

A MURDERING PRACTISE

By MARY FORSTER MARTIN

TO kick, metaphorically or literally, seems to be instinctive with human beings, and to kick a round, or nearly round, object satisfies some deep-seated instinct. Football has been a popular game, then, ever since the Romans used it as part of their military training to the present time, when to many people the football team is the most important part of the university.

But it was not always as highly organized or respectable as it is now. There is a legend that it was very early played by the Danes, who joyfully kicked a skull along the streets—preferably an enemy's skull, one presumes. In later years, football lured many a young man away from church, with sad consequences to him. For instance, when on May 5th, 1592, Richard Jeffery "procured company together, and plaied at football," in Hackwell, Essex, on Easter Monday, in Evening Service time, he was brought before the Court of the Archdeacon of Essex, and fined fourpence.¹

Time and again football was banned, sometimes because of its violence, sometimes because it drew the young men away from archery-practice. Edward III, Richard II, Henry IV, Henry VIII, and Queen Elizabeth I issued proclamations forbidding it; King James I denounced it in his *Basilicon Doron*, book iii: "From this court I debarre all rough and violent exercises, as the foot-ball, meeter for lameing than making able the users thereof."² Sir Thomas Elyot spoke of it in 1581 as "Nothyng but beastely furie and exstreme violence, whereof procedeth hurte, and consequently rancour and malice do remayne with thym that be wounded, wherfor it is to be put in perpetuall silence."³ Bishop Stubbes roundly condemned it in his *Anatomie of Abuses*: "As concerning football playing, I protest unto you it may rather be called a friendly kinde of fight than a play or recreation; a bloody and murdering practise, than a felowly sporte or pastime. For dooth not every one lye in waight for his adversarie, seeking to overthrowe him, and to picke him on his nose, though it be upon hard stones? in ditch or dale, in valley or hil, or what place soever it be, hee careth not, so he have him down."⁴

But in spite of royal enactments and ecclesiastical denunci-

1. *Lincoln Diocese Documents, 1450-1554*, ed. Andrew Clark, (Oxford, E.E.T.S., 1914), Original Series No. 149, p. 213.
2. Quoted in Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, (1801), ed. William Hone (London, 1898), p. 169.
3. Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Governour*, ed. H.H.S. Croft (London, 1880), p. 295.
4. Quoted in R. B. Morgan, *Readings in English Social History* (Cambridge, 1921), III, p. 88.

ations, football lived on. In many towns it became the custom for a game to be played annually on Shrove Tuesday, and the practice has been carried on well into the twentieth century in such towns as Ashbourne, Derby, Alnwick, Dorking, and Epsom.⁵ At Ashbourne, the goals are said to be about three miles apart.⁶

Strutt, quoting from "a Chester Antiquary (MS Harl. 2150, fol 235)" says that in Chester, up until 1540, it was the custom "... for the shoemakers yearly on the Shrove Tuesday, to deliver to the drapers in the presence of the mayor of Chester, at the cross on the Rodehee, one ball of leather called a football, of the value of three shillings and fourpence, or above, to play at from there to the Common Hall of the said city; which practice was productive of much inconvenience, and therefore this year (1540) by consent of the parties concerned, the ball was changed into six glayves of silver of thelike value, as a reward for the best runner that day upon the aforesaid Rodehee."⁷

Scotland too has long known the game. James Bone writes in his *Edinburgh Revisited*, "Football is an ancient form of exercise with the Scots, and an ancient traditional form of the game in which hands, feet, and head are used, and parish forms "scrums" against parish, is still played once a year in some Border towns."⁸

This early game, however, seems more closely akin to hurling than to modern football. Of the two games, hurling was played chiefly in Cornwall, Ireland, and other Celtic parts of the British Isles, and football in the rest of the country. From Hamilton Jenkin's *Cornish Homes and Customs*, however, we learn that in 1654 a body of a hundred Cornish gentlemen visited London to demonstrate the game before the Protector, and that some year later a similar group played before the Duke of York and several thousand spectators in Hyde Park.⁹

In Carew's *Survey of Cornwall* (1602) there is a vivid description of hurling:

Hurling taketh his denomination from throwing of the ball, and is of two sorts; in the east parts of Cornwall to goales, and in the west to the country. For hurling to goales there are fifteen, twenty, or thirty players, more or less, chosen out on each side, who strip themselves to

5. A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, *Cornish Homes and Customs* (London, 1934), p. 233.

6. J. A. Hammelton, *Wonderful Britain* (London, n.d.), I, p. 158.

7. Strutt, p. 169.

8. James Bone, *Edinburgh Revisited* (London, 1913), p. 228.

9. Jenkin, pp. 263-7.

their slightest apparell and then join hands in ranks one against another; out of these rankes they match themselves by payres, one embracing another, and so passe away, every of which couple are especially to watch one another during the play; after this they pitch two bushes in the ground, some eight or ten feet asunder, and directly against them, ten or twelve score paces off, other twain in like distance, which they term goales, where some indifferent person throweth up a ball, the which whosoever can catch and carry through his adversaries goale, hath wonne the game; . . . they must hurle man to man, and not two set upon one man at once.¹⁰

This is probably the game played by the hundred Cornish gentlemen.

The other game, hurling to the country, seems more nearly to resemble the football of the time:

Two or three, or more parishes agree to hurl against two or three other parishes. The matches are usually made by gentlemen, and their goales are either those gentlemen's houses, or some towns or villages three or four miles asunder When they meet there is neyther comparing of numbers nor matching of men, but a silver ball is cast up, and that company which can catch and carry it by force or slight to the place assigned, gaineth the ball and the victory.¹¹

As late as the last quarter of the nineteenth century, says Hamilton Jenkin, "a hurling took place annually on the Feast Tuesday (Shrove Tuesday) at Tregoney, where the ball was thrown up opposite the town clock, and was played along the road, the toll-gates at Grampound Lane (near Carveth Farm) and at Golden (top of Freewater Hill) forming the goals."¹²

In another village, the ball "was thrown up at one end of the village and hurled . . . to the other, where it was thrust in through the window of the Dolphin Inn. One of the group assembled inside would then seize the ball and try to escape with it to a certain well at Ninnis, a farm about half a mile distant."¹³

Hurling through the streets is still conducted on Shrove Tuesday at St. Columb, Cornwall, the goals being "stone-troughs standing by the road-side," which Jenkin suggests may originally have been the bases of crosses.

10. Strutt, p. 166.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

12. Jenkin, pp. 238-9.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Football seems to have been one of the hazards of London life in Charles II's time. In Sir William Davenant's description of London two years before the Fire, quoted in Besant's *Survey of London*, vol. 5, we find the following: "I have now left your houses, and am passing that of your streets, but not in a coach, for they are uneasily hung, and so narrow, that I took them for sedans upon wheels. . . . I would now make a safe retreat, but that methinks I am stopt by one of our heroic games, called foot-ball: which I conceive (under your favour) not very conveniently civil in the streets, especially in such irregular and narrow roads as Crooked Lane."¹⁴

As might be expected, Pepys has something to say about football. On January 3rd, 1664/5, his entry begins: "Up, and by coach to Sir Ph. Warwicke's, the streete being full of foot-balls, it being a great frost."

It is very probable that football was played at Cambridge when Andrew Marvell was an undergraduate, for it seems to have been popular a few years later, particularly in Magdalene College. As entry in the register book of the college for 1679 runs as follows: "That no schollers give or receive at any time any treat or collation upon account of ye football play, on or about Michaelmas Day, further than Colledge beere or ale in ye open halle to quench their thirsts. And particularly that most vile custom of drinking and spending money—Sophisters and Freshmen together—upon ye account of making or not making a speech at that football time be utterly left off and extinguished."¹⁵

Many references to football occur in the poetry of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Alexander Barclay's Fifth Eclogue, written about 1508, tells how the boys would take bladders for use as balls:

When men be busied in killing of fat swine,
 They get the bladder and blow it great and thin,
 With many beanes or peason put within,
 It ratleth, soundeth, and shineth clere and fayre,
 While it is throwen and caste vp in the ayre,
 Eche one contendeth and hath a great delite
 With foote and with hande the bladder for to smite,
 If it fall to grounde they lifte it vp agayne,
 This wise to labour they count it for no payne,
 Renning and leaping they driue away the colde.

14. Sir Walter Besant, *Survey of London* (London, 1903), V, p. 242.

15. E(dward) B(reck) and W(alter) C(amp). "Football", *Ency. Brit.*, 11th ed. (1910), X, p. 618.

The sturdie plowmen lustie, strong and bolde
 Ouercommeth the winter with driuing the foote ball,
 Forgetting labour and many a greuous fall.¹⁶

In Eclogue I, one of the shepherds announces:

I can dance the raye, I can both pipe and sing,
 If I were mery, I can both hurle and fling.¹⁷

This reference to hurling, if it is such, is probably a memory from Barclay's sojourn in Devon.

That the game was not confined to the men is indicated by some lines from Sidney's "Dialogue between Two Shepherds":
 A time there is for all, my mother often says,
 When she with skirts tucked very high, with girls at
 football plays.

Shakespeare draws on the game several times for images:

Dro. E. Am I so round with you, as you with me,
 That like a football you do spurn me thus?
 You spurn me here, and he will spurn me
 hither:
 If I last in this service, you must case me in
 leather.

(*Errors* II, i, 82-5)

Osw. I'll not be struck, my lord.
Kent Nor tripped neither, you base football player.
 (*Lear* I, iv, 94-5)

Cleo. I'll spurn thine eyes.
 Like balls before me.
 (*Antony* II, v, 63-4)

Ant. Yet ha'we
 A brain that nourishes our nerves, and can get
 Goal for goal of youth.
 (*Antony* IV, viii, 20-22)

Edmund Waller, too, was familiar with the game of football as played in the country. He bases an image on it in his poem "Of the Danger His Majesty (Being Prince) Escaped in the Road at Saint Andrew," (1664):

As when a sort of lusty shepherds try
 Their force at football; care of victory
 Makes them salute so rudely breast to breast
 That their encounters seem too rough for jest.

Gay describes the Dangers of Football in *Trivia*:
 Where Covent-Garden's famous temple stands,

16. Alexander Barclay, *Barclay's Eclogues*, ed. Beatrice White (Oxford: E.E.T.S., 1928), No. 175, pp. 184-5.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

That boasts the work of Jones' immortal hands;
 Columns with plain magnificence appear,
 And graceful porches lead along the square:
 Here oft' my course I bend, when lo! from far
 I spy the furies of the foot-ball war;
 The 'prentice quits his shop, to join the crew,
 Encreasing crouds the flying game pursue.
 Thus, as you roll the ball o'er snowy ground,
 The gath'ring globe augments with ev'ry round.
 But whither shall I run? the throng draws nigh,
 The ball now skims the street, now soars on high,
 The dex'trous glazier strong returns the bound,
 And gingling sashes on the pent-house sound.

Perhaps a word should be said here about the ball itself. It seems evident that very often bladders were used as footballs, and that balls were often covered with leather; the ball used in hurling to the country was made of wood or cork covered with silver. But some lines describing a match between Lusk and Swords in Ireland, 1721, mention a kind of ball that may have been used elsewhere:

Ye champions of fair Lusk and ye of Swords,
 View well this ball, the present of your lords,
 To outward view, three folds of bullock's hide,
 With leather thongs bound fast on every side,
 A mass of finest hay concealed from sight,
 Conspire at once to make it firm and light.

These early games, with their primitive equipment and few rules, are a far cry from the highly organized and "scientific" football of today, but who is to say which is to be called the truer form of sport?