

producers were alert to niche markets. Matronly gentility and handsome finery were but two options for forty-somethings.

Today, scores of buyers filter catwalk trends for the more conservative department stores, and designers reengineer looks in cheaper fabrics or in more practical versions depending on the age and pocket of their customer base. In the eighteenth century, that reinterpretation of style was an informal process driven by the consumer and depending on fashion information, a judgment on decorum, the balance of aspiration and risk, the stocks and knowledge of suppliers of fabric and accessories, and the expertise of dressmakers, tailors, and milliners. Misogynist discussion of female appearances admitted only three adult life stages: blooming, past her prime, and old. Yet women's own correspondence conjures an infinitely subtler set of personal coordinates with costumes and accouterments to match.

This is not to cast retailers as feminist progressives fighting the forces of patriarchy, ageism, and misogyny one garment dress at a time. Merchants were almost certainly uninterested in wider conceptual debates about the value of female subordination and invisibility. Moreover, the visual satires on "mutton dressed as lamb" issued from the market too—the roaring trade in print. However, most fashion and luxury retailers were fully cognizant of the importance to business survival of flattering feminine taste and consequence, taking for granted that women customarily managed the family purse (under notional male control) for textiles and trinkets, while sharing decision making for expensive domestic purchases even where men paid. "Old maids" with means carried full legal title to their monies, and comfortable widows, pleasing themselves at last, were customers worth snaring. Only a business bent on bankruptcy would humiliate its older customers and turn aside thirty years or more of trade. Moreover, Georgian manufacturers were set on exploiting myriad differences to create, protect, and expand markets, so they had a vested interest in celebrating fashion for the middle-aged and older woman, as well as for the debutante and young matron. Doubtless advertising, marketing, and shop patter reinforced the idea that different wardrobes suited different stages and stations of womanhood, from girlish ribbons to stately bonnets, but equally, shopgirls were not in the business of policing flashy matrons to the detriment of sales. Foolish the milliner who told an old woman to unhand the silver lace. The print shop on the high street purveyed gross misogynist caricature, but next door the mercer might be selling pink silk to sixty-somethings regardless. Cumulatively, the Georgian marketplace tended to endorse the public profiles of older women, suggesting a galaxy of imagined performances that overwhelmed the misogynist discourse arguing for their obliteration.

The Cock of the School: A Cultural History of Playground Violence in Britain, 1880–1940

Jacob Middleton

Abstract Violence was an important part of the educational experience of many British children during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It principally took the form of playground fights, in which children competed in displays of physical prowess to win the accolade "cock of the school," the term attached to the best fighter. This article examines the background to these fights using autobiographical accounts produced by individuals educated between 1890 and 1940. Working from common themes in these accounts, it explains the structure and context of schoolyard fights. In particular, it examines the manner in which contemporary notions of masculinity influenced the conduct of children. Fighting was a means by which a schoolboy could act out a fantasy of manhood and, through this, relate to his peers and the school environment.

INTRODUCTION

When recalling his education at a "rough" Stockport school at the beginning of the twentieth century, Jim Hooley noted that the "best education you received was how to look after yourself," most notably in learning "how to use your fists."¹ Hooley saw his experiences as unremarkable, what might be expected if one were to grow up in an industrial town in northern England. Learning to fight was, in his opinion, an essential and normal feature of childhood for working-class boys. Hooley's experiences were representative of most of the boys who grew up in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They saw fighting as an important part of the school experience; in their memories it often overshadows academic learning, and in their accounts of school life they frequently pay more attention to playground battles than to what occurred within the classroom. The attitudes of the era are captured in an observation by John Glenwright, who, recalling his experiences of a particular school in County Durham before the First World War, commented:

Although I stayed six years at that particular school, I cannot remember learning very much except to read badly and write with an untidy scrawl. I made more progress in the art of self-defence. I was a small, but willing young horse, and the bigger boys, just to amuse themselves, found me plenty of opponents, some older and bigger than myself. I received many a good hiding.²

¹ Jim Hooley, *A Hillgate Childhood* (Stockport, 1981), 14.

² John Glenwright, *Bright Shines the Morning* (London, 1949), 9.

Such an experience might be taken as signifying educational failure, in which violence formed a substitute for intellectual learning. Because the ostensible purpose of schools is to provide the latter, it is unsurprising that playground fights are a wholly neglected aspect of educational history, despite their ubiquity. Yet when one reads descriptions of childhood from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one sees that many boys educated at the time believed that fighting was an important aspect of their school life. These accounts transcend the sentimental views of childhood, common from the nineteenth century onward, which saw children primarily as victims in relation to violent acts.³ Finally, these stories show that fighting was not only incidental to schooling but also functioned as part of the learning experience and was an essential aspect of growing up for many boys. The playground fight is important, then, for what it reveals about childhood aggression and the violent influences upon children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

SCHOOLING AND THE ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE

The way in which societies respond to violence is not a simple and transparent matter. Violence is an interpersonal process defined largely by social context. For instance, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a fistfight is generally seen as an undesirable form of violence. This has not, however, always been the case, and it would be a mistake to project our modern perceptions of violence onto past eras. The historical problem of how violence influences the way in which we judge past societies has been considered at some length by the historian John Carter Wood. In his book *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England*, Wood notes that "it is relatively easy to look at a society or era with more violence and assume that the result was a correspondingly diminished quality of life."⁴ However, he goes on to show that this is not always an accurate judgment; the assumption that violence necessarily plays a negative role in society "tends to blind one to the vibrancy and coherence of alternative modes of organizing violence as well as to the contradictions within 'civilized' mentalities of violence themselves."⁵ Wood argues that violent acts should be viewed within the context of an "economy of violence," a nexus of customs, laws, and politics that determine acceptable responses to violent behavior.⁶ It is this economy that enables us to make moral distinctions among a boxing match, a domestic assault, and the use of force by a police officer. The relative permissibility of violence is dependent upon this economy.

Economies of violence are necessarily based upon cultural context, a fact that often complicates the manner in which aggression is interpreted within a given society. Monica Flegel provides a useful example of this problem in her studies of the emergence of child cruelty narratives in nineteenth-century Britain. These were accounts, either in the press or circulated by charities, that described the cruel treatment of

children. Flegel shows that the contrast between the forceful, aggressive adult and the meek, submissive child was a crucial aspect of the conceptualization of cruelty.⁷ However, as Flegel points out, delinquent children held an ambiguous position in these narratives, and their existence provided an alternative, and occasionally competing, image of childhood.⁸ These contrasting representations of children were the product of an economy of violence in which some acts of aggression against children were condemned, while the forceful physical punishment of the delinquent child was seen as both normal and reasonable.

The notion of the delinquent child should act as a reminder that much of the work done by historians on the subject of violence has focused on transgressive and often criminal behavior. In particular, the attention of historians has been drawn to the significant changes in attitudes toward violence in the criminal justice system during the last two hundred years. While there clearly has been a profound cultural and social shift in terms of how violence was regarded during this period, there has been considerable debate among historians as to the manner in which this reflected broader trends in contemporary society. Martin J. Wiener, for instance, has characterized these changes as part of a "civilizing offensive," aimed at strengthening the social order while reducing interpersonal violence.⁹ He has argued that the trends were part of a "growing intolerance of violence," with its basis in an expanding criminal justice system that acted as a mechanism for expanding social control.¹⁰ The end result, claims Wiener, was that traditional male behavior was increasingly stigmatized and proscribed.¹¹ Wiener's investigation into the mechanisms of control has been supplemented by the work of Clive Emsley, who has attacked teleological notions prevalent in the discussion of violence and crime. For instance, Emsley's examination of police documents shows that levels of violent activity in Victorian Britain may have been far higher than crime statistics suggest.¹² If Wiener suggests that the state increasingly took on powers to control and restrain violence from the nineteenth-century onward, then Emsley shows that such powers were applied selectively—and with restraint.

While the work of these historians provides a detailed overview of attitudes toward violence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this scholarship is limited in that it is primarily concerned with violence as an aspect of criminality. This perspective has an effect upon how violent activities are framed and produces a tendency to focus on events with serious consequences because they are more likely to come to the attention of the criminal justice system. A useful example of why this is problematic is the examination of ritualized "fair fights" by John Carter Wood. In his exploration of interpersonal fighting, Wood finds that the visibility of the fair fight declined during the nineteenth century, leading him to conclude that "there was a

⁷ Flegel, *Conceptualizing Cruelty*, 23–24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 148, 180.

⁹ Martin J. Wiener, *Men of Blood* (Cambridge, 2004), 11.

¹⁰ Martin J. Wiener, "The Victorian Criminalization of Men," in *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America*, ed. Pieter Spierenburg (Columbus, 1998), 198, 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹² Clive Emsley, *Hard Men: The English and Violence Since 1750* (London 2005), 7–8. The documents in question were occurrence books and refused charge books. These were used to record events that demanded police attention yet did not lead to action being brought against those involved.

³ See, for instance, Monica Flegel, *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-Century England* (Farnham, 2009), 57–60.

⁴ John Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England: The Shadow of Our Refinement* (London, 2004), 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

weakening in the limits of what was acceptable when two men came to blows."¹³ However, Wood's conclusions are largely based upon court documents, many recording the manslaughter trials that occurred after a participant had died from injuries sustained in a fight. These were, obviously, anomalous events, and it is questionable as to whether they provide a sufficient basis for broad comments about social attitudes, not least because the work of other historians seems to indicate that the belief in fair fights was prevalent long after Wood proclaims its demise.¹⁴ Similarly, the focus upon crime can begin to define violence for historians. For instance, in discussing Emsley's treatment of sport, Paul R. Deslandes notes that the introduction of the Queensberry rules failed to eliminate "rowdy and violent outbursts" at boxing matches.¹⁵ Yet the entire point of boxing is that the participants are involved in violent acts that they direct at one another. The normal activities in the ring do not, however, seem to be included by Deslandes in the definition of violence, a term reserved for transgressions of established rules.

The dominance of crime narratives also has a distorting influence on the work of historians. Violence becomes defined by what is said within the courtroom and which activities contravene social norms. Wiener, for instance, focuses his work entirely on narratives of murder, concentrating his research on published accounts of killings and of material generated by the state in response to such crimes.¹⁶ While the study of this form of violence can provide useful insights into state and society in a given historical period, it is important to recognize that murder is exceptional and that a large proportion of violent acts, particularly those that do not result in serious injury or death, are never addressed by the criminal justice system. This broader range of activity is best understood in terms of "everyday violence." This, notes Shani D'Cruze, was made up of interactions arising from "people's ordinary routine and mundane social interaction."¹⁷ D'Cruze points out that this was violence taking place in environments such as the home or the workplace and that it "formed part of the broader and ongoing negotiations of respectability and social identity."¹⁸ The notion of everyday violence as deployed by D'Cruze is useful, because it extends far beyond violent crime and includes many forms of behavior that, while less publicly visible, may have had a considerable impact on the lives of those living in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The moral economy in which everyday violence takes place is such that violent acts can become invisible merely through being an expected norm; Deslandes's comment on violence at sporting events is a useful example of this. However, a close examination of particular institutions and situations can often reveal previously unnoticed acts of violence. For instance, while a school is not normally seen as a violent

¹³ Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England*, 94.

¹⁴ One sees this in late Victorian conceptions of self-defense, in which the notion of a gentlemanly fist-fight was taken as a sign of civilization. See Emelyne Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature* (Basingstoke, 2011), particularly 128–31.

¹⁵ Paul R. Deslandes, review of *Hard Men: Violence in England Since 1750*, *Victorian Studies* 49, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 334.

¹⁶ Wiener, *Men of Blood*, xi. Wiener is aware of this issue, pointing out that his work tackles what he calls a "statistically minor part" of criminality. See Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 7.

¹⁷ Shani D'Cruze, "Unguarded Passions: Violence, History and the Everyday," in *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850–1950: Gender and Class*, ed. Shani D'Cruze (Harlow, 2000), 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

environment, it might expose a child to a variety of violent experiences. At its most extreme, this violence could manifest in the form of the aggressive activities that were part of normal life within the elite boarding schools of Britain during the nineteenth century, where schoolboys spent their time hunting and killing animals, brawling with inhabitants of nearby towns, and occasionally plotting active rebellion against their teachers.¹⁹ More common forms of violence, meanwhile, included those administered by teachers for disciplinary purposes; a misbehaving pupil might potentially face corporal punishment, an application of force that was considered by many educationalists to be a necessary tool for the maintenance of order.²⁰ This latter use of force was prevalent within schools and consequently provides a useful counterpoint to playground violence. First, we should note that, as a normal and sanctioned educational process, corporal punishment is a useful baseline against which other instances of violence within the school may be compared. It was expected that at least some corporal punishment would be used in the school, and as a result, it was one form of violence with which most children were familiar.²¹ Second, it provides an example of how economies of violence were constructed, with the permissibility of particular activities being based upon an institutional context. While some uses of corporal punishment may seem irrational or excessive to the modern reader, they were justified by educational norms that framed its usage.

While the use of corporal punishment within the school is relatively well recorded, playground fights and other unsanctioned uses of violence are almost invisible in the historical record; consequently, there is relatively little academic knowledge as to the historical extent of violence within state schools.²² This is largely the product of the documentation of educational practice, with official records concentrating more on the manner in which the school ideally functioned than on the actual school experience.²³ It is necessary, then, to turn away from documents generated by schools and to look instead at autobiographical accounts. There are, of course, particular considerations in relation to using such material. First, as many writers have pointed out, it is important to treat autobiographical material with caution. Because most accounts of school life were written decades after the events that they record, for example, writers have had an opportunity to consider their experiences and redefine them in relation to their subsequent lives.²⁴ A particular example of this is recorded by Jonathan Rose in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, in which he shows that the politics of individuals in later life bear a strong relationship with how they perceived the exercise of school discipline from their younger years.²⁵ Such issues have been developed by Brian Roberts, who, in examining the variety of ways in which memories are created, has shown that autobiography is a complicated narrative construction and not a mere recitation

¹⁹ J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (Cambridge, 1981), 18–32.

²⁰ See, for instance, S. E. Bray, *School Organisation* (London, 1905), 133.

²¹ See, for instance, Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London, 2001), 168–69.

²² P. K. Smith, "Violence in Schools: An Overview," *Violence in Schools: The Response in Europe*, ed. P. K. Smith (London and New York, 2003), 1–2.

²³ Harold Silver, *Education as History* (London, 1983), 21.

²⁴ See, for instance, Jacob Middleton, "The Experience of Corporal Punishment in Schools, 1890–1940," *History of Education* 37, no. 2 (March 2008): 256–58.

²⁵ Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 169.

of facts about an individual life.²⁶ One should, therefore, be cautious in interpreting an autobiographical account as a strictly factual record of events.

There is, conversely, a considerable body of literature that has explored the value of autobiographical literature and has shown its value to the historian. While we need not explore this in detail, it is worth considering the comments of David Vincent when he notes that autobiography provides one with the "ability to comprehend fully the significance and coherence of past experience."²⁷ This is a significant point; we know that fighting took place between children, but it is only through reading the stories of the participants themselves that we can gain the insights necessary for understanding the processes behind these conflicts. While official records might tell us that violence has occurred, an autobiographical account tells us what violence meant to an individual. This is particularly important when looking at a subject such as playground fights, where comparatively little information is recorded in contemporary source material. In order, then, to understand the economy of school violence, it is necessary to go beyond official records of school life and look at the experiences of pupils.

THE CONSTITUTION OF A FIGHT

The playground fight was, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a normal and everyday activity in which many British boys participated. As a common childhood diversion, it was, a number of writers recalled, what one expected to witness when visiting a school playground. For instance, Peter Donnelly, in an account of his schooling in the north of England in the 1920s, described how the boys in his school would fight among themselves, commenting that those passing by his school must frequently have been greeted "by the sight and sound of urchins in full fight or preparing to fight."²⁸ A similar description was provided by Ken Ausden when he wrote about his education in the south of England during the 1930s. Ausden commented on how the boys in his school "did a great deal of fighting," either individually or in groups; "entire classes punched their way, happily or angrily according to the seriousness of the dispute, through successive morning and afternoon breaks."²⁹ As one writer explained, "[a]t school, fights were popular and frequent."³⁰

These fights were not random outbreaks of unconstrained violence but structured events, framed by contemporary notions of what constituted appropriate behavior. They should thus be seen as operating within a particular economy of violence in which the actions of participants were guided, consciously and unconsciously, by custom. This meant that playground fights were often quite organized affairs; one writer remembered the events at his school being "conducted usually under the control of an elder, with due solemnity and order."³¹ This informal regulation of

²⁶ Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham, 2002), 135–37.

²⁷ David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (London, 1981), 6.

²⁸ Peter Donnelly, *The Yellow Rock* (London, 1950), 27–28.

²⁹ Ken Ausden, *Up the Crossing* (London, 1981), 215.

³⁰ James Williams, *Give Me Yesterday* (Llandysul, 1971), 35.

³¹ John Paton, *Proletarian Pilgrimage* (London, 1935), 36.

fighting distinguished it from a random outpouring of aggression. It was, moreover, a reflection of adult notions of the fair fight then prevalent within society.³² The rules of a playground fight were not, however, always apparent in practice, and it would be possible to describe the average contest, as one observer did, as "a fight to the finish with bare knuckles, and uncontrolled by a referee."³³ Such statements should not be read to imply a complete freedom of action for those who took part in fights, and expectation and custom could have a significant influence on governing the actions of participants. A typical example of this was described by Jimmy Wilde in his recollections of schooldays in late nineteenth-century Wales. Wilde observed that boys "would go to a lot of trouble with these fights. A rough ring would be formed, seconds were appointed with dignity, although no one seemed anxious for the task of refereeing."³⁴ Wilde's statement combines observations on how such events could be governed by expectation and tradition while lacking a formal structure. In this context, it was left up to "the anger of the crowd" to ensure that foul play did not take place.³⁵

The expectations and assumptions of the children themselves were important in determining how a fight should be conducted, with customs and local norms determining what was permissible.³⁶ Interpretations of what constituted acceptable behavior were, however, fairly liberal, sometimes surprisingly so. In Yorkshire, the local "code of fighting did not forbid kicking," and as one Yorkshire boy observed, "clogs were our chief weapons when we really got down to business and a kick on the shin from an iron-shod wooden clog is a bitter check to pugnacity."³⁷ In contrast, the deliberate use of weapons seems to have been considered objectionable throughout Britain. One boy, recalling an occasion when he was struck with a bottle, called the attack "unpardonable" and complained that it was a breach of the boys' "rules of chivalry."³⁸ While such rules were often fluid, actions considered as unsporting could produce strong reactions. Ken Ausden recalled witnessing one such act when a boy struck another in the groin during a fight at his school. The unanimous reaction of the pupils was to ostracize the perpetrator for acting in such an unsporting manner.³⁹ The relative importance of such codes of behavior can be observed in *Guttersnipe*, Sam Shaw's account of working-class life during the early twentieth century. After committing a petty crime while still a minor, Shaw found himself sent to the Feltham Industrial School, an institution for the rehabilitation of juvenile criminals.

³² See Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England*, particularly 92.

³³ James Howard, *Winding Lanes* (Caernarvon, 1938), 28.

³⁴ Jimmy Wilde, *Fighting Was My Business* (London, 1938), 20. See also Edward Ezard, *Battersea Boy* (London, 1979), 98.

³⁵ Wilde, *Fighting Was My Business*, 20. See also Walter Hannington, *Never on Our Knees* (London, 1967), 20.

³⁶ One of the most interesting manifestations of this was observed by Edward Ezard, who noted that in his school "it was considered legitimate to call in someone to fight for you" if a match would otherwise seem unfair. See Ezard, *Battersea Boy*, 98.

³⁷ Rowland Kenney, *Westerling* (London, 1939), 14. See also Joseph Barlow Brooks, *Lancashire Bred: An Autobiography* (Cowley, 1950), 56. One should note that this is distinctly different from the adult notion of a "fair fight," in which kicking was seen as underhanded. See Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 55.

³⁸ Stan Dickens, *Bending the Twig* (Ilfracombe, 1975), 39. See also Walter Southgate, *That's the Way It Was* (London, 1982), 44.

³⁹ Ausden, *Up the Crossing*, 216–18.

Although fights were common at Feltham, they were of a similar character to those in mainstream schools, constrained by rules that prevented participants from striking below the belt or hitting an opponent when he was down. While such rules may seem surprising in the context of an industrial school, Shaw considered such restraint perfectly reasonable, the product, he said, of the "inherent sense of fair play, planted in every true Englishman."⁴⁰ Thus, even in the most adverse environments, one might find that the school fight was governed by a series of consensual rules.

Nevertheless, it is easy to get distracted by the details of the customs that governed fighting and miss the fact that it occurred for a reason. Fights could be provoked by reasons as petty as partisanship over the Oxford and Cambridge boat race, which could lead to "a rough and tumble playground battle." Similarly, arguments over newsworthy events, such as the controversial verdict in the trial of Victorian murderess Florence Maybrick, might lead to conflict.⁴¹ However, more often than not, fights between boys were used as a means of establishing and reinforcing a social hierarchy. The key figure within this structure was known as the "cock of the school," the boy who "had proved he could beat any other boy in the school with his fists."⁴² As one individual observed of his schooling, every boy who came to a school had to recognize the cock as his "superior" or else he would be expected to fight.⁴³ The existence of the cock, therefore, shaped much of the fighting that occurred among schoolboys. As one individual noted, many boys were "consumed with ambition to be [their] school's prize fighter."⁴⁴ The fights that were seen as most interesting were those in which a given boy showed particular and unexpected talent because, if a boy was "thought a match for the reigning cock," the situation "would require another fight."⁴⁵ Moreover, the apparent importance of having a well-defined social hierarchy meant that it was undesirable to have an uncertain outcome to any fight. If this occurred, it would be necessary to resume the fight at a suitable time, often on the following day. If the participants were evenly matched, it was possible that the resolution of such a conflict might require a series of short bouts occurring over a period of up to five days.⁴⁶ The prolonged violence, it seems, was worthwhile if it helped to eliminate uncertainty.

The presence of the cock, and the fights that occurred to establish a given boy in this position, meant that it was possible to create a general hierarchy within the school, with each boy ranked according to his martial prowess.⁴⁷ Robin Bryans provides what is perhaps the best summary of the effect this had on school life in his autobiography, *No Surrender*. Growing up in Northern Ireland during the interwar period, Bryans recalled a competitive world in which a boy's identity and status were determined by his ability to fight:

⁴⁰ Sam Shaw, *Guttersnipe* (London, 1946), 72.

⁴¹ "Authorship Unacknowledged," *Narrow Waters* (London, 1935), 28; Cecil Rolph Hewitt, *London Particulars* (Oxford, 1982), 91. The controversy was that Mrs. Maybrick was found guilty of murdering her husband despite being young and attractive, which, it was popularly believed, was an indicator of her innocence.

⁴² Jim Bullock, *Bowers Row: Recollections of a Mining Village* (Wakefield, 1976), 93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁴ Robin Bryans ["Robert Harbinson"], *No Surrender: An Ulster Childhood* (London, 1960), 194.

⁴⁵ Donnelly, *The Yellow Rock*, 28–29.

⁴⁶ Joseph Williamson, *Father Joe* (London, 1963), 33–34; Howard, *Winding Lanes*, 28.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Brian Magee, *Clouds of Glory* (London, 2004), 44.

Certainly none of us could remember what place we held in class with regard to spelling or arithmetic, but we never forgot our position on the fighting championship ladder. He who stood on the top rung kept his position by his fists. Under this system everybody eventually fought everybody, the weak and fearful being more content to remain so, the strong consumed with ambition to be the school's prize fighter.⁴⁸

It is telling that Bryans's most vivid memories of school are the fights that he took part in and observed. What dominates his memories of school, decades after the events in question, is not the life of the classroom but the violence of the playground.

FIGHTING IN FANTASY AND REALITY

The notion that fighting within the school was limited by certain constraints indicates how violence was seen not only as a means to an end but also as a particular class of behavior that was an end in itself. While the status accorded to the cock of the school may have motivated many boys to fight, many others simply felt a general pride in their participation in the act of fighting.⁴⁹ To take part, even to be beaten by another boy, seems to have had some intrinsic value, providing that the fight in question was conducted according to the law of the playground. This situation is best understood if the playground fight is seen as a heavily romanticized activity, a form of constrained violence by which a boy could measure himself against contemporary ideals of masculinity. This process is understandable when one considers how, from the late Victorian era onward, it was seen as particularly desirable to encourage qualities of manliness in growing boys. This encouragement was given in a variety of ways, such as through the Earl of Meath's "Duty and Discipline" campaign, which began at the end of the 1880s. This was a political movement that encouraged tradition, patriotism, and the robust upbringing of children; its supporters argued that "almost any harshness compatible with [children's] physical health and mental progress would be better than an ignoble and helpless inability to control their conduct."⁵⁰ The example of the Duty and Discipline movement highlights the attitudes toward manliness that were increasingly being stressed in the latter years of the Victorian era. In this view of the world, pain and physical hardship would help boys assert their masculinity in what was frequently condemned as an "age of sentimentality."⁵¹

The most obvious and enduring way in which these debates on masculinity were communicated to boys was through the children's literature of the period. This issue has been explored in depth by the historian Kelly Boyd, whose work on masculinity in children's literature has shown how, from the 1890s onward, books aimed at school-age boys increasingly promoted a notion of physical assertive manliness; this encompassed within it an idea of fair play and the belief that fighting was a

⁴⁸ Bryans, *No Surrender*, 194.

⁴⁹ Albert Mansbridge, *The Trodden Road* (London, 1940), 11; Bryans, *No Surrender*, 194–95; Williamson, *Father Joe*, 34; Hannington, *Never on Our Knees*, 20.

⁵⁰ *Essays on Duty and Discipline: A Series of Papers on the Training of Children in Relation to Social and National Welfare* (London, 1910), 3.

⁵¹ See, for instance, "Punishment of Schoolboys," *Morning Advertiser*, 25 January 1904, 6. "To Our Readers," *Brutitarian* (October 1904), 1.

reasonable, manly, and courageous response to certain circumstances.⁵² This literature was often a written expression of the cultural issues expressed through political movements such as the Earl of Meath's Duty and Discipline campaign. Moreover, notably from our point of view, these books frequently portrayed violence as a reasonable, if not commendable, means by which problems might be addressed, with physical courage and confrontation being part of a masculine approach to the problems of life.⁵³ While literary representations of manliness should not necessarily be seen as a cause of violence and aggression, they provided a behavioral template to participants, influencing their perceptions of fighting and informing their responses to conflict.

The influence of literature on fighting was commented on in a number of autobiographical accounts of life in the early twentieth century. In particular, many individuals claim to have been influenced by school fiction, an extraordinarily popular genre of children's fiction during the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Although most school stories appear relatively remote from working-class life, concentrating as they do on fictional public schools, the genre held a romantic allure for many children. Looking back on their childhood in later life, many boys would claim that they were influenced by the codes of conduct common in the fictional public schools of their childhood literature.⁵⁵ One example can be seen in the autobiography of Michael O'Donovan. Growing up in Cork immediately before the First World War, O'Donovan recalled that his own behavior was affected significantly by the school stories he found in periodicals such as *The Gem* and *The Magnet*. Admiring "the public-school code," he resolved that his own actions, most notably the manner in which he fought other boys, should be based on these idealized notions of childhood.⁵⁶ In contrast, a less positive reception to such fiction was provided by Paul West, who grew up in a country village in Derbyshire. West explicitly rejected the ideals set down by school stories, complaining that it was rare for boys to "patch up a quarrel by shaking hands," with that kind of behavior confined to "cissy school stories with boys called Antony and Jeremy."⁵⁷ Yet in this rejection, West was responding to the school story just as readily as was O'Donovan, framing playground violence within a fictional context. What makes their claims particularly believable is the manner in which their experiences failed to live up to the image of reality promoted by tales of life at public school. O'Donovan, for instance, admitted that his school-story fantasies of personal combat failed to match the reality of fighting. He recalled that "before ever I got in the deadly straight left I had developed from

⁵² Kelly Boyd, *Manliness and the Boys' Story Paper in Britain: A Cultural History, 1855-1940* (Basingstoke, 2003), 67, 70-71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁴ Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 322-23. Rose noted that of those boys whose education terminated at the age of fourteen, one in every eight books they read was a school story.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 322-31.

⁵⁶ Michael O'Donovan ["Frank O'Connor"], *An Only Child* (London, 1961), 120. There are many other examples from which one might choose; see, for instance, Frederick Willis, *Peace and Dripping Toast* (London, 1950), 56-57.

⁵⁷ Paul West, *I, Said the Sparrow* (London, 1963), 44. It is, of course, important to note that literature can be both an expression of popular culture and a means by which it was transmitted. It was possible to reject such literature yet still respond to the underlying cultural forces that were responsible for its production.

shadow boxing before the mirror, I got a knee in the groin or a kick in the shin or had my glasses knocked off, and went home, weeping."⁵⁸ The playground fight could be a hard lesson in the differences between fiction and reality.

The inculcation of masculine values was not transmitted solely through literature, and children could learn about manliness through many other aspects of culture at the time. For instance, sporting proficiency was a notable channel for aggression, with the physical prowess exhibited in sport being one way of displaying manliness.⁵⁹ Most significant, at least from the point of view of interpersonal violence, was the popularity during this period of boxing in working-class communities. Boxing not only provided boys with sporting heroes, whose actions might be emulated in the playground, but also was an activity endorsed by the educators of the period; according to one writer, it was a "manly and healthful exercise," which would instill in boys the virtues of "tenacity, magnanimity, fortitude and courage."⁶⁰ It was possible to see boxing solely in practical terms, as a source of skills, and it is in this form that the sport enters into the autobiographical accounts of people who grew up in Britain from the end of the Victorian period onward. Boxing was seen by some children as an arcane science, with skilled boxers being in possession of secret knowledge that would allow them to triumph over their opponents.⁶¹

The prominence of images drawn from school stories and boxing matches can be contrasted with the comparative absence of adult violence from childhood memories. This is perhaps surprising, given that playground conflicts often resembled forms of adult fighting prevalent among the British working class during the nineteenth century. As historians have shown, the notion of the ritualized fair fight was common in the Victorian era; in the words of John Carter Wood, it was a form of violence defined by "a clearly delimited variety of fighting techniques," not dissimilar from an informal version of boxing.⁶² However, the striking lack of reference to fair fights among adults suggests that these did not directly influence playground conflicts. Instead, the fair fight was filtered through the medium of school stories and boxing, becoming a fantasy that infected both childhood practice and later recollection.

The fantasy of fighting did not always, or even often, match the reality experienced by children. It was, for instance, typical for a fight to begin with the combatants, "mindful of the boxers they saw in the Sunday papers," assuming appropriate stances; however, with the first blow, "both would forget the niceties of boxing and fight each other in a whirl of arms, legs, clinches, clogs, and the swear words of which we were all proud."⁶³ If any boys learned to apply practical boxing skills, such experiences were absent from their autobiographies; even individuals who became boxers in later life, such as Septimus O'Reilly, reported little of the refined skill of the boxing ring in their stories of childhood fights. In his autobiography, O'Reilly admitted that he would simply rush at his opponent and hit him repeatedly, which was reportedly an effective technique when a fight consisted of a "lot of

⁵⁸ O'Donovan, *An Only Child*, 127.

⁵⁹ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, particularly 22-23.

⁶⁰ E. B. Dent, *Boxing for Boys* (Aldershot, 1920), n.p.

⁶¹ See, in particular, Williams, *Give Me Yesterday*, 36.

⁶² Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England*, 86-87.

⁶³ Donnelly, *The Yellow Rock*, 28.

squaring up and sparing about and threatening each other before ever a blow was struck."⁶⁴ As another individual would observe of the notion of coming into a fight like a boxer, "winning by circular swings of mighty hairy fists spelled doom from the start."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, although adopting the skills of the boxer appears to have been rare in practice, discussion of the sport is important, because it reminds us of the role played by the imagination in the lives of children. Indeed, for many boys, it seems that the fantasy roles that were assumed while fighting were as important as success within the fight. They fulfilled an unspoken purpose, allowing boys to act out fantasies of male aggression. Mere participation in a fight, even if one was beaten, was useful, because it showed that one possessed the valued masculine qualities of bravery and determination.⁶⁶ Conversely, although it was possible to avoid violence, this carried with it the "slur of cowardice," seen as "the more unpleasant alternative" to the process of fighting.⁶⁷

The importance of imagination in the fighting process can be underlined with the gender distinctions made by many writers. Fighting was considered to be distinctly masculine, and girls were at least notionally excluded from such behavior because, according to the beliefs of the period, "it was wrong to hit a girl."⁶⁸ This comment was representative of a masculine notion that girls could or should not fight. This was more the product of societal expectations than of empirical experience; when tested, it was not always found to be an accurate representation of reality. For instance, Albert Mansbridge, educated in a London school during the late nineteenth century, recalled picking a fight with a girl, under the impression "that boys were stronger"; beaten by his opponent, he received a practical demonstration that such prejudices were not always true.⁶⁹ The anecdote indicates that girls might engage in fights, a notion reinforced by the fact that some women did include stories of participating in playground fights in their autobiographies.⁷⁰ However, such accounts are not common, with women more prone to recount domestic tales from their childhood than any violence in which they might have participated in while they were girls. This portrayal of girls' participation in playground fights is suggestively inconsistent; while enough accounts exist to suggest that girls participated in and observed fighting, many writers excluded girls from their accounts of fighting or insisted that girls did not participate in this form of violence.⁷¹ This should be a reminder of the limitations of autobiography, which reflects society as much as personal experience. The notion that violence was an intrinsically masculine pursuit meant that it was more readily discussed by men who admitted that, in childhood, their fantasy lives had been consumed by fighting, as they

⁶⁴ Septimus O'Reilly, *The Tiger of the Legion* (London, 1936), 18. O'Reilly was not the only individual who claimed that dispensing with preliminaries and simply attacking an opponent was an effective tactic; a similar notion was put forward by Cecil Rolph Hewitt. See Hewitt, *London Particulars*, 89.

⁶⁵ John Giscard, *A Place of Stones* (London, 1958), 117.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, William Brown, *So Far ...* (London, 1943), 26.

⁶⁷ William Goldman, *East End My Cradle* (London, 1940), 31–32.

⁶⁸ Magee, *Clouds of Glory*, 44.

⁶⁹ Mansbridge, *The Trodden Road*, 11–12.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Angela Rodaway, *A London Childhood* (London, 1960), 53; Josephine Gibney, *Joe McGarrigle's Daughter* (Kington, 1977), 71.

⁷¹ The reader should note that this includes the autobiographies of female writers, though the exceptions are revealing.

imagined themselves to be daring boxers or fictional heroes, who expressed mature masculinity by prowess in combat. In addition, while both fantasy and reality are reflected in autobiography, it is not always easy to distinguish between them; with such accounts prepared at a great distance in time from the events to which they refer, the two can easily blend together to form a semi-imagined account of childhood violence.

AGGRESSION AND CULTURES OF SCHOOLING

Although playground fights were often spontaneous exhibitions of aggression, it is important to place them in the cultural context of Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As we have seen, late Victorian cultures of masculinity had made fighting seem a reasonable, and even commendable, behavior by the 1880s and 1890s. These cultures, moreover, were emphasized by a series of military conflicts that had a significant effect upon British culture. The imperial wars of the nineteenth century, the Boer War at the beginning of the twentieth, and the two world wars that followed were important events in British history. Their influence was unmistakably profound, and many of those who grew up at the time recalled the prominence of militarism in British culture at the time.⁷²

While children had little direct contact with military life, the indirect influence of warfare was pervasive and militarism often encouraged by schools. From the Edwardian period onward, children were encouraged to see warfare as central to British history and culture—to view themselves as the "kinsmen of men who charged with the Light Brigade, and sons of the heroes who routed the Zulus."⁷³ In particular, prior to the First World War, some saw one purpose of schools as being to prepare children for military life; thus, physical drill was described "both as a matter of public health and as a preparation for the citizen army of the future," and a number of commentators argued that rifle training should be a standard feature in the curriculum.⁷⁴ Although few schools took up the latter suggestion, the notion of the soldier as a heroic figure was promoted and, as one individual observed, it was not unusual for the boy who went on to join the armed forces to be portrayed as "the hero of the school."⁷⁵ The militaristic strands within British education during this period helped to promote a nationalistic culture in childhood play, which might manifest itself in pastimes such as the popular Edwardian game of "Britons and Boers."

⁷² A particularly good example of this is provided in James Whittaker, *I James Whittaker* (London, 1934), 23–25.

⁷³ Aubrey Darby, *A View From the Alley* (Luton, 1974), 10.

⁷⁴ W. P. Herringham, "On Physical Training in Schools," in *Two Addresses Delivered Before the Medical Officers of Schools Association* (London, 1906), 1. On rifle training, see T. C. Horsfall, "The Influence on National Life of Military Training in Schools," in *Two Addresses Delivered Before the Medical Officers of Schools Association*; A. G. Grenfell, "Teaching Schoolboys to Shoot," *Liverpool Daily Post and Liverpool Mercury* (8 August 1905), 7; H. S. Perris, *Rifles and Education: A Record and Appeal* (London, 1907). The subject is fully explored in Alan Penn, *Targeting Schools: Drill, Militarism and Imperialism* (London, 1999), particularly 165–68.

⁷⁵ H. Hodge, *It's Draughty Up Front* (London, 1938), 36. It is interesting to note that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the School Board for London made provisions for memorials inside school buildings to commemorate "heroic" acts by pupils. See "Records of Acts of Heroism and Self-Sacrifice," *School Board for London Gazette* (29 May 1900), 148–49.

This was, in the words of one participant, "a primitive pastime which consisted of chasing the Boers and lamming them with belts when they were caught."⁷⁶ The prevalence of such violent pursuits attracted alarm from some quarters; as one writer was to complain, if schoolchildren were playing Britons and Boers, "can we be surprised that the games of larger boys in towns should be more serious fights?"⁷⁷ However, more often than not these violent games were accepted as part of normal childhood play and even described as having redeeming qualities. As one educational manual of the period explained, aggression

may be due to an exuberance of energy and animal spirits, a consciousness of muscular strength, a love of power, a desire for fame or distinction. In such cases the violence of temper or action is not always an unmixed evil. In fact, it is a hopeful fault, because good qualities may underlie it.⁷⁸

Although the game of Britons and Boers was only popular for a short period at the beginning of the twentieth century, it had its equivalents throughout the period that we are examining. Edward Short, who was born in 1912, recalled that his childhood games were often influenced by the violent conflicts that formed a backdrop to his boyhood. He noted that, during the First World War, many games "involved fighting the Germans who lurked around every corner"; a few years later, he and his friends were "equally preoccupied fighting the Sinn Féin up hill and down dale."⁷⁹ Such pursuits were tolerated, seemingly unaffected by the concerns over the brutalization of the British population that were under debate in the period.⁸⁰ The activities of the children included fighting, and as one individual remarked, the teachers of the period "seemed to look upon it as clean, healthy fun" and chose not to intervene in playground fights.⁸¹ "Masters," it was claimed, "never interfered and black eyes in class went unremarked," provided that one did not fight other boys too often, "else the Head might take unfavourable notice."⁸² Moreover, acts of violence were not seen as serious offenses; contemporary records show that kicking other boys might be punished with four strokes of the cane, as opposed to the six strokes of the cane that could be awarded for impudence or insubordination.⁸³ While the latter punishment might seem disproportionately severe, it reflected the notion

⁷⁶ Howard Spring, *Heaven Lies About Us: A Fragment of Infancy* (London, 1939), 19.

⁷⁷ "Notes," *Board Teacher* (1 January 1901), 7. See also William Winch, *Problems in Education* (London, 1900), 146–47.

⁷⁸ T. F. G. Dexter and A. H. Garlick, *A Primer of School Method* (London, 1905), 15.

⁷⁹ Edward Short, *I Knew My Place* (London, 1983), 21–22.

⁸⁰ See Jon Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain," *Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 3 (September 2003). Lawrence suggests that the issue of brutalization was subject to broad public discussion, although the substance of his article actually focuses on the more interesting issue of the deployment of notions of brutalization in British political debate in the immediate post war period.

⁸¹ James Kirkup, *Sorrows, Passions and Alarms* (London, 1959), 64.

⁸² Ezard, *Batterssea Boy*, 98. This is reflected in punishment books of the era, where entries that relate to playground fights are infrequent. For instance, the punishment book for Salter's Hill Boys' School in London covers 1,544 acts of punishment over a period of three years, from the beginning of 1927 to the end of 1929, yet only five instances of punishment relate to fighting. See Salter's Hill School Punishment Book, f. EO/DIV8/SAL/MISC/3, London Metropolitan Archive.

⁸³ Ibid. See also F. H. Spencer, *An Inspector's Testament* (London, 1938), 69.

that disciplinary measures were designed for the purpose of maintaining order within the school. As long as fighting occurred during time set aside for play, it was not seen as disruptive. The relative importance of imposing order and controlling aggression is revealed in the recollections of Abel Jones, who was schooled in late nineteenth century Wales. Jones stated:

I spent my boyhood in the elementary school in the days of rigid discipline, when a headmaster's whistle would demand immediate silence and stop all movement. One playtime I, a small boy in Standard I, fell down and was kicked in the face. At this point the whistle went. A brother of mine, a couple of years older, seeing me on the floor, bleeding, ran to me at once in spite of the whistle. He was severely caned.⁸⁴

These events clearly show the economy of school violence in action. Although it may seem irrational for an act of compassion to provoke corporal punishment, while an unprovoked act of violence went unpunished, the events should be seen within the context of the values of the nineteenth-century school. Order and discipline were of paramount importance in this world, while violent acts were seen as of incidental importance. While fighting was at times punished, it was often in situations when this behavior had consequences for the maintenance of order. For instance, during 1935 and 1936, the punishment book of Salter's Hill School in London recorded only two occasions when children were punished for fighting. The first act of punishment related to boys fighting when "in line," while the second resulted from boys "fighting in room."⁸⁵ Here the reasons for punishment emphasize the fact that teachers were less concerned with the violent nature of such activity than with its disruptive effect on their own authority when it occurred in inappropriate times and places.

The other point at which teachers might intervene was when there was evidence that serious harm might result from fighting. An instance of this was observed by John Giscard, during his schooling in the 1930s. An intense period of fighting between the boys at his school was tolerated by his teachers until one boy used a knife on another. In this situation the punishment was relatively mild and the boy in question received a mere two strokes of the cane.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it is clear that, even when teachers were forced to intervene, they did not consider playground violence to be a serious issue. In part, these attitudes were derived from the notion that the playground was a space where children should be allowed to freely develop. From the nineteenth century onward, it was commonly accepted that play and use of the playground were valuable parts of the educational process.⁸⁷ The playground was typically described as the "uncovered school-room," where the "formation of character goes on even more decisively than in the school-room strictly so called."⁸⁸ Despite the extensive disciplinary powers of teachers, it was believed that "the playground is often a better teacher of discipline than the class room, for it is in the play-ground that

⁸⁴ Abel Jones, *I Was Privileged* (Cardiff, 1943), 7.

⁸⁵ Salter's Hill School Punishment Book, f. EO/DIV8/SAL/MISC/2, London Metropolitan Archive.

⁸⁶ Giscard, *A Place of Stones*, 39–41.

⁸⁷ Marc Armitage, "The Influence of School Architecture and Design on the Outdoor Play Experience within the Primary School," *Paedagogica Historica* 41, no. 4 (August 2005): 539.

⁸⁸ *Further Reports of Assistant Commissioners on Popular Education in England*, (London, 1861), 545; *Appendix to Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Commissioners on Popular Education*, (London, 1861), 91.

the boys have to learn to obey their chosen leaders.⁸⁹ Moreover, in an era when corporal punishment was a normal and acceptable part of maintaining order within the classroom, the violence of the playground was not seen as in any way exceptional. Children, as one educational writer argued, saw "physical restraint and bodily pain as the natural order of things."⁹⁰ This acceptance of pain was seen as a positive, masculine, quality by teachers, and it was thought that the "boy who cannot take a well-deserved thrashing without crying out about it is not worth calling a boy at all."⁹¹ The idea, then, that boys might spend much of their time fighting was perfectly acceptable to most teachers, because it merely reflected the attitudes of the classroom.

THE EXPECTATIONS OF MASCULINITY

While the playgrounds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may seem intolerably violent to the modern reader, they reflected the aggressive norms of contemporary society. "Physical violence was a part of everyday life," explained journalist Brian Magee, recalling his childhood in the 1930s, "not only the standard sanction of anyone in authority but also the standard arbiter of differences and disputes amongst ourselves."⁹² Fighting, noted another writer, was more common, and was of a "more brutal character" in the period prior to the Second World War than in the postwar years.⁹³ While this latter assertion is wholly subjective, it is worth noting that it runs counter to the popular historical assumption of a peaceable past that has given way to a violent present.⁹⁴

Prior to the Second World War, the role of violence in society was heavily determined by contemporary cultures of masculinity. As historian Peter Stearns has observed, in the early twentieth century the Anglo-American ideal of manliness legitimated the use of controlled anger.⁹⁵ It was this culture that not only encouraged boys to fight while at school but also allowed their teachers to see such behavior as a normal part of childhood. Aggression was understood to be a valid way in which children might relate, or even communicate, with one another. More than one individual recognized that the fights of their childhood were used as a means of building relationships. As one writer noted, one way to make friends "was to pick a fight: if you won, the boy respected your skill and saw in you a useful ally; if you lost, he respected your cheek and flattered himself by offering to 'stick up for you' in the future."⁹⁶ Fighting could thus provide a shared experience of tapping into the prevailing masculine culture and, through this, form the basis of friendship.

⁸⁹ Annie Besant, *Education as the Basis of National Life* (Madras, 1908), 10.

⁹⁰ P. A. Barnett, *Common Sense in Education* (London, 1899), 61.

⁹¹ Raymond Blathwayt, "Sentimental England," in *Essays on Duty and Discipline: A Series of Papers on the Training of Children in Relation to Social and National Welfare* (London, 1910), 3.

⁹² Magee, *Clouds of Glory*, 48.

⁹³ Kenney, *Westering*, 14.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London 1983), particularly 7–11.

⁹⁵ Peter Stearns, "Men, Boys and Anger in American Society, 1860–1940," in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940*, ed. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester, 1987), 87.

⁹⁶ West, *I, Said the Sparrow*, 44. See also Bullock, *Bowers Row*, 94.

However, while aggressive ideas of what constituted masculinity were dominant during this period, they were not universal. Although positive accounts of fighting frequently appear in autobiographical records, some individuals were willing to admit that they found no pleasure in the violent episodes of their school life. As one was to remark in later life, playground fights were "needless and silly ways of getting hurt."⁹⁷

Since masculinity and aggression were coupled in the popular imagination, it was difficult for boys to completely withdraw altogether from the fighting culture of schools. While fighting was an almost universal aspect of boyhood, many authors were to admit in later life that they participated with reluctance. Coercion might be necessary to persuade some boys to fight, and they could be "goaded into punching each other" by what was, in the words of one observer, "a howling mob" of children.⁹⁸ Even those boys who were happy to fight might dislike what was often the coercive nature of playground aggression; as one boy noted, he was happy to fight another boy, but he "would not fight on a silly side pretext."⁹⁹ In some instances, this reluctance to get involved was due entirely to a distaste for the painful consequences of violence; as V. W. Garratt was to comment, he "lacked the courage to give the first punch" and was thus "content to let other boys do the shedding of the blood."¹⁰⁰ There was, however, something about the very nature of violence that some boys found frightening or disturbing. For instance, James Kirkup, educated at a "rough" school in South Shields during the 1920s, claimed that the "heated, almost hysterical violence of certain boys and girls" would fill him with anxiety.¹⁰¹ Joseph Barlow Brooks, another unwilling fighter, recalled that some boys in his school, "like some dogs, had a taste for fighting."¹⁰² Examples such as these are useful, because they underline the fact that the Victorian culture of masculinity was not a universal and impersonal force to which all members of society were subject. Instead, it was the product of beliefs held in common by a sufficient number of people to have an effect on how society functioned. While fighting may have been a normal activity for boys during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is necessary to recognize that not all children subscribed to the cultures that promoted this form of behavior and that many found playground violence to be a negative experience.

Despite the aggressive nature of masculine culture during this period, little connection was made between violence and its consequences. Boys were, by fighting, playing out the roles of boxers or literary heroes, or were trying to assume some aspect of adult masculinity. As one schoolboy of the period recalled, he and his schoolfellows felt the idea "that someone should be killed was terrible."¹⁰³ It seems that few boys understood what the potential effects of violence might be. There were, however, occasions when fighting did cause harm. One example of

⁹⁷ Kenney, *Westering*, 13. See also, Brooks, *Lancashire Bred*, 56.

⁹⁸ Kirkup, *Sorrows, Passions and Alarms*, 64.

⁹⁹ Kenney, *Westering*, 13. See also in Francis Guest ["James Spencer"], *Linney Breaks In* (London, 1934), 7.

¹⁰⁰ V. W. Garratt, *A Man in the Street* (London, 1939), 25–26.

¹⁰¹ Kirkup, *Sorrows, Passions and Alarms*, 64.

¹⁰² Brooks, *Lancashire Bred*, 55.

¹⁰³ Tom Tremewan, *Cornish Youth: Memories of a Perran Boy* (Truro, 1968), 12–13.

this, which helps to underline some of the complexities of male aggression, can be found in Robin Bryans's account of his childhood. Bryans grew up in Ulster during the 1930s and was, in the early years of his schooling, a keen fighter.¹⁰⁴ This situation changed with the death of his cousin Capstack from "fatal blows delivered on the playground."¹⁰⁵ Bryans resolved to refrain from fighting, study hard, and gain a career in the shipyards of Ulster. This proved to be a difficult choice in the context of an aggressive school culture:

My abstinence was translated as cowardice pure and simple. I was called a "yella bugger." Then I threw shipyard and apprenticeship and the vision of Capstack to the winds and in the rush of temper would follow the old, familiar thud of knuckle on muscle, and the din and roar of blood.¹⁰⁶

The problem faced by Bryans was not that he was forced to fight but that to not fight was problematic in that it implied he was a coward and lacked proper masculine virtues. His continued participation, goaded on by accusations of cowardice, is a reminder that boys were not compelled to fight but chose to, coerced by a culture that expected aggressive behavior. It might be undesirable to refuse a challenge, but it was possible to do so. As William Goldman was to recall, violence could only be avoided by a firm refusal:

An older boy would bear down on you during play-time, thrust his face into yours, and inquire, "Wan' a fight?" The natural retort of "Why?" wasn't accepted as a legitimate one; it would land you in a fight whether you wanted one or not. If you said yes the same consequence followed. Only by a direct no could you escape with a few short and contemptuous blows, and the slur of cowardice. For many it was the more unpleasant alternative.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, the ability to refuse, along with the notion of the fair fight, meant that playground conflicts were a form of aggression over which children had some control. It is worth noting that many children educated during the period compared the school fight favorably to other forms of violence they might encounter. For instance, corporal punishment, commonly experienced by children in this period, could be seen as an unfair and disagreeable use of force, "always practiced on someone too small to retaliate."¹⁰⁸ The playground fight at least allowed its participants the possibility of triumphing over their opponents and, if not, a chance to show a mature magnanimity in defeat.

CONCLUSION—AN ERA OF VIOLENCE

While playground fights have always been an aspect of school life, what emerges in an analysis of autobiography is a cohesive culture of playground aggression that

¹⁰⁴ Bryans, *No Surrender*, 194.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁰⁷ Goldman, *East End My Cradle*, 31–32.

¹⁰⁸ See William Horrocks, *Reminiscences of Bolton* (Swinton, 1984), 15.

spanned the years between the later nineteenth century and the advent of the Second World War. This culture was encouraged by the expansion in school attendance in the latter years of the nineteenth century, which drew large numbers of children together in institutional environments. Meanwhile, the simultaneous growth of the Victorian cult of manliness supported the idea that violence was an appropriate part of masculine behavior. Both of these factors related to underlying societal shifts. The growing importance of education, for instance, was linked to the increasing economic importance of skilled labor and the professions; the cult of manliness, meanwhile, was very much a Victorian invention, dating from a time when changes in employment patterns meant that many middle-class men felt anxiety over the status of their passive clerical jobs.¹⁰⁹ Such issues were the product of a changing and urbanizing world. Demonstrative expressions of masculinity were coming into fashion at the point where children were being thrown together in a system of mass education that reinforced these images of manliness.

Once established, notions of violent masculinity might be reinforced in numerous ways. Children's fiction played a significant role, and as Kelly Boyd has noted, the growth of the working-class market for boys' stories grew at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁰ The activities of children were also influenced by contemporary militarism in society, particularly in relation to the wars in which Britain participated in this period. As Joanna Bourke has observed, "[D]uring the First World War, literature about the imperial wars entranced thousands; at the time of the Second World War, boys spent hours reading *The Times History of the Great War*."¹¹¹ As she also points out, many soldiers during the wars drew their expectations of warfare from literature and particularly from childhood reading.¹¹² This literature could also influence activities in the playground, and both childhood fights and participation in wars could act as expressions of masculinity. This continuity can be seen in the recollections of Michael O'Donovan, who, as we saw above, adopted a public-school code of honor in relation to his conduct in his own school life. O'Donovan would grow up to be a young man in Ireland at the time of its struggles for independence; viewing "life through a veil of literature," he was driven by his ideals to serve the republicans in the civil war that followed.¹¹³ Thus, the same literary influences stretched across his early life, having an effect upon both his school experiences and the part he played in the Irish civil war.

The influences of masculine culture, militarism, and children's fiction were pervasive and relatively unchanging for a considerable period of time. Playground fights, existing within this context, were equally unchanging. Thus, the position of cock of the school was as recognizable to the school children of London in 1890 as it would have been to their equivalents in Yorkshire in 1940. In consequence, the stories told of playground fights in autobiographical accounts are, at times, virtually indistinguishable from one another, differentiated only by dialect and the context within

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, Jacob Middleton, "The Cry for Useless Knowledge: Fear of Over-education in Late Nineteenth-Century England," *History of Education Researcher* 76 (November 2005): 97–98; John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2005), 204.

¹¹⁰ Boyd, *Manliness and the Boys' Story Paper in Britain*, 72–73.

¹¹¹ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London, 1999), 21.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 20, 53–54.

¹¹³ O'Donovan, *An Only Child*, 211.

which they are framed. These forms of fighting were a product of a particular set of converging influences; they came into existence in the early years of mass education and would dominate the shape of violent behavior at school until the middle of the twentieth century.

There are two notable points about the relatively static nature of playground violence. The first is that it fits poorly with the notion that violence declined gradually through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as part of a civilizing process.¹¹⁴ Such claims have generally been made on the basis of trends in serious violence, particularly murder and certain forms of public disorder. Accounts of playground fights, however, suggest that at least certain forms of violence were exempt from this and that the civilizing process may not be as simple, or as linear, as it is sometimes represented. Second, the static nature of playground fighting serves to conceal the manner in which it occurred within an economy of violence. Militarism and the cult of manliness not only made school violence permissible but also were sufficiently pervasive so as to become established long-term norms. This continuity makes it easy to see why teachers during the 1930s accepted the prevalence of playground violence, given that it was little different from what they might have experienced twenty, thirty, or even forty years before.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the manner in which playground fights were framed began to shift considerably in response to changes in British culture. Most prominent among these shifts was the move away from the Victorian cult of manliness. While this survived into the twentieth century, it was on the wane; historians J. A. Mangan and James Walvin claim that, although this model of masculinity remained a significant influence in British society after 1900, it suffered a steady and gradual decline until its disappearance in the 1940s.¹¹⁵ While this cultural shift was a complex phenomenon, it is worth noting that the idea of manly self-defense was increasingly at odds with the professional, industrial warfare of the mid-twentieth century. The idea that courage or skill at boxing would allow one to overcome one's enemies was appearing increasingly absurd.¹¹⁶

With the decline of the cult of manliness, the economies of violence in Britain, both within the school and in society in general, were inevitably subject to change. Thus, although fighting remained a feature of school life after the Second World War, the language and ritualized behavior that surrounded it declined. When Iona and Peter Opie were researching cultures of childhood play in the 1950s, they found that, although fighting retained some rituals, many traditional aspects, such as the phrase "cock of the school," had faded almost entirely from use.¹¹⁷ Therefore, while it would be impossible to give any precise date by which the fight was no longer a central part of playground culture, it would seem reasonable to locate it

¹¹⁴ See, for instance, Wiener, "The Victorian Criminalization of Men," 200.

¹¹⁵ J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, introduction to *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Although not without its proponents: James Hipkiss, in the 1941 book, *Unarmed Combat*, promised on the cover that the martial art ju-jitsu was "your answer to invasion." That we now find the idea of fighting off panzer divisions with the use of martial arts absurd is a sign that we inhabit a different economy of violence than Hipkiss. See James Hipkiss, *Unarmed Combat* (London, 1941).

¹¹⁷ Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (Oxford, 1959), 196-97. The authors noted that "cock of the school" was retained only in northern England.

around the middle of the twentieth century, along with the last remnants of the Victorian cultures of manliness. As these long-standing notions of masculinity declined, so too did the economies of violence that for half a century had sustained a stable and continuous set of playground behaviors. In the new economies of interpersonal violence that were emerging in the middle of the twentieth century, it was becoming harder to see childhood violence as anything other than a meaningless struggle, characterized by one participant as "a few harmless blows and possibly a badly-aimed kick or two."¹¹⁸ Violence was being reinterpreted, not as a meaningful exhibition of masculinity, but as a relatively inconsequential set of actions; the playground fight was becoming an outmoded form of aggression, no longer acceptable in the schools of Britain.

¹¹⁸ Brooks, *Lancashire Bred*, 56. See also, West, *I Said the Sparrow*, 43-44.