THE ORIGINS OF MODERN ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL

***The English Game* [Series – Netflix], History and Heritage**

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The English Game is a six-part historical drama mini-series produced by Netflix. Developed by screenwriter Julien Fellowes, best known for creating *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) and other English-based costume dramas, the series purports to tell the story of the origins of modern association football. It moves broadly chronologically from the late 1870s to the 1882-1883 period (« *one of the great inflection points for both rugby and soccer* », as Tony Collins has put it)[1], when the first working-class teams from Lancashire in the industrial heartland of north-west England began to defeat the public-school old boys' teams that had hitherto dominated the Football Association (FA) Cup, the primary competition of the day.

The narrative follows the fortunes of two « heroic » figures: Arthur Kinnaird, a leading footballer and administrator from a wealthy banking family (played by Edward Holcroft) and Fergus Suter, a working-class stonemason from Glasgow who became one of the first recognised professional footballers after moving from Scotland to Lancashire in 1878 (portrayed by Kevin Guthrie). Both were important in the development of football during the late 19th century and the essential elements of their careers and lives are portrayed reasonably accurately. Interspersed with the football-based story arc, *The English Game* deals with the working and living conditions of the urban population, labour unrest, the treatment of unmarried mothers and domestic abuse, among other themes. However, at its heart, like most of Fellowes' dramas, it is about class and social hierarchy and the relationships, tensions, and divisions between people from different social backgrounds.

When first broadcast in March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not sympathetically reviewed. Critics bemoaned the hackneyed dramatic tropes, stereotypical portrayals of working-class life and awkward dialogue. Lucy Mangan in *The Guardian* dismissed it as « *terrible* » television, « *mainly because Fellowes has discovered The North* », labelling it « Downton Abbey *for boys* »[2]. Pat Stacey in the *Irish Independent* accused Fellowes of having little interest either in football or history, and of « *rehashing* » his normal « *soapy upstairs/downstairs formula* » with « *the usual cardboard characters, patronising stereotypes, and dubious class politics* »[3]; a Conservative peer in the House of Lords, Fellowes is not known for having progressive political views. Other reviews were more positive, recognising, for

DOI : 10.33055/SPORTSMODERNES.2024.001.01.215

instance, that the portrayal of the intellectual qualities of Suter (as far as football was concerned) and the brutishness of Kinnaird and his teammates did challenge simplistic sociological assumptions.

Academic reactions were also understandably quite negative. At the time of its release, the Football Scholars' Forum and the Society for American Soccer History organised an online discussion of the series with short presentations by a number of historians. Martin Westby, an expert on early football in Sheffield, bemoaned the historical inaccuracy of the series, particularly its merging of the Blackburn Olympic and Blackburn Rovers clubs into a composite « Blackburn FC » and its implication that, under Suter's captaincy, this club beat Kinnaird's Old Etonians in the FA Cup final in 1880. In reality it was Olympic who beat Old Etonians in 1883, not 1880. Suter played for Rovers, not Olympic, and was part of the team that lost to Old Etonians in the 1882 Cup final, although he did go on to play in three consecutive cup final victories from 1884 to 1886. From a Scottish perspective, Ged O'Brien was more positive, mentioning that the series focused on the importance of the so-called « Scotch Professors » in their contribution to a passing style that was then taken up in England and beyond. Dismissing it as « *an English programme, for an English audience with English reviews* », he was perhaps unconcerned that the title reinforced assumptions that the game of football or styles of playing football were national « *inventions* », rather than the product of multiple exchanges and interconnections across regions and national borders[4].

The most thoughtful and persuasive observations came from Tony Collins. Collins was critical of the series, not so much for the specific factual inaccuracies outlined by Westby as in relation to its broader misrepresentation of late 19th century British society, culture, and sport. Collins outlined four main concerns. First of all, he argued that *The English Game* portrayed a sporting culture in which soccer had become the dominant game, whereas in the late 1870s and early 1880s clubs and players were still frequently switching codes. Second, it failed to grasp the sheer of change in sport during these decades, as football in its various forms mushroomed in popularity amongst players, spectators and in the print media. Third, the language of *The English Game* was often anachronistic, its characters speaking of « *the glory of the cup* », « *the good of the game* » and so on, in a way that we might today but that simply did not reflect the way people saw the nascent culture of football at the time. Finally, *The English Game* presented a patronising picture of working-class people, implying that the game of football was the one and only facet of an impoverished culture and ignoring the rich cultural experiences of the industrial working classes, which included co-operative societies, trade unions, bands, political organisations and so on[5].

For all its many flaws, however, there are reasons to value *The English Game*, particularly in terms of its potential for promoting interest in the history of sport or as a tool for teaching at school or university level. As Netflix is notoriously secretive about its viewing figures, we cannot know how many people have watched the series. But given that the company has around 232.2 million subscribers worldwide (as of the first quarter of 2023), even if only a tiny proportion were to watch, it might still amount to the largest engagement ever with the history of Victorian football in any format. The fact that the series was subtitled for six European countries also suggests an anticipated international audience. The potential impact of this is difficult to gauge. For the majority, the series was doubtless simple entertainment. It may, when it was first broadcast at a time when

sport at most levels was suspended, have been a reminder for some people of their individual or communal attachment to sport. But there is also the likelihood that for some it stimulated an interest in the history of later 19th century football and society and prompted them to find out more about the detail of the narrative and the wider context. As one review of the series concluded, *The English Game* offered a rare « *opportunity for the public at large to explore* » the game and its past[6].

Shortly after its initial release, the educational platform *Football Makes History* assessed *The English Game*'s potential as a teaching resource. The history educators it interviewed highlighted a number of ways in which the series could be used. They saw it as an especially useful way into discussions about social conditions in 19th century industrial Britain, class politics and leadership, as well as broader educational questions about loyalty, power, inequality, and change. None of the interviewees regarded the factual inaccuracies as particularly problematic. For Denver Charles, a school history teacher based in Belfast, *The English Game* « *could be used as a way of inspiring students to go and fully investigate what the true story of the birth of football was* ». He regarded its obvious flaws « *as stimulus material to further work* ». For Dutch teacher Marcel Put, the series could help students think critically about « *history-themed movies* » and the relationship between the historical source material and the significance of « *human sensation and emotion* » in popular entertainment[7]. These observations align with my own experiences of using *The English Game* in university teaching. I have, for instance, used parts of the series with international post-graduate students (few of whom have an academic background in history) to tease out the relationship between facts, myth, memory, and interpretation in the history of sport, among other things.

My final point relates to the potential of exploring *The English Game* as a specific 21st century reading of 19th century sports history and what it can tell us about the period in which it was produced as much as the historical era in which the story is set. In her contribution to the *Football Scholars' Forum* debate, Jean Williams made a valuable point about understanding *The English Game* as a product of « *the new nostalgia* » of the 2020s and how that might be juxtaposed with similar nostalgic interpretations of the sporting past, such as the famous 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*[8]. Exploring the form and tropes of the series and the messages it aimed to convey would allow students and academics a deeper understanding of *The English Game* as a « heritage » product similar – and yet distinct in certain respects – to the so-called British heritage films of the 1980s[9]. It could also encourage critics to frame the perfectly valid criticisms made by Collins and others about the anachronisms, over-simplifications and patronising tone of the series within a wider reading of it as a form of modern melodrama, characterised by sensational plotlines and exaggerated behaviour with relatively little concern for historical realism.

***The English Game* (Netflix, 2020; directors : Birgitte Stærmose and Tim Fywell).**

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Notes

[1] COLLINS Tony, « Rugby Reloaded Podcast #106: *The English Game*: How football did not begin », 30 March 2020, http://www.rugbyreloaded.com/ [date accessed, 12 February 2023].

[2] MANGAN Lucy, « The English Game review – Julian Fellowes football drama is an own goal », *The Guardian*, 20 March 2020.

[3] STACEY Pat, « The English Game review », *Irish Idenpendent online*, 23 March 2020, https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/television/tv-reviews/the-english-game-review-cardboard-characters-patronising-stereotypes-and-dubious-class-politics/39066932.html [date accessed, 15 April 2023].

[4] See Football Scholars Forum website, audio recording of 28 March 2020 debate on *The English Game*, https://footballscholars.org/uncategorized/the-english-game/ [date accessed, 6 March 2021]. On this broader understanding of the « invention » of football, see COLLINS Tony, *How Football Began: A Global History of How the World's Football Codes were Born*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019; TAYLOR Matthew, « The Global Spread of Football », in: EDELMAN Robert, WILSON Wayne (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sports History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 183-195.

[5] Football Scholars Forum website, audio recording of 28 March 2020 debate on *The English Game*, https://footballscholars.org/uncategorized/the-english-game/ [date accessed, 6 March 2021].

[6] « Netflix The English Game Useful for History Teaching », *Football Makes History* website, 18 April 2020, https://footballmakeshistory.eu/netflix-the-english-game-useful-for-history-teaching/ [date accessed, 15 June 2020].

[7] « Netflix The English Game Useful for History Teaching », *Football Makes History* website, 18 April 2020, https://footballmakeshistory.eu/netflix-the-english-game-useful-for-history-teaching/ [date accessed, 15 June 2020].

[8] Football Scholars Forum website, audio recording of 28 March 2020 debate on *The English Game*, https://footballscholars.org/uncategorized/the-english-game/ [date accessed, 6 March 2021].

[9] See HIGSON Andrew, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003; MONK Claire, « The British 'Heritage Film' and its Critics », *Critical Survey*, vol. 7, n° 2, 1995, pp. 116-124.