

INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS BOOTH

Rafael Fortes¹

Abstract Douglas Booth is the Dean of the School of Physical Education, Sports and Exercise Sciences, and professor of sports studies at the University of Otago (Dunedin, New Zealand), where he teaches the history of sport, and research design and analysis. In this interview, which took place in Sydney (Australia), on July 6, 2017, during the Sporting Traditions conference, he speaks about his career, sports history, epistemology, and research in archives.

Keywords: Sport History. Historiography. Australia. Surfing.

Entrevista com Douglas Booth

Resumo Douglas Booth é o decano da Escola de Educação Física, Esportes e Ciências do Exercício e professor de estudos do esporte na Universidade de Otago (Dunedin, Nova Zelândia), onde leciona história do esporte, metodologia científica e disciplinas ligadas a pesquisa. Nesta entrevista, realizada em Sydney (Austrália) em 6 de julho de 2017, durante o congresso Sporting Traditions, ele fala sobre sua carreira, história do esporte, epistemologia e pesquisa em arquivos.

Palavras-chave: História do Esporte. Historiografia. Austrália. Surfe.

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Rafael Fortes: Can you begin by telling a bit about your formative years – undergraduate and graduate studies?

Douglas Booth: I did a Bachelor of Science majoring in Geography at the University of Melbourne [Australia]. I was interested in physical geography when I enrolled, but after the first year I became more interested in human geography. I completed honors in political geography.

Right from a very early age, as a secondary school student, I was interested in Africa as a physical, cultural and political place. And I knew I wanted to go to there. I went to South West Africa/Namibia as part of my honors research on Walvis Bay and at the conclusion of that year I set a goal to return to Southern Africa and complete a master's degree. I didn't know the precise topic only the general direction. So I ended up in South Africa in the mid-1980's. I taught at a high school in Durban, and I enrolled in a master's degree in the Development Studies Unit at the University of Natal (Durban).

My career was heading in that direction. This was the time of the sports boycott and I became very interested in that having played a lot of sport as a teenager. I supported the boycott but all the literature coming out of South Africa, or at least in the white press, opposed the boycott. I started writing about the issue at the same time that I was doing my degree. I ended up spending more and more time looking at the sports boycott and I decided it would be a good topic for a PhD. I asked a number of academics at Natal whether they would be interested in supervising the topic but the general feeling was that it was a trivial subject.

I made inquiries in Australia which led me to work with Colin Tatz, a professor of politics at Macquarie University (Sydney) and a former South African. Thus by the late 1980's, early 1990's my scholarly interests had shifted from physical geography to human geography to political geography to social history.

I finished my PhD and won a job teaching the social history of sport in the School of Physical Education at the University of Otago (Dunedin, New Zealand). Thus you could say that my student career spanned some 12 years.

How long did you live in South Africa?

I lived in South Africa for six years, from 1983 to 1988, with my wife [Gaye Booth] who moved to South Africa with me from Australia.

How long have you been living and teaching in New Zealand?

Twenty-four years. Twenty of those years have been at the University of Otago. Between 2004 and 2007 I was at the University of Waikato. I moved there for a promotion to professor. At the end of 2007 I returned to Otago as the Dean of the School of Physical Education (subsequently, Physical Education, Sport and Exercise Sciences).

Your book *The Race Game*² addresses surfing only once. Why? And also, when did you realize that surfing could be a subject for research?

My scholarly interest in sport centered on politics and this launched my career. I don't remember the reference to surfing in *The Race Game*, but during my time at the Development Studies Unit, the beaches in Durban were in the process of being desegregated. It was a very big issue in Durban. Given my interest in surfing and beaches, I employed a research assistant, Dennis Mbona, and we, together with my wife Gaye, did a small survey on attitudes toward racial desegregation on three beaches in Durban.³ Gaye interviewed beachgoers on the whites-only beach, I interviewed people at the integrated beach, and Dennis spoke to beachgoers at the African beach. That was, I suppose, my first research *per se* into the politics of the beach. I wasn't even thinking about surfing. At that stage my real interest was in the politics of race and racial integration; surfing was simply a personal recreational pursuit and tangential to any research.

I returned to Australia to complete my PhD using all the material that I had collected in South Africa over the preceding years. Having grown up in Australia I was well aware of the politics of the beach, especially in the hostile relationships between surf lifesavers—more correctly clubbies—and surfers that emerged in the 1960s. At issue was the paramilitary environment within the lifesaving movement and the attempts by many clubs to exert total control over beaches including enforcing strict rules regarding the use of surfboards. Hostility only receded in the late twentieth century with the widespread use of legropes that removed some of the dangers posed by surfboards to bathers. Around the same time some clubbies and surfers recognized their common interests as watermen and waterwomen. Nonetheless, some hostility persists. So while I was writing up my PhD I began looking at the politics of the Australian beach—I can't focus on one project for too long; I like to have my fingers in many pies—different projects—so to speak.

In the mid-1990's I was presenting my work at conferences on the sports boycott and the politics of the beach. As soon as I completed *The Race Game*, which was essentially the political and social history of the sports boycott based on my PhD, I started to gather material in earnest for a book on Australian beach cultures. *Australian Beach Cultures* is a close examination of the history of the decriminalization of surf bathing in daylight hours in Australia, the development of bathing costumes and the public display of more revealed bathing bodies, and changes in

² BOOTH, Douglas. *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa*. London: Frank Cass, 1998.

³ BOOTH, Douglas; MBONA, Dennis. Leisure Relations on the Beach, *Indicator South Africa*, 5, 3 (1988): 39-42.

surf lifesaving and surfing.⁴ *The Race Game and Australian Beach Cultures* were simply different stages of my scholarly endeavors.

Are you a lifelong surfer?

Yes. I learned to surf on the west coast of Victoria which is probably best known for the premier surfing spot Bell's Beach. My parents had a holiday house at Torquay and I learned to surf around a number of beaches there. My parents bought me my first surfboard on my twelfth birthday.

I surfed a lot in Durban, primarily at two places. As I said earlier, the beaches in South Africa were segregated but I regularly surfed at the beach reserved for Africans (opposite the Durban Country Club). The wave was good and there were very few other surfers around—whites stayed away, and Africans had no access to the sport (very few townships—dormitories for Africans—enjoy a coastline). Ironically, African beachgoers were extraordinarily welcoming of white people at their beach but this wasn't reciprocated; [laughs] Africans weren't welcomed at whites-only beaches. Another favorite surfing spot was Brighton, a whites-only beach south of the Durban Harbor.

Interestingly, the relationships between surfers and clubbies were also hostile in South Africa. I think that relations in South Africa were probably even worse than in Australia because beaches in the former were demarcated by race and by use; in the South African mindset every group had to have its own space—swimmers, bathers, fishermen, boardriders, windsurfers. The use of beach space was rigorously policed, certainly more aggressively than in Australia.

How long did it take you to do the research and writing for *Australian Beach Cultures*?

That was actually pretty quick. I would say I about five years.

In your article "Invitation to historians",⁵ there's a part in which you state: "For example, I recently interviewed a group of octogenarian surf lifesavers who meet every morning in the North Bondi surf lifesaving clubhouse to natter over coffee and cake. I immediately recognized these social occasions as critical to their identities and, indeed, their lives. Does their private occupation of public space also constitute colonization? As I continued to interrogate my work, I became increasingly sceptical about what historians claim to know."

You refer to many topics and aspects of the historical labor, historical writing, which are neither recognized nor understood by many sport historians. I can tell you that that's true for many historians writing in Portuguese as well. I'd go as far as saying that

⁴ BOOTH, Douglas. *Australian Beach Cultures*. London: Frank Cass, 2001.

⁵ BOOTH, Douglas. Invitation to historians: the historiographical turn of a practicing (sport) historian. *Rethinking History*, 18, 4 (2014): 583-598.

many are not even aware of these issues. How do you evaluate the impact of these propositions – some of them anticipated in the book *The Field*⁶ – on sports history?

That's an interesting quote, which of course I had long forgotten. [laughs] But it's a good reminder.

After I wrote *Australian Beach Cultures*, I was looking for a new project. One of my mentors, John Loy, who is well known in sports studies as a founder of sports sociology, happened to be at University of Otago. We developed a good relationship and wrote numerous articles together. He suggested that I write a book on historiography and with his encouragement I took up the idea; that led me to revise the way I conceptualize history. The quote you singled out identifies the clear distinction between the two types of histories that I have written. My pre-2005 social histories, such as *The Race Game* and *Australian Beach Cultures*, were grounded in politics and social theory; my post-2005 histories, coinciding with *The Field*, have been inspired by historiography.

I would never have made an observation about the clubbies at North Bondi in *Australian Beach Cultures* because that book was driven by social history and particular social theories. After 2005 I became much more interested in historiography, the practice of history, the theory of history, and all that means. These are two radically different genres of history. After 2005, to around 2012, I went back to the works I had written as a social historian and asked myself the question: "How would I write this work now and what's the difference?" The quote you picked out is a nice example, because as a social historian I conceptualized the old clubbies as colonizers of the beach and argued that they operated within an institutional framework that paid little attention to their identities and relationships with the beach beyond the club uniform and outside the clubhouse. After 2005, I took a much more critical approach to my own conceptualizations; and this produced a much more sympathetic appraisal.

I had prepared this question before you answered the previous one... This is from a very particular point of view. I first read *The Field*, because we discussed it in our research group. Later I read *Australian Beach Cultures*, because I was doing my PhD on surf magazines. And then, about a year and a half ago, I read *The Race Game* while I was in the US doing research on surfing and the sports boycott of South Africa. So, by chance, I followed the opposite order. This is what I wanted to ask: how has it been for you to continuously review and rewrite your work, as you have done in recent articles?

Fantastic. I love it! [laughs] This approach reaffirms my position that history is a narrative of the past, and the only way we access the past is

⁶ BOOTH, Douglas. *The Field: Truth and fiction in sport history*. London: Routledge, 2005.

through a subjective and very mediated set of circumstances and structures – for want of a better word. Going back over my work has, in my mind, reinforced and demonstrated the fragility of history. Let's put it more precisely: it demonstrates the difference between history as a narrative of the past and the past as what actually happened. Historians have access to some elements of the past, but they will never know the past as it actually was because they mediate the past through the sources they collect, the sources they ignore or discard, through their interpretations of the sources, and, as Hayden White and Alun Munslow so eloquently show, through the figuration and the configuration of their narratives. In this sense, history is both an empirical-analytical project and a linguistic project. In the case of sport history, Murray Phillips has categorically demonstrated the linguistic component of history in his analysis of different presentations of the Australian surf lifesaving movement.⁷

In which countries have you done research in archives? Any special story to tell?

I don't like working in archives. It is physically demanding, tiring, and boring. Some of my colleagues have questioned whether I have ever even been inside an archive. I have. I have spent some long backbreaking hours in archives. One of the most intense periods in the archives was working on my current book, which is about Bondi Beach, in the Waverley Municipal Library (Bondi Junction) and in the New South Wales State Library (Sydney). It was physically demanding at the former because I had to find the material in one room and then take it through to another room to photocopy; each time I wanted to copy material I had to ask permission to use the photocopier (this was before I got myself a digital camera). It was 20 cents a copy and the money had to be paid for each copy individually. The whole system was structured to discourage efficient gathering of material. The hours of opening were usually short and so the work was continually being broken up. The librarians weren't particularly warm or interested – they were helpful in their own way, on their own terms, at their own times. Of course, they had many demands placed on them and no doubt they are dealing with crackpots. They can't distinguish between who's a professional, who's an amateur, who's trying to rip stuff off. I understand all that, but it's frustrating and annoying if you are the victim. [laughs]

At the State Library of New South Wales the material is strictly policed; you can only use pencils and if librarians see you with a pen in your hand they go ballistic. Now with greater access to digital

⁷ PHILLIPS, Murray; BOOTH, Douglas; JAGGARD, Ed. The Dark Side of Surf Lifesaving and A Tragic Plot? A Reply to Jaggard and Phillips, Forum: Analyzing Disputes in Sport History, The Lifesaving Debate, *Journal of Sport History*, 29, 1 (2002): 1-46. Reprinted as, O Lado Obscuro do Salvamento no Mar. *Recorde: Revista de História do Esporte Artigo*, 5, 2 (2012). Translated by Rafael Fortes. URL = http://www.sport.ifcs.ufrj.br/recordes/pdf/recordesV5N2_2012_22.pdf and Um Enredo Trágico? Uma Resposta Para Jaggard e Phillips. *Recorde: Revista de História do Esporte Artigo*, 5, 2 (2012). Translated by Rafael Fortes. URL = http://www.sport.ifcs.ufrj.br/recordes/pdf/recordesV5N2_2012_25.pdf

technology, including cameras in phones, they won't let you photograph material because it's apparently subject to copyright. They have some really good material in the State Library, and I wanted to photograph it but couldn't; I had to write it out long hand which is incredibly time wasting and invariably means that there will be errors and mistakes.

So I'm not a great fan of the archives—it's just another institution of surveillance.

Afterwards you have to type everything...

Yes. The whole system is not particularly user friendly. I have written about research in the archives in *Sport in History* where I discuss the problems at length.⁸ I have shared my experiences with colleagues and they are critical of the same things. A friend of mine wanted to use the archives at the Automobile Club in England and the doorman wouldn't let him in because he wasn't wearing a tie. Only gentlemen are allowed into those premises and the mark of a gentleman is a tie!

Besides Australia, in which countries have you been to archives?

Australia mainly. I have done a little work in New Zealand at the offices of the New Zealand Olympic Committee in Wellington and the Hocken Library at the University of Otago. The main sites in Australia have been the Manly Municipal Library (Sydney) and the Waverley Library. While I was working on *Australian Beach Cultures*, I spent extended weeks at the Warringah Library (Dee Why, Sydney). I also spent time at *Tracks* magazine going through all their editions.

Of course, I appreciate the thrill of finding a box of material that you know that no one else has seen. I have had a couple of those thrills. At Warringah Library, I found material dealing with corruption in the Warringah Council, which had a direct impact on surfing. I found some good stuff at Waverley Library on Aub Laidlaw, who was a well known lifeguard (and ex-clubbie) at Bondi Beach and who had a testy relationship with surfing. So I have found some great material in archives. But these have been my two really big thrills; nothing earth shattering but in the context of my work these were, let's call them, exciting moments. [laughs]

How do you compare research before and after digital cameras, cell phones, scanners etc.?

Technology has reduced some of the laboriousness of research. It hasn't necessarily reduced the frustration, because often the technology doesn't work. You have to learn how to use it. But emerging technology is removing some of the tedium. Of course, you still have to go home, download the material, and file and order it. Technology also makes it much easier to copy everything rather than making judgements in the

⁸ BOOTH, Douglas. Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power? Refiguring the Archive, *Sport in History*, 26, 1 (2006): 91-109.

actual archive.

How did you establish your connection with the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH)? How long have you been attending their conference?

I started going to ASSH [the Australian Society for Sports History] conferences in 1989 when I was doing my PhD. Then I got my job at Otago University and, as I mentioned earlier, my first mentor there was John Loy. He was an American and convinced me to go to NASSH. I was initially apprehensive; I think my apprehension was based on anticipated higher standards. I anticipated that the standard of work would be much higher at NASSH. Notwithstanding the occasional excellent presentation at ASSH, the average standard there is lower. Of course, this was before I had my confidence with publishing. I'd had a few articles out, obviously, but nothing really substantial. So I was a little apprehensive. My first NASSH was 1996 (Auburn) where I spoke about the Rugby World Cup the previous year in South Africa. My session included a commentator. The commentator was extremely critical of the first two presentations (I was the third speaker) and I was thinking: "Ok, this will be interesting." He got to my paper and basically didn't have anything critical to say. I was pretty relieved and thought "Ok, I can mix it now"; my confidence was up. I was very happy to return and keep going back.

I also clearly remember the 1998 conference in Windsor which was attended by Tony Mason, the well known British sport historian. Tony was in my session where I spoke about surf lifesaving in Australia. Someone said to me afterward – in the corridor – "I don't think you addressed x [one issue that I can't recall] particularly well". Before I could reply, Tony chipped in and said: "I think he did cover that". So to have someone of Tony's stature reaffirm my presentation at that point in my career was another confidence booster. That's how it all began at NASSH.

I went to eleven NASSH conferences in a row, up to and including 2007. Since then I have attended in 2012, 2013 and 2015. As Dean it was a bit more difficult to attend. Hopefully, I can get back more regularly in the future.

Do you see any changes in the sports history field since 2005, when *The Field* came out?

In the last five years I have witnessed more embracing of historiography, cultural issues, and questions and concerns about representing the past. When *The Field* was published, Dan Nathan was pretty much the lone voice with respect to writing critical cultural histories of sport that challenged the standard grand narratives of social history.⁹ Dan has a really good grasp of historiography and he was one

⁹ NATHAN, Daniel. *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

of the first to produce a monograph dealing with what could be called the new cultural history of sport that raised questions about representing the past. In the last few years, this approach, or style, or genre has burgeoned. Last year (2016), Rita Liberti and Maureen Smith won the NASSH book award with *(Re)Presentating Wilma Rudolph*.¹⁰ I think this text marks a turning point in the way sport historians, particularly in North America, have embraced cultural history and historiographical issues more critically. I can see greater receptiveness to historiography and to theorizing history. So there's been a considerable change there.

At conferences there's still a lot of bitching and moaning about "what constitutes real history". The irony is that those who claim there is a "real history" seem to believe that history is a monolithic discipline. They reject others who distinguish between different genres of history. Of course, this is simply a strategy to secure a particular brand of sport history within the pantheon of approaches. In *The Field* I demonstrate the diversity of history. Obviously, not all approaches have the same validity in all circumstances, but they do have their uses in different cases. Sport history, like every other subfield of history, is a broad church with its own professional associations, such as BSSH [British Society of Sports History], ASSH and NASSH, that by and large accept diverse approaches.

I feel there has been a misrepresentation of what the cultural turn and the historiographical turn in sport history have done and are doing. History as a discipline is changing. It will continue to change. We shouldn't ignore that what we're doing now will be criticized in ten years time or twenty years time and will be considered obsolete, just as we are questioning and challenging previous approaches to history. All disciplines are moving on and changing. I only hope that I can keep up and stay abreast of the changes and perhaps contribute to the new directions. That should be the ultimate goal of everyone rather than trying to defend one type of history as all that matters.

¹⁰ LIBERTI, Rita; SMITH, Maureen M. *(Re)Presentating Wilma Rudolph*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015.

Do you have any comments on surfing history?

I think surfing history is at an interesting conjuncture. A lot of academics, particularly geographers and sociologists, are researching surfing. Scholars are recasting the popular histories of surfing that have been produced by perhaps as few as half a dozen people—Phil Jarratt, Matt Warshaw, Drew Kampion, Sam George, Tim Baker. These authors, many of whom have a background in journalism, have produced the majority of the grand narratives that are the basis of our understanding of surfing. I can see a tension emerging between academic and popular histories of surfing. This is already evident, for example, in discussions around localism in Hawai'i and gender in the surf. I suspect that this tension will only escalate.¹¹

One of the things I would like to do – I don't know if I will, but I'd like to see someone do it – is analyze popular surfing histories and historians and their influence on the general understanding of surfing history. As I've said, I suspect that as few as half a dozen authors—journalist surfers—have shaped the popular understanding of surfing.

How is the book on Bondi beach going?

It is going well. [laughs] I've got a basic draft and probably four chapters that are ready for submission. I am working on five or six chapters in total. This is hard to write. Essentially, I have to write the material three times—as a traditional social history, as a critique of social history (that is, identifying the limitations and shortfalls of this genre of history), and as a “first person” narrative. If the text was simply a traditional social history, I would have completed the book three years ago. The “first person” approach, for want of a better label, is a narrative based on what the beach, Bondi Beach, would write if it was the author. I have not written much of this section but I have allocated it only about 20,000 words and I think I can get it out pretty quickly once I get my mind in the right place. [laughs]

Besides your topics of research, what do you like to read as far as academic literature?

I get most of my academic ideas from the sociology and social theory literature. Most of my reading is what I call current affairs via broadsheet newspapers. I read the *New York Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *New Zealand Herald* each day, especially opinion pieces and feature articles. The broadsheets provide a wealth of material for teaching and research, and they keep me up to date with what's going on with regard to politics and social issues.

¹¹ See, for example, WALKER, Isaiah. *Waves of Resistance*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011; and COMER, Krista. *Surfer Girls in the New World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.