

BOOK REVIEWS

The Story of Rhodesian Sport: Volume 1 1899-1935 By J. de L. Thompson. Bulawayo, Books of Rhodesia, 1976, 423 pp., illustr., Z\$7,20.

Rhodesian Sports Profiles 1907-1979 By G. Byrom. Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1980, 256 pp., illustr., Z\$22,00.

Rhodesian Rugby: A History of the National Side 1898-1979 By J. Winch. Salisbury, The Zimbabwe Rhodesia Rugby Union, 1979, 151 pp., illustr., Z\$6,00.

Works on the social history of this country are surprisingly few, and so these books, however slight, are welcome. Thompson's general survey of European sports, originally published in 1935, was a useful book in its time but this reprint unfortunately has no analytical introduction, merely a new foreword by Ian Smith. The review of this book was deliberately held up pending the publisher's planned sequel to it but, in the changed conditions of the country, that is probably remote now, unless an author can be found who will widen his approach from purely European sporting activities to include African sport, notably, of course, soccer. The same publisher's more recent *Sports Profiles* is clearly not such a sequel; it is a mere listing of some fifty prominent personalities in twenty different sports, of whom only three are Black (one soccer player and two runners). The third book by virtue of its subject, rugby football, also deals only with Europeans. The process by which Europeans were brought to Rugby, in imitation of English Public Schools, and then largely gave up soccer, to avoid racial mixing, is in itself a study that would be well worth scholarly attention; African soccer, luckily, is now receiving attention from one of my research students.

R.S.R.

Ragtime Soldiers: The Rhodesian Experience in the First World War By P. McLaughlin. Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1980, 159 pp., Z\$12,90 (Z\$3,50, p/b).

War has traditionally spotlighted two consistently courageous groups of people: the frontline soldier and the conscientious objector. The stark antithesis between the actual fighting in Flanders and the chairborne warfare of the women at home brandishing white feathers is one of the dominant motifs of McLaughlin's *Ragtime Soldiers*. Although the book is about White Rhodesians banging the imperial drum during the Great War, interwoven are many subtle comments on the futility of other wars. Eerie parallels with the bush war of the 1970s abound, especially when the author deliberately uses modern phrases such as 'take-out' to describe an action in 1914. Sometimes the analogy is explicit: 'Patriotism took many forms, but doing one's bit became an obsession with the patriots, not for the last time in the century' (p. 84), or 'The mining industry was the key sector in the survival of sanctions-bound Rhodesia during the 1960s and 1970s, and played the same role during the Great War' (p. 104).

The timeless predicaments and the vigorous style help the book to transcend the apparently limited appeal of an historical treatise on the 1914-18 war. This is McLaughlin's aim. For, as the author makes clear in his rather pretentious preface, he is trying to interest the general reader in the history of his own country. And he succeeds. With a cosmopolitan wit, he scans all aspects of the Rhodesian involvement in the war: from the music-hall to the trenches; from the dust of East Africa to the sting of savage death in the mud of the Somme and then back to the home-spun humour of a repertory company in Umtali.

McLaughlin is a professional historian, but he does not blind his reader with technocratic gobbledygook, even when it comes to the specifics of weaponry. Both his tactical and strategic analyses are helpfully straightforward. For example, on the repercussions of the tank: 'Until someone conceived the idea of putting men inside armoured boxes, there was no answer to the combination of trench and machine gun'. McLaughlin is as incisive when he analyses the social impact of the conflict. He explains how the bellicose frivolities of the settler women contributed towards political emancipation after the war. But such a benediction did not descend upon the Blacks who had volunteered to fight for an already senescent British Empire. Over 31 Africans were killed in action, 116 were wounded and 142 died from disease and other causes while in uniform.

While the war did little to change White Rhodesian attitudes towards race, the class barriers were eroded. For this was the first total war; and to 'defend democracy' the public was often undemocratically manipulated by newspapers, as well as by poets: 'The Great War turned poetry from an exquisite public school torture into a popular literary form.' But it was the cinemas, the music-hall and the 'troopie shows' which brought the classes into proximity *en masse* for the first time and gave the middle and upper classes 'a first glimpse of the working classes at play—bawdy, irreverent, sentimental and unselfconscious, but above all *alive*'.

War is a great auditor of institutions; and White Rhodesia—although suffering its 'lost generation' (700 Europeans died as a result of the war)—began forging settler nationalism. A (lost) generation or two later, it was no coincidence that Ian Smith chose the Great War's armistice day to launch his U.D.I. It was both a reminder of the kith-and-kin factor to inhibit retaliation and a touch of *Ettu, Brute* defiance. In the most recent audit of the war, White Rhodesia was found wanting; and ironically Britain provided the instruments for the final reckoning.

Ragtime Soldiers entertains and instructs the modern reader about a struggle that ended 63 years ago; McLaughlin concludes poignantly by asking: 'Seventy years from now will there be [White?] Rhodesians to look back on what their ancestors did in the 1970s?'

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