bunns'; they paid to see what were referred to as freak shows, and on 8 April 1752, paid sixpence to see a cockfight while on trip to Westminster.[6] What impression the visit had on the future Baron Colquhoun and Member of Parliament for Elginshire is not recorded. Although a diversity of people attended cockfights, the vast majority who did attend were men from across the social strata: and cockpits were no place for the faint-hearted.

[5] Timbs, *Romance of London*, Vol. II, p. 238; George Ryley Scott, *History of Cockfighting* (originally published 1957; reprinted Hindhead, Surrey; Triplegate, 1983). p. 59; S. A. Taylor, Cockfighting and its Votaries; pp. 18/19; Captain Jack Gilbey, 'Cockfighting in Art', *Apollo*: *the Magazine of the Arts for Connoisseurs and Collectors*. London, New York: No. 65, January 1957. Pp. 22–4. p. 24.

[6] National Records of Scotland GD248. Papers of the Ogilvie family, Earls of Seafield (Seafield Papers), Ref GD248/205/14 Dated 1751/1752. Household accounts due by Sir Ludovick Grant 1751. Accompt of money received and disbursed for Master Grant from December 1751 to April 1752. William Lorimer A/C paid June 12, 1752.

Young Master James and his tutor were not the only Scots to visit a cockpit while in London. On Wednesday 15 December 1762, twenty-two-year-old James Boswell, not long arrived and loving the vibrancy of the capital, decided to play the 'true-born Old Englishman' for the day by way of a riposte to the enemies of the country who considered Englishmen 'selfish, beef-eaters and cruel'. To this end, he satisfied the first two charges by eating a beef stew on his own and without sharing it, at Dolly's Steak House—hardly radical—and afterwards 'went at five o'clock to the Royal Cockpit in St James's Park and saw cockfighting for about five hours to fulfil the charge of cruelty'.[7] He did take some precautions; he filled his pockets with gingerbread and apples to provide some sustenance; changed into old clothes and a laced hat; left behind his watch, purse and pocket-book, and armed with an oaken stick for protection, he 'sallied to the pit'.

> The Cockpit is a circular room in the middle of which the cocks fight. It is seated round with rows gradually rising. The pit and the seats are all covered with mat. The cocks, nicely cut and dressed and armed with silver heels, are set down and fight with amazing bitterness and resolution. Some of them were quickly dispatched. One pair fought three quarters of an hour. The uproar and noise of betting is prodigious. A great deal of money made a very quick circulation from hand to hand. There was a number of professed gamblers there. An old cunning dog whose face I had seen at Newmarket sat by me a while. I told him I knew nothing of the matter. He thought I would be a good subject for him but found himself baulked. I was shocked to see the distraction and anxiety of the bettors. I was sorry for the poor cocks. I looked round to see if any of the spectators pitied them when mangled and torn in a most cruel manner. But I could not observe the smallest relenting sign in any countenance. I was thereof not ill pleased to see them endure mental torment. Thus, did I complete my true English day, and came home [to his fashionable lodgings in Downing Street] pretty much fatigued and pretty much confounded at the strange turn of this people.[8]

Boswell's efforts to absolve his English hosts of the charge of cruelty, at least in his own mind, had failed. He, like Pepys and Evelyn before him, recorded his own condemnatory impressions and opinions of blood sports but made no effort to change the recreational habits of those around him,

[7] James Boswell, *London Journal*, 1762–1763, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New Haven and London: University Press, 2004, first published 1950) p. 86.

[8] Ibid., p. 87.

and audiences continued to frequent the cockpits that proliferated across the metropolis.

The artist William Hogarth grew up in the vicinity of St Bartholomew's Hospital, in the shadow of the forbidding walls of Newgate Prison, and within the sights and sounds of the shambles at Smithfield market where for two weeks in every August thousands enjoyed the various pleasures and excesses of 'the greatest of all shows of London', St Bartholomew's Fair. He took a keen interest in the life on the streets around him where bear gardens, cockfights, wrestling matches between women, and other shows were advertised daily and enjoyed by many while the literate could visit coffee houses where they read newspapers and journals to keep up to date with the news.[9]

Hogarth's print, 'The Cockpit' (1759), depicts the Royal Cockpit in Birdcage Walk (Fig. 2.1).

His contemporary, Dr John Trusler, who helped the artist's widow earn money from selling copies of his work, adopts a moralistic tone when describing this work, as befitting the intentions of the artist and his widow. He invites his readers to:

> Take notice of this group of gamblers, of all ranks; as well as noblemen, butchers, chimney-sweepers, shoe blacks, post boys, thieves, and blackguards of all denominations … Read in their faces, the disposition of their hearts, Look, steadfastly, on him, in the middle; see him lost in the enjoyment of his favourite amusement; eager to bet, and, full of cash, he is the dupe of every one present, who are but too ready to take advantage of his weakness. In this confused state of his mind, is one villain, purloining of a bank-note from him; behind whom, is another, actuated by envy, willing to do the same, and, grudging his neighbour, the happy opportunity.[10]

The man who is being relived of some of his money is said to be Lord Albemarle Bertie, the second son of Peregrine (Bertie) 2nd Duke of Ancaster.[11] Also depicted is a blind man, a deaf man and a man without the

[9] Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth: A Life and a World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) pp. 82/3.

[10] John Trusler, *Hogarth Moralised. Being a Complete Edition of Hogarth's Works containing … a comment on their moral tendency. Calculated to improve the minds of youth, and convey instruction, under the mask of entertainment. Published with the approbation of Jane Hogarth, widow of the late Mr Hogarth.* (London: Hooper, 1768) pp. 178/9. William Hogarth | The Cockpit | The Metropolitan Museum of Art (metmuseum.org) Accession Number: 91.1.119.

[11] Gilbey, 'Cockfighting in Art', p. 24.

Fig. 2.1 Royal Cockpit in Birdcage Walk by William Hogarth

use of his limbs, to signify the lengths the afflicted will go to indulge in their pastime. A Frenchman sits with obvious disdain, dropping his snuff into the eyes of the man sitting below him, signifying the contempt in which foreigners hold the English for engaging in 'such vulgar and low-bred amusements'. A portrait of, Nan Rawlings, commonly called Deptford Nan, or sometimes the Duchess of Deptford, hangs on a wall. She lived by gaming and was a well-known frequenter of the racetrack and cockpit. The shadow of a man hoist in a basket hangs from the ceiling, his punishment for failing to honour his debts. He is offering his watch to redeem his liberty. A drunk sits contemplating his empty purse.

Hogarth was not the only artist to see the value of using the goings-on at the Royal Cockpit as a suitable subject to expose and ridicule the vices of contemporary society. A print of a cockfight there by the prolific painter and caricaturist, Thomas Rowlandson, (1756–1827), depicts a throng of

'peers and pickpockets, grooms and gentlemen, bons-vivants and bullies' interacting in confusion and bustle, as they wager; win, boast and threaten; come to blows with fists, horsewhips and sticks; lose, despair and cringe; or contemplate proceedings with a sedate insouciance (Fig. 2.2).[12]

The poet John Hamilton Reynolds, a friend of John Keats and Pierce Egan, sportswriter and raconteur, loved the company of 'the Fancy', and night after night was to be seen sauntering down the gaslight streets to meet 'the bloods and the sports and to watch some sparring'. Apart from

Fig. 2.2 The Royal Cockpit (1808) by Thomas Rowlandson

[12] Rudolph Ackermann, *Microcosm of London,* 3 volumes (London: Metheun, 1904) Vol. 1, pp. 123–5; (illustration No. 18 between pp. 122/3). Joseph Greco, *Rowlandson the Caricaturist: a selection from his works.* Two Volumes (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880) Volume I, pp. 290–3. Designed and etched by Thomas Rowlandson | Royal Cockpit | The Metropolitan Museum of Art (metmuseum.org) Accession Number: 59.533.1671(9).

his love of boxing, what was 'stirring to his blood like a drum tap was the sight of a cockpit setter with his keen face, bright eyes and coloured belt'.[13] That said, Reynolds wrote of a cockfight, 'When it was all over, what remained in the mind, but the dirty dregs of brutality and vice'.[14] Brutality and vice could be found in the cockpit in other forms. Egan, familiar with the patois of London street life, in a satirical work – whose scurrilous dedication to King George IV must have been lost on His Majesty otherwise the author would have found himself in the brig – has a trio of swells, Tom and Jerry and Bob Logic, visit the new cockpit at Tufton Street where they witness a fight for 100 guineas between Jacco Maccacco, 'the famed Italian monkey of unrivalled fame, and a dog of 20lbs weight, the property of a Nobleman well-known in the circle'.[15] The crowd, a cross-section of London society, includes 'flue-flakers, dustmen, lamplighters, farmers, barristers, coachmen, swaddies, sprigs of nobility. MPs and market men', all jostling against one another to get a seat when the doors open. Delighted when the monkey wins, for they have backed him, the three swells collect their 'blunt' and leave.[16]

A Visit to the Royal Cockpit

One of the best accounts of the atmosphere in this nineteenth-century cockpit is provided by Edward Herbert in a letter to his friend Russell Powell. Newly returned to London after recuperating from illness by the Cornish seaside, he was languishing in his rooms at the Albany as the autumn nights closed in when his reverie was interrupted by the rapping of knuckles on his door to announce the arrival of his friend, sportsman and gambler Tom Morton, clutching a newspaper. 'Here is that which will be life itself to *you*!' declared Morton, who 'proceeded to read aloud from the first column of the newspaper with the emphasis on one word—Cocking!—at the Royal Cockpit, Tufton Street, Westminster, 200 the

[13] John Hamilton Reynolds, *The Fancy, with a prefatory memoir by John Masefield* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1921?), introduction by Masefield, pp. 10/11.

[14] Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800.* (London: Allen Lane, 1983) p. 69.

[15] Pierce Egan, *Life in London, or the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorne, Esq., and his Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their rambles* and sprees through the metropolis. (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1821), pp. 221–7.

[16] John Bee, *Sportsman's Slang; a Dictionary of Terms Used in the Affairs of the Turf, the Ring, the Chase and the Cockpit …* (London, Lewis, 1825)