

Everybody wants to rule the world: Britain, Sport and the 1980s, by Roger Domeneghetti, London, Yellow Jersey Press, 2023, 392 pp., £20 (hb), ISBN 9781787290594

Perhaps the best encapsulation of this book, which bills itself as “*A social history of 1980s Britain, told through the sport of the time*”, is the cover illustration: a wonderfully evocative photograph of Margaret Thatcher, in full skirt suit, kicking a football on a visit to Scunthorpe United in 1988. Thatcher didn’t like sport - “She tried occasionally to show an interest and dutifully turned up to watch great sporting events, but always looked rather out of place”, as John Major put it¹ - and yet any history of the 1980s would be incomplete without her strident figure taking centre stage.

Roger Domeneghetti’s key argument is that “sport is the key to understanding what really happened to Britain in the 1980s” (p.3): a decade during which both sport and society became hyper-commercialised, and during which sport was an arena where crucial political battles over immigration, sexuality, the Cold War, apartheid and the free market (to name but a few) played out. For anyone who has researched either social history or the history of sport (arguably they are one and the same thing), this argument will probably seem rather reductive. So will Domeneghetti’s confident assertion in his introduction that historians tend to ignore sport. Members of the British Society of Sports History (which recently celebrated its 40th anniversary) would beg to differ.

But then this book is not really aimed at us. At £20 for the hardback version, it knows its audience - the general public who remember watching Botham’s Ashes, John Barnes, Zola Budd and Martina Navratilova, and want to understand how, in retrospect, their sporting heroes were part of broader political narratives. Domeneghetti, now a lecturer in journalism at Northumbria University, worked as a journalist for more than 20 years: he knows how to write for a public audience. The book is pacy, and the author has an excellent eye for anecdotes to illustrate his points - it is fun, for example, to picture the moment when Marieanne Spacey was recognised in a McDonalds in London, shortly after women’s football was televised for the first time (p.117). Writing accessible sports history is not easy, and is certainly something more of us should be doing.

The book is split into four thematic sections - Culture, Identity, Conflict and Politics - and covers a lot of ground in 400 pages. A (lighthearted) word of warning: be prepared to come away from the book singing a medley of 1980s tunes. From the Tears for Fears-inspired title, to the various chapter names (direct from The Smiths, Billy Idol, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, A-ha and others) it might well inspire some karaoke sessions.

I loved reading the various snippets from interviews which Domeneghetti carried out for the book - there must be at least 30, with everyone from Greg Dyke to Diana Moran (the BBCs “Green Goddess”). The author’s methodology is opaque, but these presumably were more akin to journalistic interviews than to oral histories; nevertheless they are a key strength of the book. For instance, I found it refreshing to read Wayne Larkins relaying his perspective on the Gooch-led “rebel tour” of South Africa in March 1982; he openly admits to Domeneghetti that his reason for going was that he was “cheesed off” with the England selectors (p.309).

¹ John Major, *John Major: The Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p.403.

In some ways, the book feels like a missed opportunity: with Public Record Office files at Kew from the 1980s now readily accessible under the Thirty-Year Rule, I was surprised not to see more primary source material used. There are some interesting analytical juxtapositions - Hillsborough is contextualised as one incident in a “litany of tragedy” caused by the government’s commitment to the free market and deregulation (p.379) - but largely speaking, it’s a synthesis work, which relies on secondary accounts. The interview quotes are often left to speak for themselves, rather than being contextualised academically: Paralympian Tara Flood describes a focus at the 1988 Games on “athletes who didn’t look like they had any significant level of impairment” (p.104) but there is no reference to recent work on disability media hierarchies by Pullen, Jackson and Silk among others.²

Having read this book, I still think there is a gap for more historical scholarship dealing with the post-1970s period in Britain’s sporting history - a particularly frustrating void to navigate when writing my PhD thesis on postwar British women’s cricket. On the other hand (and this can’t be said for all books one is tasked with reviewing) I did very much enjoy reading it - and so, crucially, will its intended audience.

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² Emma Pullen, Daniel Jackson and Michael Silk, “(Re-)presenting the Paralympics: Affective Nationalism and the “Able-Disabled””, *Communication & Sport* 8:6 (2020).