Occasional piece

Poetry and sport

Even if one forms the subset from the set of those interested in literature and the set of those interested in sport, there is a substantial proportion who do not know of the many poems that feature sport. Not only are there many hundreds of such poems, but there is a substantial corpus of good poetry within that number.

On the other hand, great world poets of the 20th century, such as Anna Akhmatova, Juan Luis Borges, T S Eliot, Odysseus Elytis, García Lorca, Somhairle MacGill-Eain, Pablo Neruda, Ezra Pound, W B Yeats, and others, have, collectively, written little about sport. An outstanding exception is Lorca’s magnificent Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias.1

In some cases this may have been due to a misplaced feeling of contempt, as implied by Kipling’s “...the flannelled fools at the wicket/The muddied oafs at the goals”, and Yeats: “If beauty is not a gateway out of the net we were taken in at our birth it will not long be beauty, and we will find it better to sit at home by the fire and fatten a lazy body, or to run hither and thither in some foolish sport.”

However, Pablo Neruda, in his 1935 advocacy of “Impure poetry” could talk of: “...a poetry consistent with shameful, disgraceful deeds; with dreams, observations, sleepless nights, presentiments, eruptions of hatred and love; animals, idylls, shocks; negotiations, ideologies, assertions, doubts, tax demands...” Sport, in all its facets, could easily slip onto to such a list.

One difficulty for poets is that sport is an activity that has to be actively sought out, either as spectator or participant. In major events, access is especially hard, and television—for the poet—is not at all a satisfactory substitute. Thus, although there are many hundreds of poems on sport, very few feature high level sport or its participants, which is due in no small measure to sheer difficulty of access. However, excellent sports poetry abounds, of which the following excerpts provide a minute sample.

First is an early sports medicine poem from the Maitland Folio manuscript 1582 (translation in parentheses):

Brissit brawnis and brokin banes,
Stryf, discord and wasti wanis,
Cruiket in eild, syne halt withal,
This are the beawteis of the fute-ball.
(Twisted muscle and broken bones,
Strife, discord and broken homes,
Old players stoop, their bodies stall,
These are the beauties of football.)

On the physiological side is Peter Meinke’s To an athlete turned poet:

...and now his stomach’s soft, his books
press out his veins as he walks
and noe-one looks
but deep in his bone stadium
the roar of the crowd wells.

While on the motor skill side, from Stanley Matthews, by Alan Ross:

...Now gathers speed, nursing the ball as he cruises,
Eyes judging distance, noting the gaps, the spaces
Vital for colleagues to move to, slowing a trace;
As from Vivaldi to Dibdin, pausing,
and leisurely, swings
To the left upright, his centre, - on hips
His hands, observing the goalkeeper spring,
heads rising vainly to the ball’s curve
Just as it’s plucked from them; and dispassionately
Back to his mark he trots, whistling through closed lips.

From another ball game is Basketball by Stephen Vincent:

...You never came to see me
spread my warm fingers like the edges of stars
round the ball as I went like a smooth fox
down the court, my tennis shoes squeaking faster
than a grasshopper through clover. At sixteen
I travelled fast, father.

Critic W B Stanford has written “The scientists seek facts. The moralists seek virtue. The poets and artists seek—to use an old-fashioned term—beauty, i.e. the effect of artistic excellence on the senses, emotions and mind.” This is exemplified by the following three extracts, starting with Robert Francis’ Watching gymnastics:

Competing not so much with one another
As with perfection,
They follow follow as voices in a fugue
A severe music.

How flower-light they toss themselves, how light
They toss and fall,
And flower-light, precise and arabesque
Let their praise be.”

And Robert Wallace’s After the swimmer:

Clear, the shaken water
busies in its claws
clouds, light,
from which she climbed.

And Robert Francis’ The skier:

He swings down like the flourish of a pen
Signing a signature in white on white.
On incandescent feet he falls
Unfalling, trailing white foam, white fire.

Another side of skiing is shown in Conrad Diekman’s parody Winter trees:

I think that I shall never ski
Again against so stout a tree,
A tree whose rugged bark is pressed
In bas-relief upon my chest.

Golf has a major literature, including many poems, such as Betjeman’s Seaside golf:3

How straight it flew, how long it flew,
It cleared the rutty track
And soaring, disappeared from view
Beyond the bunker’s back -
A glorious, sailing bounding drive
That made me glad I was alive.

Highland Games have their own poetic adherents, such as Norman MacCaig:5

The chieftain leans his English accent
On a five-foot crook and feels
one of the natives.
The rope ring is full
of strenuous metaphors.

Unusual sports are not neglected, as Sky diver by Adrien Stoutenberg:4

Grotesque, jumping out
like a clothed frog, helmet and glasses,
arms and legs wading the sky,
feet flapping before the cloth flower opens.
Or the sub-aqua *Diver* by Robert Francis:

Diver go down
Down through the green
Inverted dawn
To the dark unseen
To the never day..
Deep beneath deep.

And, still on water sports is *First lesson*, by Philip Booth:

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped in the cup of my hand.
... when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive,
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember, when fear
creams your heart I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Surprisingly vivid poetry can be found in *Billiards* as by Walker Gibson:

Painted, polished, here these spheres
Rehearse their civilised careers –
Trapped in a geometric toil,
Exhibit impact and recoil
Politely in a farce of force ...

Of a huge number of climbing poems, none is better than
Shelley's *Mont Blanc*:

In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the long glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them:
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,

Upon that mountain; none beholds them there,
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Betjeman has written the classic club tennis poem, on the
prowess of Miss Joan Hunter-Dunn, but Paul Petrie's *Old Pro's Lament* takes a more metaphorical view of the game:

Each year the court expands,
the net moves back, the ball
hums by—more spin...
But nightly in dreams I see
an old man
playing in an empty court
under the dim floodlights of the moon
with a racket gone in the strings -
no net, no ball, no game -
and still playing to win!

Still in a philosophical mode, *The Stan Cullis blues* by
Martin Hall exemplifies many a soccer club's predicament:
the night Stan Cullis got the sack
Wolverhampton wandered round in circles like a disallowed goal
looking for a friendly linesman.

Blood sports have always attracted poetic comment, as in
*Litos* by Edmund Blunden:

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