

## IN AWE OF THE SPORT OF KINGS

### *An interview with JD Stout Fellow David Grant*

JOHN MANSFIELD THOMSON

*Wellington-based social historian David Grant began his tenure as J.D. Stout Fellow in New Zealand Cultural Studies on 1 April 1999. In broad terms, his project encompasses an assessment of the social and economic impact and importance of horse racing on our recreational, sporting, business and community cultures. Within this framework, he will record and explain the changes that have occurred in the industry from when Samuel Marsden first brought horses into this country in 1814, until the present time.*

*From any perspective his task is daunting, as he explains . . .*

IT SEEMS TO ME everyone in New Zealand has a racing story. In social situations I have become ambivalent about discussing my project. Folk get enthusiastic, tell about their grandfather who raced successful thoroughbreds, about their uncle who had the beer carting contract to the Southland races in the 1940s, about their priest who resorted to less than Godlike ways to overcome Papal restrictions to place a bet or three, about their aunty's friend who 'mucked out' as a lass at the stables of a well-known Canterbury standardbred trainer – or about themselves who as kids searched the grounds at Awapuni for "live" race tickets after a meeting in the hope of making some pocket money, the odds being distinctly more promising after there had been a protest'.

'But it is a nice ambivalence. While the pragmatist in me just sees more work, the passionate in me rejoices in the way that horse racing

has affected so many of our lives to a greater or lesser degree and reaffirms my decision that this was a worthy exercise to embark upon. It's a vast tapestry to explore. I hope I can do it justice'.

David Grant does not have a racing background, save occasional attendances, past and present, at 'picnic' meetings in the summer replete with rug, hamper, plenty of red and the *Dominion's* racing page scrawled up in the back pocket – and a financially embarrassing sojourn at last year's Wellington Cup meeting to celebrate the 50th birthday of a friend (a keen, if impecunious punter). His path to this project evolved through previous work; a well-received history of gambling published in 1994, a comprehensive history of the stock market (to which many respondents have ascribed similar thematic predilections), and the first draft of a history of the TAB, to be published in October of next year.

He is also aware that such a history needs to be taken seriously as a worthy social discipline within the generic 'protestant' parameters which, to date, have largely determined what the mainstream has identified as being historically 'important'.

'Sports and leisure historiography in New Zealand is a thin volume in terms of determining how significant it has been in our social development and as a benchmark in our national identity, he adds. 'There has been a snobbishness within the New Zealand academy that this has not been an area of deserving research. Not *real* history. Interesting but marginal. Takes a back seat to politics or race relations. Yet it seems to me that the exploits of Josh Kronfeld on the rugby paddock or *Courage Under Fire* on the racetrack, to give recent examples, involve and excite a huge cross-section of New Zealand society, not replicated elsewhere. It is also true that horse



*Bookmakers pose for the camera before taking their positions before racing at a meeting at Ellerslie during the early 1890s. By this time metropolitan clubs employed only bona fide bookies, that is men who were registered with the Tattersalls Club. Each paid an operating fee of around 5 guineas, and, in some cases, were expected to pay the club a share of the profit. By this time they were competing with the totalisator. Many bookies found it harder and harder to make a living.*

racing, up until the most recent of years, has been doing this for generations’.

‘Attitudes are changing, but slowly. You can still count the number of folk actively working on histories of sports and recreation in this country on the fingers of one hand. This is in sharp contrast with the traditions in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia where it has been a rigorous intellectual discipline for decades. I would like to think that the book that might eventually emerge from this may be a small step in helping to advance the cause’.

To date, he has focused mostly on the 19th century. What he has found so far has been staggering. ‘The competitive ethic, a dominating theme from the beginning, was most clearly expressed in the earli-

est days in match races among horse owners to satisfy ego and make money from betting on the result. Early bookmaking was spontaneous and entrepreneurial. The most astute among these folk made much money from side-bets on the outcomes of these contests.’

‘Horse racing clubs evolved from this, although these had antecedents in Great Britain (and to a lesser extent, the United States for harness racing) and its evolution here was an integral and readily accepted part of the cultural baggage that accompanied the early settlers. It was *the* primary recreational activity following the establishment of community, and to a lesser extent, the development of rail. Everybody went to the Saturday races – as many did on other days as well. In 1867, more than

25,000 crowded Riccarton Racecourse to watch *Stormbird* win the Canterbury Cup for a stake of 1,000 sovereigns. In 1879, New Zealanders bet £20,000 on the Melbourne Cup. By 1882, no fewer than 54 clubs operated south of the Waitaki River holding 82 days of racing. In 1885, despite a deepening recession, more than £500,000 was spent on stakes, bets and expenses at licensed race meetings and unlicensed (or “tin kettle”) meetings which proliferated in remoter areas, largely sustained by bookmakers’ fees’.

‘There are some certainties. Racing was the first sport in this country, by some 70 years, to have a mass audience. Racing was the first to employ professional sportsmen and sportswomen – there were a number of successful women harness racing drivers until the newly-



*Racing in the Wairarapa in the 1850s. This engraving appeared in the Illustrated London News of 1853 showing the first annual race organised by landowners in the Martinborough district who became members of the province's first-ever race club, the Lower Valley Jockey Club which existed until 1911. At this time, there was no permanent course as such. Horses raced between pre-set flagged poles, usually manuka, which were strung between scrub, brush, trees and riverbed. Like others of the time, especially in rural areas, it was more in the nature of a cross-country course.*

formed Trotting Conference banned them around the turn of the century. By 1890, race meetings were the only organised, outdoor social and sporting events that were held on nearly every day of the week except Sunday. Mid-week meetings were designated as holidays, even for school children.'

'Fledgling communities viewed and promoted horse races as benchmarks of physical and cultural progress', David comments, 'and were arenas for egalitarian competition. New wealth was paraded in the form of imported stock, and later home-grown thoroughbreds but there was still room for the blacksmith's hack to "have-a-go". Even small town racecourses had freshly-scrubbed, white railed tracks, band rotundas and large,

covered, ornately-carved grandstands. On-course, bookies vied with the totalisator for the punters' custom. Off-course, hundreds of bookmakers and their touts hustled for business on the street, in bars, clubs, boarding houses, even private homes'.

'The bonds of social stratification were evident in the structure and this is an obvious theme for me to pursue. As in Britain, it was the wealthy who dominated race clubs' committees: watching the racing from within membership enclosures where sartorial excess and rampant gluttony were frequent corollaries. In contrast, the common folk, watched from the front rail, or from within basic stands far from the finishing line, and drank warm beer or crude whisky from dank bars

under the main grandstand. Like the élite, the proletariat gambled enthusiastically, sometimes beyond their means'.

'This, in my view, was not overt class consciousness, but a reflection of the reality that the men who made the sport run, as in Great Britain, were affluent and pursuing a traditional heritage. Only these folk, landed gentry initially, and then wealthy merchants and businessmen could afford to own, feed and transport horses, could afford to dispense patronage in the forms of cups, plates and money prizes, and could afford to pay for the conspicuous consumption that was a feature of the social activities of the well-heeled on race-days, and far into the evening. If anything, these folk inculcated a kind of

paternalistic responsibility towards the rest of the race-going community, in seeing that their organisations were socially and financially successful'.

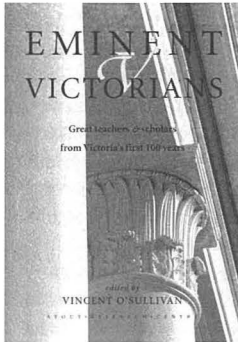
This then, is just the beginning. There is very much more: the end of the 19th century sees the beginning of a national organisation—the New Zealand Racing Conference – which not only asserted an administrative authority over racing in the whole of the country but a strong moral authority over it as well. This was understandable because the sport up to then had been community-based with local rules, often not efficiently enforced, and subject to

corruption, some of it overt as to races being fixed, horses being 'rung in' under false names and officials receiving backhanders from bookmakers for favourable odds, and positions on the course. This change was part of a wider moral conservatism which flowered during these years leading into the 20th century and culminated in the numbers of race meetings being controlled and in campaigns to ban the totalisator (unsuccessful, but only just) and bookmakers—which succeeded in 1910.

Nevertheless, David Grant affirms that the sport grew in popularity, despite decreasing numbers

of race-days imposed first by the body politic in 1911, worried that it, alongside gambling, its *raison d'être*, was getting out of control. 'Rugby football challenged its hegemony only at specific times – test matches and Ranfurly Shield games – newspapers and specialist journals recorded it, poets and novelists wrote about it, politicians legislated for and against its expansion, and just about everybody else has punted or "fluttered" on it, at least once in their lives. By its sheer ubiquitousness, horse racing has become part of the national psyche.' ❧

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