

***Chariots of Fire*: bigotry, manhood and moral certitude in an age of individualism**

Ellis Cashmore*

Staffordshire University, Stoke on Trent, England

Chariots of Fire is examined both as a chronicle of the 1920s, in which it is set, and an allegory for the period in which it was released, the early 1980s. The film unfolds amid a culture of individualism in which British patriotism, while strong, is both conditional and instrumental. Class inequalities are deep, unemployment is growing steeply and industrial conflict is widespread. Victorian values are changing and the end of British Empire is approaching. The film records the intersecting paths of two athletes, Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell, as they prepare for the Paris Olympic Games of 1924. Both are, in different ways, marginal: Abrahams, a Jew, is challenged by anti-Semitism; Liddell, the son of a missionary, is a steadfast Christian and runs because he believes he is fulfilling God's purpose. The two dominant themes of the film – masculinity and anti-Semitism – are addressed. Abrahams, with his singular mentality and professional coach, is seen to prefigure later developments in sport. The context of the film's release is also considered: the enterprise culture encouraged by the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher rewarded the kind of dogged, individualistic enterprise exhibited by Abrahams and Liddell and supported the film's patriotic motifs, especially during the Falklands War of 1982. While based on actual historical characters and events, the film is most productively accepted as a figurative reconstruction that has resonance in the late rather than early twentieth century.

The context of the 1920s

'This complex blend of individualism, scepticism towards authority, and an individual patriotism that was strong but sometimes difficult to tap'.¹ Alan Fox's précis of the British Zeitgeist at the beginning of the 1920s suggests a society in transition. The values and status hierarchy of the Victorian period, 1837 to 1901, were fast disappearing. Confidence in the power of the free market to deliver personal freedom and material plenitude had receded amid the revulsion at women's work underground, the exploitation of labour in mills and the squalor of the industrial cities.

Medical provision was uneven despite the 1918 Education Act, which compelled the inspection and treatment of pupils in state schools. Universal health care would not arrive until 1946. Education reflected a class-divided society, the potential for social mobility being extremely limited. 'The odds were still heavily weighted against a university education for a working-class child',² reported historian Arthur Marwick.

Before the World War of 1914–18, discontents arising from class divisions and industrial labour were checked by limited working-class expectations, restrained perhaps by the suasion of religion. By the end of the war, the working class was not so easily placated. Industrial disputes became commonplace and radical politics centred on the

* Email: e.cashmore@staffs.ac.uk

emergent Labour Party, which formed its first administration in 1923. When unemployment crept towards the two million level, trades unions called for militancy, building eventually to a nationwide General Strike in 1926.

An incipient consumer culture was taking root. The economic theorist Thorstein Veblen³ had used the term ‘conspicuous consumption’ in 1899 to describe the nascent pattern of displaying social status through consumable items. While the focus of Veblen’s analysis was the USA, similar trends were in evidence in Britain: household items, clothes and the then novel means of conveyance, the motor car, were appearing. By the 1920s, this growing consumer culture had been complemented by the widespread availability of new forms of entertainment, including the radio (the BBC began broadcasting in 1922) and motion pictures. A culture ‘strongly infused by individualism of a self-interested kind’,⁴ as Fox puts it, began to coalesce.

Support for national purposes or any kind of pursuit that transcended individual or organized group interests was far from assured. Even patriotism was conditional. There was a resistance to combining Englishness with abstract concepts such as State or Empire. What good were a strong nation and a global empire if there was no individual well-being?

Paradoxically, this was a time when the English ‘felt the need to put out the flag, to cultivate national sentiment and to look to national monuments and national rituals’, as Krishan Kumar reflects.⁵ The English superiority that had been undeniable for at least 300 years was under threat. Charged, as they saw it, with a responsibility for civilizing the world, carrying their language, their culture, their institutions and their industry to all corners of the Empire, the English rarely showed the arrogance, bombast and all-round superciliousness with which they later became associated. After all, Kumar points out: ‘Ruling the roost, they felt it impolitic to crow’.⁶ But disastrous military campaigns in the Second Afghan War, the death of General Gordon at Khartoum and the struggle with the Boers in South Africa were portents. The Empire was approaching an end.

Whatever national consciousness or national identity there was, rested on shaky foundations. The unity of purpose catalyzed by the War had largely dissipated by the 1920s, replaced by the ethic of individualism. Centuries of Empire had left traces on the attitudes and sentiments of the English and, indeed, the British. But the type of ‘Britishness’ experienced in this period was, as Bernard Crick suggests, ‘highly and sensibly utilitarian, not emotionally nationalistic’.⁷ In other words, it was measured in terms of its practical value to the individual.

There are, of course, no individuals: at least, not in the sense of human beings as separate, independent entities distinct from all others. Every member of society derives his or her identity from membership in a ‘people’ of some kind, whether a group, an organization or several different kinds of collectivity. This principle lies at the heart of all societies. Indifferent to the nation and the Empire though the English might have been in the 1920s, they had memberships. In other words, they identified with, attached themselves to and perhaps surrendered themselves to other associations. With the comprehensive stabilizing force of the nineteenth century no longer in evidence and the traditional ties of geography and occupation weakened, people were released to explore other affiliations; affiliations they believed were central to their being.

Neither Eric Liddell nor Harold Abraham was overtly patriotic. Even in their triumphant moments, they were not seen draping themselves in the Union flag or heard proclaiming their allegiance to Great Britain, as today’s athletes customarily do. While neither averred the kind of scepticism of authority, which Fox believes was widespread, their behaviour suggests they were prepared to defy formal arrangements in pursuit of their own ambitions. Both men’s commitments were narrow, specific and so consistent with the individualism of the time.

Liddell was born in 1902 in Tientsin, now Tianjin, in north-east China. His parents were members of the London Missionary Society. At 5, Liddell was enrolled in Eltham College, a private boarding school for the children of missionaries in south-east London. His parents remained in China, and the family met only during furloughs in Edinburgh, Scotland. At school Liddell distinguished himself in rugby and cricket, both appropriate sports for the son of a gentleman, though he excelled in sprinting.

He added to his sporting achievements after moving to the University of Edinburgh in 1920: here he represented his university in track and rugby. He also earned international caps playing in the (then) Five Nations rugby tournament. While in Scotland, he became an active member of the Glasgow Students' Evangelical Union, speaking at Evangelical meetings across Scotland. After the 1924 Olympic Games – which we will consider shortly – he retired from competitive sports, aged 22, and moved back to China, where he was ordained as a Minister. He married a Canadian missionary with whom he had two children. After the Japanese invaded China, she took the two children to Canada, leaving Liddell to practise his mission. He was interned by the Japanese and, in 1945, died in captivity from a brain tumour, age 43.

Abraham, like Liddell, was an all-round athlete, adept at both sprinting and the long jump. Born in Bedford, 50 miles north of London, in 1899, his father was Sir Sidney Abrahams, himself an Olympic long jumper. The Abrahams family had ancestry in Lithuania: they were among nearly 250,000 Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, who migrated to and settled in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sir Sidney Abrahams became a successful financier.

Also like Liddell, Abrahams was privately educated, in his case at the Repton School in Derbyshire, before going to study at the elite Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1919. While at Cambridge, he earned a place in the British team at the 1920 Olympics, but failed to make an impression in any of his four events, his best finish being fourth in the 4 × 100 metres relay. Four years later, he accompanied Liddell to the Paris Olympiad, which was a much more modest tournament than the heavily sponsored, globally-televised and politicized spectacle we recognize as the Olympics today. In 1925, still only 26, he retired from athletics having sustained a foot injury and went into law and journalism. He died in 1978, two years before the release of the film that enshrined him and Liddell in the popular imagination.

The film

Players and events

The much-garlanded *Chariots of Fire* was director Hugh Hudson's first feature and it was acclaimed globally, winning Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Costume Design and Best Score. The plot of *Chariots of Fire* centres on the efforts of Liddell and Abrahams to win Olympic gold medals. Both did: Abrahams upset the odds by beating two high-class US sprinters in the 100 metres, while Liddell, having switched to 400 meters to avoid compromising his religious convictions about competing on the Sabbath (a 100m heat was scheduled for a Sunday) also emerged victorious. Liddell's preparation in the Scottish Highlands parallels Abrahams' endeavours in Cambridge. Both men are depicted as resolute and unwavering in their determination to win gold medals.

There are no villains as such in the film's narrative; just abstract forces that task both men. In Liddell's world, God rather than man is central: he has a pure and immutable faith and engages with it strenuously. When he runs, it is with the same kind of passion he brings to his evangelical orations. He believes in absolute principles. In Liddell's mind, there is no doubt

that God gave him an intellect with which to comprehend the Almighty. But why has he blessed him with being fleet of foot? This provides him with intolerable uncertainty. His sister objects to his athletics, insisting that the time he spends training or competing should be properly spent evangelizing. His father assures him that when he races, he does so in the service of God. 'Run in God's name', he implores him. 'And let the world stand back in wonder.'⁸

Abrahams' funeral forms a frame for the stories: among the members of the congregation is Aubrey Montague, a journalist who recounts his impressions of first meeting Abrahams when he arrived at Cambridge just after the war. He recalls Abrahams' ambivalence at the deference of two war veterans who help him with his luggage. While God is a constant presence in Liddell's life, Abrahams has no such comfort. But he has a challenge: as a Jew, he sees himself as 'a weapon', someone who is representing a group that has an epic history of driven itinerancy and persecution. While his own background has afforded him protection from maltreatment, he remains mindful of the anti-Semitism that surrounds him. He confides that he feels 'semi-deprived . . . they [Gentiles] lead me to water, but won't let me drink'.

The two men interact when Abrahams, having heard of Liddell, seeks to check out the competition at an athletics meet in Edinburgh. He watches in awe as Liddell grittily picks himself up after being knocked over during a race and still prevails. The prospect of running against such a determined adversary makes Abrahams take the drastic step of securing the services of a coach for his Olympics preparations. Already somewhat marginalized because of his Jewishness, Abrahams distances himself further from his peers by appointing Sam Mussabini, who has accepted money for his services.

While the dishonour of being trained by a professional is expressed though not emphasized in the film, Abrahams is forced to separate from his coach shortly before the competition and Mussabini waits for news of his charge's race from a hotel room. While many sports at the time, including football, rugby league and boxing, allowed payments for competitors, athletics disapproved of professionalism. It contravened the 'Corinthian spirit' so lauded by true amateurs, which saw the joy of sport in the competing rather than winning.⁹

The move places Abrahams outside the parameters of true sportsmanship. Competition was conceived in a way that permitted honour amid defeat: there was no disgrace in losing, but shame in not trying. The most damning insult a competitor could pay a rival was not to try his utmost. A central purpose in sport was to bring all participants to their mettle. Striving was more important than winning. (It will be apparent by my consistent use of the masculine pronoun that women's participation in sport was stringently discouraged or simply not allowed, and I will consider this below).

Abrahams is motivated by other priorities: 'I run to win', he reminds the female actor Sybil Gordon; 'If I can't win, I won't run'. His remark captures his individualistic, self-interested approach to competition. It is totally at odds with the ethos of sport in the early years of the twentieth century, yet entirely congruent with the 'win-at-all-costs' mentality that was to become prevalent in sport in the decades that followed.

Liddell too is driven by selfish concerns, in his case to satisfy his unyielding conviction that he is competing in God's service. His version of evangelical Protestant Christianity equates to what later became known as fundamentalism, underpinned by a sense of certainty and intolerance of other faiths or other versions of Christianity. For Liddell, God is a 'benign dictator'. In 1925, the year following the Paris Games, John Scopes, a high school biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was indicted for teaching evolutionary theory in defiance of a state law that demanded only creationism be taught. The 'Scopes Monkey Trial', as it was known, revealed the pervasiveness and influence of fundamentalist beliefs 66 years after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*.

'I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast', says Liddell, who is shown in the film unsettled by the news that a heat of his chosen 100 metres final is scheduled to take place on a Sunday. He will not countenance running on the Sabbath and is offered the alternative of competing in another event, the 400 metres. In fact, the programme was known several months in advance and Liddell made his decision in time to adjust his training accordingly.

The film depicts both men following their different paths to the VIII Olympiad, Abrahams making friends and enemies in roughly equal measure. He reminds Montague that, as a Jew, he has 'felt the cold reluctance in a handshake' but, as an athlete, he has never felt defeat. Portrayed by Ben Cross, Abrahams has the poker-faced glare of a professional boxer and the gait of a basketball player. Tall and angular, he dispenses challenges in a way that advertises arrogance. Within days of his arrival at Cambridge, he succeeds in the Trinity Dash, which is a 312-yard sprint around the perimeter of a university courtyard that must be completed in less than 46 seconds, this being the time it takes for the church bell to chime twelve times. Although Abrahams is seen succeeding, only two people have really accomplished this: Sebastian Coe¹⁰ and Lord Burghley, who is played in the film by Nigel Havers as 'Lord Andrew Lindsay' (Burghley refused to cooperate with the film-makers).

The nonchalant aristocrat's training methods are theatrically evocative of the gentleman-amateur: he balances full champagne glasses on the edge of hurdles, then proceeds to negotiate them at speed without spilling a drop. Abrahams, meanwhile, is grinding out miles under the ruthless supervision of Mussabini. In one of the film's most memorable scenes, several athletes are seen training on the beach with Vangelis' celestial synthesizer soundtrack matching the slow-motion filmed pace of the runners, prompting the audience to think that the story may be about two athletes, but it is also about the moral rearmament of the post-war period.

The Games themselves unite the two stories, if not the two men. Abrahams' race in particular mirrors other themes: America's emerging supremacy as a superpower is represented by Charles Paddock and Jackson Scholz, reputed to be the fastest men alive. Their ambitions are not hampered by Corinthian ideals: they want to win, as, of course, do Abrahams and Liddell, though for different reasons. The Americans' modern approach presages the coming age in sport.

Abrahams and Liddell both win their respective events, suggesting a kind of watershed. Abrahams' methodical, perhaps even mechanical approach will be duplicated many times over, though few athletes will compete because it is their bounden duty to do so. As if to underline his obligation, Liddell pronounced it fulfilled when he left active competition to pursue his calling after the Games. British triple-jumper Jonathan Edwards, British hurdler Kriss Akabusi and German golfer Bernhard Langer are among the many Christians who, like Liddell, realized their calling through sport. Edwards, in particular, was compared with Liddell when he opted not to compete in the British trials for the Seoul Olympics of 1988 because his event fell on a Sunday.

Ian Charleson, who played Liddell, like his character, died young. The Edinburgh-born actor who brought an engaging solemnity to his role, went on to play in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* in 1982, and Dario Argento's 1987 *Opera (Terror at the Opera)* before dying of an Aids-related illness in 1990, aged 40. He was one of a number of renowned people to die from a condition first designated Acquired Immunodeficiency Disease Syndrome (Aids) in 1982 and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in 1984. Brad Davis, who played Scholtz in the film, also died from Aids. Among the others were the Hollywood actor, Rock Hudson, who died in 1985, the entertainer Liberace, who died in 1987, and Terrence Higgins, the journalist, who died in 1982.

Britishness

Chariots of Fire is, of course, drama, not documentary or even docu-drama and certainly not *cinéma-vérité*. As such, it makes no apologies for the way it mixes fact with fabrication. The timing of Liddell's switch to 400 meters is a minor historical fudge; as is the elision of the athletes' other ventures in the Games, or indeed Abraham's previous defeats in the 1920 Olympics. Liddell's sister might not have been keen on his apparent departure from his central mission, but there is no evidence that she counselled against it. The sham Cambridge challenge of the Trinity Dash is inconsequential. In a way, all these add to the film's ethereal qualities: its plot may have been rooted in this world, but the main characters embody otherworldly characteristics, including the fortitude, fervour and redemptive powers more typically associated with gods. Abrahams and Liddell were actual people, but their stories are told as fables. The provenance of the film's title alerts us to this. Taken from William Blake's poem of decline and redemption, *Jerusalem*,¹¹ it evokes heroism, fearlessness and valour through the lyrics:

Bring me my bow of burning gold
 Bring me my arrows of desire
 Bring me my spear
 O clouds unfold!
 Bring me my chariot of fire
 I will not cease from mental fight
 Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
 Till we have built Jerusalem
 In England's green and pleasant land.

Chariots of Fire displayed motifs perfectly suited to the time of its release and, for this reason, can be approached as much as a metaphor for the 1980s as a chronicle of the 1920s. British culture of the early 1980s yoked the breakdown of older loyalties, especially those of class, with a new unbridled form of aspirational individualism that would by mid-decade effloresce in 'yuppies' (young, upwardly-mobile people, driven by acquisitive impulses).

The respective Governments of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the USA conferred respectability on avarice and the inequalities it engendered. Drive, enterprise and the unswerving will to succeed were hallmarks of a culture in which success was, in many senses, an ultimate value. For this reason, the film 'was a popular choice for exhibition at fund-raising events for the Conservative Party', as David Rowe notes, adding that the Conservatives of the day 'had their own "prototype" champion elite athlete seemingly drawn from the games of the film – Sebastian Coe (later to become a Conservative Member of Parliament)'.¹²

Released just before *Chariots of Fire*, John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1979) essayed similar themes but through gangster kingpin, Harold Shand (played by Bob Hoskins), who is bigoted, bullish and abrasively nationalistic. Set at the cusp of the 1980s, the film features Britain in transition: 'Our country is not an island any more', Shand reminds his American visitors, 'We're a leading European state'. Shand's (ultimately disastrous) 'business collaboration' with his US guests mirrors Thatcher's relationship with President Reagan and the keenness with which Shand pursues his goals would have been commendable in this context (though not his methods, e.g. suspending rivals on meat hooks when trying to extract information).

In the run-up to her election to Prime Minister in 1979, Mrs Thatcher memorably warned that British culture was in danger of being 'swamped'. Shand would almost certainly have shared the sentiments, though his bellicose chauvinism was then a caricature. By 1982 when the Falklands War animated a gung-ho jingoism, it was representative of a new patriotism that lifted Mrs Thatcher in the opinion polls. *Chariots of Fire* used a different kind of vocabulary to convey its nationalism, though the repeated signifiers of British perseverance, resolve and indomitability would be recognizable in the early 1980s, as might be the contempt for other nationals shown, especially at Cambridge in the 1920s (Arabs, Italians and French are all disparaged in the film; 'Semites' are merely regarded with suspicion).

Interestingly, both athletes' sense of patriotism is brought into doubt. Abrahams 'resents' his Cambridge master's accusation that he does not run for his country but for 'individual glory'. Elsewhere in the film, he sings with gusto Gilbert and Sullivan's 'He is an Englishman!' while playing in a production of *HMS Pinafore*: 'But in spite of all temptations/To belong to other nations/He remains an Englishman!' Liddell's patriotism is questioned by the British Olympic Committee when he refuses to compete on the Sabbath, and he affirms his loyalty; though in another scene, he quotes from the Bible Isaiah 40:17, 'All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity'. The culture of the 1980s applauded exactly the kind of grit and mercilessness shown by Abrahams. And the singularity of purpose Liddell brought to his efforts would not have been out of place at a time when success was never achieved fortuitously, always through vision allied to application.

The enchantment of *Chariots of Fire* lies partly in its plausible depiction of Britishness, replete with class distinctions, meticulously observed prejudice and downright snobbery. Looking backwards from the early 1980s, these practices seemed both elegantly civilized and cruelly archaic. But their depiction contributed to a surge in interest in British recent history. *Chariots of Fire's* success in this respect added appreciably to its reception. As Marilyn Bethany, of the *New York Times*, wrote in 1982, *Chariots of Fire*, along with Karel Reisz's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, also released in 1981, and the television series *Brideshead Revisited* (directed by Charles Sturridge and Michael Lindsay-Hogg), 'have spun visual yarns so exquisite and compelling that they may well set a new standard against which all future efforts of the sort will be measured'.¹³

When *Chariots of Fire* won its Best Picture and other Oscars, its scriptwriter Colin Welland famously tipped off the Academy audience with the warning: 'The British are coming'. The film was widely acknowledged as a British achievement: its director, producer, writer and most of its cast were British, as were its crew, subject matter and location. So its production as well as content teemed with nationalism. The patriotic huzzahs tended to drown out the fact that the British film industry derived little material benefit from the \$35 million profit made by the film. Sandy Lieberman, President of Fox when *Chariots* first left the drawing board explains: 'Although *Chariots* was made by the UK arm of 20th Century Fox [now owned by Rupert Murdoch] . . . all profits made by Fox films are remitted to the U.S. to avoid paying British taxes. So, no, there would be no direct return of the film's profits to Britain or the British film industry.'¹⁴

The Main Themes

Masculinity

Chariots of Fire is perhaps the antithesis of 1990s 'chick flicks': it is all about men, their dreams, their relationships, their enemies, their strengths and, very occasionally, their

Achilles' heels. Females feature in the drama as fleeting presences, cameos or staves that make men sturdier in their moments of weakness, reassure them in times of doubt.

Its circumstances involve the lead-up to the Olympic Games, a sporting event, which, as its founder Pierre de Coubertin announced in 1894, was an 'exultation of male athleticism ... with female applause as a reward'. There was no place for female competitors in de Coubertin's vision: 'No matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain shocks'.¹⁵

In 1921, there was a separate Women's Olympic Games, though, by 1928, a limited women's programme of events was integrated into the Amsterdam Olympiad. Women's participation was reflected in other sports, such as golf, tennis and motor racing, none of which involved physical contact or collision. As such, they were considered appropriate for 'ladies'. Violet Percy ran a 3:40.22 marathon in 1925, but no further records were kept until 1964. When Percy ran, only 10% of married women in Britain went to work; by the time record keeping began the percentage had risen to 38.08, according to Halsey.¹⁶ This was a time when women were renegotiating their social status. For long paralysed politically, they were awarded voting rights by the legal reforms of 1918, after an often-painful campaign by suffragettes. The most sacrificial episode in their campaign was in 1913 when Emily Davidson threw herself under a horse owned by King George V at the Derby race meeting. The extension of franchise reflected changing, though not altogether enlightened, attitudes towards women. For decades before the war, manliness was synonymous with moral goodness as well as physical health, and vestiges of this are apparent in *Chariots of Fire*: women are always peripheral to the main narrative and either support, encourage or express their appreciation, as de Coubertin had advocated.

The English public schools in which Abrahams and Liddell were educated and from which the ethos of 'Muscular Christianity' had emerged in the 1850s, promoted sport, not simply as recreation, but as a proving ground where boys' resolve would be tested and their resilience taxed. This was wholly consistent with the view that competition would foster and help develop the character of the future captains of industry and leaders of the British Empire. There was no need for those engaged in military conflict to prove their manhood, but, in the absence of war, sport became a crucible. There was also what Timothy Chandler and John Nauright call, 'the need for an arena to provide a sense of traditional masculinity, which the development of an increasingly urban-industrial society was eroding'.¹⁷ 'The fear lay deep in English culture that city life was effeminate and that the advance of material comforts was making men soft', writes Jock Phillips: 'What would remain of their virility if boisterous physical activity were curtailed?'¹⁸

Similarly, disturbed by what they saw as a feminization of Victorian culture, writers such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Arnold¹⁹ advanced what Laura Fasick²⁰ calls 'hyper-masculinity' and openly praised overt displays of power and aggression to promote the harmonious development of mind, body and spirit.²¹ 'Muscular Christianity' with its stress on physicality and exercise was a counterpoint to the illiberal, sacramental Catholic Tractarianism, as espoused by the influential theologian, John Henry Newman. Kingsley's doctrine of 'Christian manliness' may have lost strength by the early twentieth century, but it finds expression in *Chariots of Fire*, particularly in the efforts of Liddell to discover philosophical and theological justification for his fanatical pursuit of athletic perfection.

Liddell is actually hailed by his family in the film as a 'Muscular Christian' and, according to Norman Vance, Liddell prosecuted a 'neo-evangelical version of what was essentially Victorian Christian manliness'.²² Watson, Weir and Friend observe: 'Liddell's decision not to race on a Sunday, due to his Christian faith (Exodus 20: 8), so missing the 100 meter final

of the 1924 Olympics and his decision to give up a distinguished athletics career to become a missionary in China . . . demonstrates many of the virtues of the Muscular Christian ethic'.²³

In Abrahams too there is a vision of manhood that resonates with the times. Driven, it often seems, by primal forces, he draws rebuke from Cambridge colleagues who remind him of the importance of *esprit de corps*, comradeship and 'mutual responsibility'. 'In your enthusiasm for success you have lost sight of these ideals', his college master tells him. His quest for 'individual glory' is 'too plebeian'. Yet Abrahams' self-centred conduct contrives to portray an individual freely and defiantly pursuing his own course of action. It is congruent with both the laissez-faire doctrine of individual action unrestricted by government interference and a conception of masculinity in which the vigorous, physical and pursuit of goals is an ideal antidote to vice, sloth and indolence. Both chimed with the free market ideology that was, by the early 1920s, beginning to creak.

Anti-Semitism

Abrahams was almost certainly not motivated by the kind of considerations that guided the nineteenth-century promulgators of Muscular Christianity, though he is pictured as regarding sport as an instrument; not the evangelical instrument envisioned by Liddell but a 'weapon' as he calls it, with which he could fight anti-Semitism. This is part of the film's design, though there are doubters. Ed Carter,²⁴ for example, questions whether anti-Semitism occupied such precedence in Abrahams' motivational hierarchy. The fact that he converted from Judaism to Catholicism ten years after the Paris Games and five years before the outbreak of the Second World War adds further doubt to Abrahams' purported motive for running.

Abrahams talks about his feelings of rejection and alludes to a society seething with antipathy for Jews. He was one of about 250,000 Jews in England in the 1920s and there is evidence to support the view that anti-Semitism would have affected the life chances of many of them. If Hannah Arendt²⁵ is to be accepted, anti-Semitism, as we understand it in its modern form, began to emerge in the 1870s, suggesting that Abrahams would have lived amid the unfriendly mythology surrounding Jews. Yet there is inferential evidence that what we might call institutional anti-Semitism had been abating for several decades.

Jews were banned from Britain from 1290 until Oliver Cromwell allowed their return in 1753. In the late eighteenth century, Daniel Mendoza, who was based in London's East End, became the most fêted prize-fighter of his day. Benjamin Disraeli entered Downing Street as Britain's first Jewish prime minister in 1874 and was an architect of the modern Conservative Party. Jews had been admitted to the Bar since 1833 and, in 1835, Sir David Salomons became the first Jewish Sheriff of London. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the de Rothschilds were prominent members of society, bankrolling Britain in the Napoleonic Wars. But when he was elected to the House of Commons in 1847, Lionel de Rothschild was barred for his refusal to take the Christian oath of allegiance and it took another decade before he took office. George Jessel became Solicitor-General in 1871 and, by 1890, all restrictions to politics and commerce based on religion had been removed.²⁶

Abrahams' family was part of the great wave of Eastern European Jews migrating to Britain between 1881 and 1914. In 1897, at the first World Zionist Congress, Chaim Weizmann gave direction and purpose to Jews scattered all over the world when he called for the establishment of a permanent state for Jews in what they considered their spiritual homeland, Palestine. With Prime Minister Arthur Balfour's Declaration of 1917, the

British Government expressed sympathy with this aspiration, though with a certain ambivalence, as noted by the declaration's historian, Leonard Stein: 'Because they [Jews] possessed in marked degree distinctive characteristics which in themselves commanded his respect, he [Balfour] was for that very reason uncertain about their place in a Gentile society'.²⁷

Anti-Semitic politics in Britain burst briefly to life in the 1930s with Oswald Mosley's fascist organization. Mosley formed the British Union of Fascists in 1932 and enjoyed the support of at least one national newspaper. At its height, the organization claimed to have 50,000 members, who often wore military-style garb and called themselves 'Blackshirts'. They staged rallies often in predominantly Jewish areas, most famously in London's East End in 1936. The ensuing conflict became known as the Battle of Cable Street. By this time, Abrahams had converted and was, presumably, untroubled by the dramatic, if short-lived rise in anti-Semitism. Working for the august BBC, he had become something of an establishment figure. In one sense, he always had been. Privately educated, then a Cambridge don, his background afforded him protection from the kind of harassment experienced by, for example, Jewish residents of London's East End, whose homes and shops were assailed by Mosley's followers.

The film records Abrahams' perception of being snubbed and suggests he drew motivation from this. But it is perhaps best regarded as a dramatic device rather than an insight into Abrahams' unconquerable will to win. The available evidence indicates that Abrahams' motives were less altruistic. Whatever his precise motives, Abrahams' heroic triumph is a satisfying denouement. The viewer is almost invited to interpret the victory as a triumph for not just the race's underdog (which Abrahams was), but for society's underdog (which, as we have seen, he was not). He wins a race, but as what? An athlete or a Jew? The answer is strongly implied: both. Wounded by the genteel, condescending attitudes he encounters at Cambridge, Abrahams takes up the cudgels and fights back in the name of his people. His personal triumph is also a victory over anti-Semites. This lends the film a parable-like conclusion.

The moral in this appears to be that anti-Semitism, like the bigotry that spawns it, can be damaged by symbolic deeds. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson was burdened with the aspirations of all other African Americans every time he stepped into the ring. His wins were interpreted as blows against the racism that blighted the lives of all black Americans. When African American sportsmen of the 1930s, such as boxer Joe Louis and track and field athlete Jesse Owens won contests, their achievements were often elevated above the levels of sport. *Chariots of Fire* fashions Abrahams' win similarly. There are no radical gestures on victory rostrums or dedications, but the foregoing struggle, at least as Abrahams sees it, converts his victory into an emblem. It is this climactic triumph-of-the-will sententiousness that is simultaneously uplifting yet trivializing. The bigotry that is so central to the narrative is seemingly broken as easily as the finishing tape.

The political utility of sport is beyond doubt. The 1968 Olympic 'black power salute' of Tommie Smith and John Carlos did much to bring the issue of racism in the USA into global focus. The 1977 Gleneagles Agreement to sever sporting links with South Africa contributed in some measure to the end of apartheid. These are dramatic instances of how sport has affected social events. Individual victories on the sports field have less impact. Some might argue they have no impression at all, apart perhaps from adding substance to old stereotypes about naturally gifted athletes. Abrahams' win in 1924 did little to ameliorate the material problems faced by Britain's Jewish population: if anything, the situation deteriorated over the following years, as the rise of Mosley instances.

Sign of the Times

Amid the dominant themes, a less conspicuous one proves to be one of the more enlightening. Abrahams' approach to sport is noticeably incongruous in the 1920s. Yet it prefigures a thoroughly modern attitude towards sport and one with which we are all familiar. In fact, the anomalous characters in the film are those who understand sport as a basically frivolous endeavour on which nothing really depends and which will have nugatory effects on the competitors and the nations they represent.

The champagne-sipping Lord Burghley who trains alongside Abrahams, but with an imperious detachment and a sense of perspective, is a more typical athlete of the 1920s. His abiding priority is the protocols of amateurism, the term itself derived from the Latin *amator*, for lover. He is skilful in the execution of his athleticism and is not averse to practising, though never in a way that confuses his pursuit with labour. He competes out of love and, win or lose, he is fulfilled by the satisfaction of the endeavour. The result is of far less importance. There is no disgrace for him in losing as long as he has the satisfaction of knowing he tried his utmost. He happily sacrifices his place in the 400 meters to accommodate Liddell's intransigence.

Abrahams is cut from different cloth. He prompts sneers from his Cambridge colleagues for his insular orientation. A playful game of cricket in the Cambridge ballroom sees Abrahams appealing furiously over a decision while his fellow students tease him. 'As intense as ever', one laughs. For Abrahams, defeat, as athletes were later wont to say, is not an option. At least, that is how he is depicted in the film. Writing in the 1930s, the historian John Kieran observed that Abrahams might have been much keener than his fellow Brits, but 'he did not take his training as seriously as the group from beyond the Atlantic'.²⁸

The likes of Paddock and Scholz, whom Abrahams beat, would also have been amateurs, though they were probably not bound by the gentlemanly codes of behaviour that prohibited too much preparation or an unseemly desire to win. In the film, both are seen training sedulously, watched by a domineering coach. They were both university students from affluent families. As white athletes, they would have been part of an elite: the USA at the time was divided legally by racial segregation which did not end until 1954, after which it was a further ten years before the Civil Rights Act. There were African Americans in many sports, though most sports reflected social arrangements and blacks did not compete against whites. When the barriers did begin to crumble (from the 1930s), black athletes started to dominate the sprint events.

Much of American sport was also predicated on the Muscular Christian idea that the moral behaviour learned on the sports field was transferable to the world beyond and that competition should be based on the principle of fair play, though some sports, particularly baseball, had developed into fully commercial enterprises, giving players huge earnings potential. In 1928, the baseball player Babe Ruth famously earned \$5,000 more than the US President. By this time, any of baseball's residual pretensions to fair play had been destroyed by the 1919 World Series which had been corrupted by gambling syndicates.²⁹ Professional boxing too was driven by commercial rather than moral imperatives.

Athletics remained studiously amateur, resisting the pressure of professionalism. The original covenant of the British Amateur Athletic Association, drafted in 1866, excluded mechanics, artisans and labourers from its definition of an amateur, its fear being that working-class competitors would be susceptible to cash incentives. The rule was revised in 1880, but the import was clear: athletics wanted neither working-class competitors nor professionalism. It stayed that way for over 100 years: in 1983, the International Association of Athletics Federations recognized payments for competitors.

In the film, Abrahams unconvincingly denies that his attitude is 'win-at-all-costs' by avowing that he abides by fair play. His declaration: 'I run to win' elicits incredulous admiration from his listener. This is a misleading response. More likely it would provoke surprise, perhaps even astonishment and, in some quarters, disapproval, especially in the run-up to an Olympic Games. De Coubertin, in his initial proclamation, had affirmed that: 'The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have won but to have fought well.'³⁰

Abraham's reversal of this might have been unusual in athletics, though the survival of already-professional sports depended on the patronage of spectators, who were less interested in the experiential aspects of competition. By the 1920s, the sporting world was divided into two halves: those who recognized the positive, morally uplifting and character-forming benefits of sport, and those who made money from it. As consumer culture began to develop, so populations were coming together as exploitable markets. Like American baseball, association football in England was, from its inception as an organized sport, tailored to markets. Prize-fighting had an even longer history as a professional sport. In 1904, nine years after splitting from its amateur union cousin, rugby league changed its rules, making it possible for its players to be full-time employees of their clubs, which in turn were financially dependent on admission money paid by spectators.

Fans, as we later called them, might have been irksome irrelevancies, or at best, atmospheric props to some sports, but they were vital to others. And fans showed an appetite for competition that was all-out. They were not interested in the joys of participating or the rewards of giving of one's best: they wanted to be entertained at the end of what might have been a monotonous week of industrial labour.

Once the genie of all-out competition was out of the bottle, there was no going back. Even sports that did not depend on spectators' benefaction could not escape the changing attitude of competitors. Abrahams epitomized the change. The wisdom of hiring a professional coach in a sport that barely 40 years before did not admit mechanics must have been doubtful. In the event, it was probably a sign of the times. Mussabini was not allowed into the stadium, but Abrahams started a trend. What athlete now would dare dispense with a coach? Abrahams ambushed athletics, introducing a method of preparing and a manner of competing that might have upset traditionalists, but was perfectly in harmony with the wider changes in the role of sport in popular culture. 'I believe in the pursuit of excellence', Abrahams announces: 'I'll carry the future with me.'

In 1930, six years after the Paris Olympic Games, the first genuinely global professional sporting tournament took place in Uruguay where the Fédération Internationale de Football Associations (FIFA) staged its inaugural World Cup. Two years later, in a competition that had political repercussions, England's touring cricket team in Australia disclosed the most antagonistic, win-oriented approach ever witnessed in the gentlemen's game of yore. The 'Bodyline' tour, as it was known, left cricket's authorities aghast: English cricketers were hitherto regarded as the guardians of the sport's finest values. In five Test matches, they modernized them completely ('modernized' in this context meaning to bring tradition into harmony with current views or thought). By the mid-1930s, sporting competition had become the instrumental, results-oriented activity we recognize today, the attachments of competitors growing progressively extrinsic over the next several decades. Abrahams personified the first stirrings of what was, in the 1920s, a new type of competitiveness.

Conclusion

'*Chariots of Fire* is a quintessential sports film', tenders David Rowe. 'It deals squarely with the mythological possibilities of transcendence of class, ethnic prejudice and human selfishness through sport.'³¹ To watch fellow Oscar-winner *Rocky* (1976) or any of its sequels after *Chariots of Fire* is like descending from Mount Olympus to downtown Philadelphia (where *Rocky* is set). Rocky Balboa's world boxing title challenge represents a victory for grit and perseverance in the face of prohibitive adversity and he carries through the six films the burden of the underclass. There is even a parable in his rise, fall and phoenix-like comeback. But few other films have distilled the 'quintessence' of sport quite as perfectly as *Chariots of Fire*. If Rowe is to be accepted, the film captures the most intrinsic and central constituent of sport: its capacity for surpassing the range of normal or merely physical human experience – its transcendence.

Films about baseball have frequently been the most effective purveyors of this quality, perhaps because the sport has an inclusive and democratic character that separates it from all others, at least in the USA.³² It has a curiously positive and uplifting effect on Americans, especially film directors. Phil Alden Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989) tells of an Iowa farmer tormented by a discordant relationship with his dead father, itself a microcosm of the generational conflict that affected the western world in the 1960s. Baseball is his form of redemption and he sacrifices almost everything in the pursuit of it. Similarly, baseball is vested with legendary, even Arthurian, characteristics in Bernard Malamud's book *The Natural*, which was the source of Barry Levinson's 1984 film of the same name.

Sport provides raw material with which to fabulate: in a sense every competition conveys a moral. Abstract principles of good and evil come to life; conduct and standards are made visible for our inspection; prudence can be appreciated, virtue applauded, and honour praised. In *Chariots of Fire*, as Rowe's judgment indicates, social injustice and personal unfairness are overwhelmed, bringing the fable to a satisfying and poignantly comforting conclusion. In the 1980s, when the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had publicly announced that there was 'no such thing as society', the ability of an individual to prevail even in the face of manifest wrongness was a warmly reassuring, if bogus, message.

The film could have been contrived as an antidote to earlier British films such as Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) or Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963), both of which used sport to express larger human dramas in which iniquitous social practices defeated honest individuals. By complete contrast, *Chariots of Fire* offered a view of a society in which wrong-doing might be persistent and perhaps inevitable, but sport is like a permanent magnet, retaining its properties regardless of the surrounding activities. Sport cannot vanquish social inequity, but it transcends it.

This fanciful moralizing is both a strength and weakness, depending on the viewer's expectations. *Chariots of Fire* is about real figures in their historical context, but in the same way as, for instance, David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) is about T.E. Lawrence or Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985) is about Karen Blixen. Historical film, like history itself, is a subject of hindsight: it reconstructs situations, events and people after they have happened or acted, omitting and including selectively. More than any other genre, it suffers from a kind of cultural soft-focus: *Chariots of Fire* is less a reflection of recent history, more a mythic meditation. This enhances its merit as a work of art and as a piece of faultless hagiography: it treats its characters with reverence, plays up their merits and alchemizes what might, in another era or in another film, seem like vices into virtues. As a reliable index of 1920s society, however, it is a curate's egg.

By centring on what was, in the 1920s, a relatively modest Olympic sideshow that had no television coverage and amplifying it into a plausible drama about human lives that intersect, albeit momentarily, in a context of hope that would soon sink into depression, *Chariots of Fire* manufactured a piece of reality. Its re-enactment of that reality is insufficient to explain or even heave into view the ‘why’ of anti-Semitism, less still ‘were there any repercussions?’

The answers are, of course, that the Olympics made no material impact at all on anti-Semitism, which, as we have seen, escalated during the gloom of the 1930s. Perhaps this is not a legitimate charge to set against a work of art that drew from, but did not purport to be, a history. *Chariots of Fire* is a film that finishes with an almost operatically overwrought conclusion, shifting from the prosaic to the sublime. Feasibility becomes a casualty of a grand quixotic finale as bigotry is vaporized, uncertainties about the existence of God vanish and affirmations for the ethic of individualism abound. For this reason, the film is most profitably understood as an invigorating sermon for the 1980s, rather than a literal or authentic record of the 1920s.

Notes

- ¹ Fox, *History and Heritage*, 290.
- ² Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, 61.
- ³ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*.
- ⁴ Fox, *History and Heritage*, 290.
- ⁵ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, 199.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ⁷ Crick, ‘The Sense of Identity of the Indigenous British’, 172.
- ⁸ This and subsequent quotations from the film *Chariots of Fire*, directed by Hugh Hudson, UK: 20th Century Fox, 1981. See also Magnusson, *The Flying Scotsman*, Weatherby *et al.*, *Chariots of Fire*, 1983.
- ⁹ In nineteenth-century England, affluent gentlemen-amateurs believed their sporting pursuits embodied some of the spirit of Corinthians, the inhabitants of the ancient Greek city of Corinth, site of the Isthmian Games, who engaged in sport for noble purposes and without the incentive of financial gain.
- ¹⁰ Sebastian Coe won gold medals for Britain in the 1500m at the 1980 and 1984 Olympics and is the only man to date in athletics history to hold three different world records (800m, 1500m and the mile) at the same time, achieving a total of 12 world records. He retired from athletics in 1990 for a career in politics, becoming a Member of Parliament for the Conservative Party at the 1992 General Election. In 1997 Coe became a member of the International Olympic Committee. He later successfully led London’s bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games, which led to a knighthood in early 2006.
- ¹¹ William Blake (1757–1827) is an important English poet and artist, whose work marked the beginning of Romanticism. His poem, *Jerusalem*, has become both a hymn and an uplifting, patriotic anthem identified with the English nation.
- ¹² Rowe, *Sport, Culture and the Media*, 192.
- ¹³ Marilyn Bethany, ‘When the Mood Strikes’. *New York Times*, Section 6, 4 April 1982, 90.
- ¹⁴ Lieberson, quoted in Nigel Andrews, David Churchill and Michael Blanden, ‘The hidden spin-off of “Chariots”’. *Financial Times*, Section I: Weekend Brief, 3 April, 1982, 15.
- ¹⁵ Snyder and Spreitzer, *Social Aspects of Sport*, 155–6.
- ¹⁶ Halsey, *Change in British Society*, 107.
- ¹⁷ Chandler and Nauright, ‘Introduction: Rugby, Manhood and Identity’, 5.
- ¹⁸ Phillips, ‘The hard man: Rugby and the formation of male identity in New Zealand’, 70–1.
- ¹⁹ Kingsley (1819–75) was a theologically liberal English cleric and author of the classic children’s book *The Water-Babies* (1863). He idealized human movement and spiritual embodiment through sport and games and believed that this, along with love of family in serving God, would combat the all social problems of Victorian society. Thomas Arnold (1795–1842) was

- headmaster of Rugby School from 1828 to 1841 and a great proponent of Muscular Christianity, the creed that encouraged the development of 'character' through sports and religion.
- ²⁰ Fasick, 'The Failure of Fatherhood: Maleness and its Discontents in Charles Kingsley'.
- ²¹ Hall, 'On the Making and Unmasking of Monsters'.
- ²² Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, 172.
- ²³ Watson, Weir and Friend, 'The Development of Muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and Beyond', 8.
- ²⁴ Carter, *Chariots of Fire: Traditional Values/False History*.
- ²⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.
- ²⁶ See Gainer, *The Alien Invasion*, for more on anti-Semitism of the time.
- ²⁷ Stein, quoted in Gainer, *The Alien Invasion*, 119.
- ²⁸ Kieran, *The Story of the Olympic Games*, 151.
- ²⁹ See Rader, *Baseball*.
- ³⁰ de Coubertin, quoted in Widund, 'Ethelbert Talbot: his Life and Place in Olympic History', 11.
- ³¹ Rowe, *Sport, Culture and the Media*, 192.
- ³² For more on the quintessential American sport of baseball as a recurring theme in films, see Sobchack, 'Baseball in the Post-American Cinema, or Life in the Minor Leagues'.

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