

Britain's Olympic Women: A History, by Jean Williams, Oxford, Routledge, 2020, 368 pp., £120 (hb), ISBN 9780367473211

Jean Williams' new book on British female Olympians is the first monograph to consider the contribution of British women to the Olympic movement as a whole, and as such its publication is long overdue. The book, Williams argues, is "revisionist" in placing women centre-stage in a movement, and a literature, that have been decidedly androcentric. The book aims to draw attention to the "hidden histories" of these women, a laudable purpose given that many of the names in the book will be unfamiliar to most of us. I learned a great deal from reading it.

The book adopts a case study approach, with each chapter centring around one or more British female Olympians, while also describing their broader social and sporting contexts. There are chapters on swimmers Gladys Carson and Margaret Wellington, the four figure-skaters who comprised the first all-female British Olympic team in 1932, runner Audrey Brown, and equestrian Pat Smythe.

Methodologically, the book is grounded in archival research conducted by Williams at the British Olympic Association archive and International Olympic Committee archive - much of the material here is hugely valuable, and previously under-utilised by historians. Williams has also collected personal material belonging to women themselves to inform the book; I especially enjoyed her description of scrapbooks as "a kind of life-writing; half diary, half travelogue" (p.87). Historians should make more use of this kind of material and there is a good roadmap here for how we might do so.

Additionally, Williams has gathered oral histories either with the Olympians themselves, or with their family members. This combination of archival and oral research is becoming something of a norm in women's sports history; here, it plays a useful role in helping Williams to track the life courses of these pioneering female athletes. Having said that, I would have liked to see more use of direct quotes from these oral history interviews. In the chapter on Brown, for example, Williams states that she was able to draw on seven different interviews contained in the British Library sound files - and yet in the final chapter, we hear very little from Brown that is not refracted through the lens of Williams the researcher. In this way, I feel that something of the strength and joy of oral history, in giving direct voice to these pioneering women, is lost. That may of course be personal preference.

For me, the strongest chapter of the book is that on Smythe, though that is perhaps to be expected - Williams' first published work on Smythe appeared 10 years ago, in 2011, and it would be difficult to find a historian who is better-informed about her life. Unfortunately, the rest of the book has an air of being rushed; I can't help feeling it would have benefited from a more rigorous editing process. The book ends very abruptly, with no real sense that the overall arguments and themes presented in the book have been drawn together into a well thought-out conclusion. Reading the book, I am left with the impression that Williams has spent time collecting a huge amount of information and then simply thrown it at the page, without signposting the reader to the most important and groundbreaking aspects of that material.

I was surprised to find a lack of reference to some of the most influential recent publications on women's sport history. Williams attempts to justify this in the introduction, saying: "due to the confines of space and time, there is a Select Bibliography at the end of the book, which focuses particularly on the archival sources" (p.9). However, a bibliography that contains no reference to Fiona Skillen's influential work on women's sport and modernity in the interwar period¹ (to give just one example) seems to me to be rather too "select". And given that this book is partly aimed at undergraduate students, an indication of how the book's arguments are situated in relation to existing historiography is surely an essential rather than an optional component?

¹ Fiona Skillen, *Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013).

Another confusing aspect is the fact that the book initially posits itself as a “collective biography of British women in the Olympic movement” (p.6), but by page 217 we are being informed that “the intention of the book [has not] been to register a definitive roll-call of female Olympians”. I appreciate that Williams was confined to the stories she could tell in 120,000 words, but given that she explicitly directs us in her opening chapter to draw conclusions from the social class, ethnicity and region of the women discussed in the book, her inability to present us with a full list of athletes seems somewhat incongruous. In a book entitled “Britain’s Olympic Women” it also feels like a missed opportunity to bring a quantitative research agenda to bear on this discrete group of women.

There is no doubt that this book needed to be written, and I feel sure it will appear on many student reading lists before too long. Hopefully Williams - who outlines at least 20 separate future research agendas in the course of this book - will inspire others to fill in some of the gaps which this book leaves open.

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