CONCERNING GOLF (AND OTHER) BALLS.

Professor Geddes, in a brilliant essay published on the conclusion of the Chino-Japanese War, in which, starting from St. Andrews, he passes by a gentle transition to the sociological significance of "cash," France after 1870-1, and to the new development which he predicted for China, has expounded the origin of Golf. The shepherd of the St. Andrews foreshore could on that narrow strip of pasture develop none of the distinctive characteristics of the pastoral civilisations; instead of adapting himself, and his descendants, to his occupation, he must needs modify the conditions of his life to suit the cravings of his Viking blood. Tranquillity and contemplation irk him; he must find some active exercise. He swings his shepherd's crook, and strikes the pebbles. After a while he finds it more amusing to select a particularly white and round pebble, and to drive it in a particular direction, straight into the rabbit hole which he marks within an appropriate distance. Thus Golf begins, and St. Andrews makes its contribution to the life of Scotland first, of Europe and America latterly.

So much for the origin of golf. But a little further consideration may well be given to the psychology of the game—if game it be. What is it that makes the action of knocking a little white ball with a crooked stick so soothing to the nerves of the middle-aged clerk or sugar-broker? So far as I know no one has given the answer. That, however, is probably due to my utter ignorance of the literature of golf, because the answer is so obvious that it springs to the mind the moment the question is seriously asked. The very word "club" used by the golfer to denote his crooked stick conveys it. The little white ball represents nothing less than the skull of your enemy. When you smite it with brassy or cleek, your nerves thrill to the very stimulus which maddened uncounted generations of your ancestors through ages of palæolithic savagery in tribal warfare. It is, probably, on some of your earliest visits to the links that you best realise this, when, again and again, you open your shoulders and strike with repeatedly increasing vigour, and still that little white ball grins back at you from the spot where it lies on the turf.

There is, in fact, an elementary pleasure in the mere striking of a ball cleanly and effectively. This forms what we may call the primary constituent in the charm, not of golf only, but of ball games in general. The intensity of this particular pleasure varies in proportion to the closeness with which the sensations of primitive
contest are copied. Thus it detracts somewhat from the pleasure of golf that the symbol of the enemy's skull lies motionless; the tennis player, the batsman at cricket, the association footballer, all aim their blows at objects full of motion and apparent life. On the other hand the pleasure of the act of striking is intensified in golf from the bonelike hardness of the golf ball, and the equal hardness of the wood or metal club with which it is struck. In comparison the soft tennis ball and springy racket are insipid. Cricket here does not compare ill with golf, and I think it offers on the whole a keener thrill than golf can to the batsman who hits hard and successfully. But cricket is chancy, and fraught with frequent disappointments.

The second elementary constituent in the pleasure of golf is also related to early, though not to the most primitive, human life. It is the pleasure of seeing the ball speed like a well-directed arrow towards its destined mark. The throwing stick first, and the bow later, tuned the nerves of humanity to respond to this sensation. It was an element in the joy of the chase as well as in the joy of the warfare; it remains an element in the joys of ball games generally, more refined and less brutal than that of dealing smashing blows on the skull-symbol. For the experts among players, and for the connoisseurs among spectators, this is the dominant pleasure. It is neolithic rather than palæolithic. Nevertheless it carries back the soul of the twentieth century Briton to a very remote and barbaric stage in human evolution.

This psychic return to neolithic barbarism and to palæolithic savagery is the secret of golf. It is the reason of the rapid spread of golf-mania among nations of city-dwellers who suffer more and more from the strain of the ever-increasing rapidity of social evolution. It is the fact by which we must appraise the good and evil of this golf development, which is no unimportant element in the social movement of our day. How far is it morally permissible for a man to fall out of the ranks of twentieth century civilisation, to relax the muscles and tendons of his soul, and practise the (morally) easy virtue of hitting straight and hard? As before, the answer leaps to the mind. Moral relaxation is an imperative need. The occasional round of golf is invaluable to the man who lives under a continual strain of mind and will. The affairs of the nation no doubt are all the better conducted because of the hours which Mr. Balfour and Mr. Lloyd George spend on the links. But let relaxation become the rule instead of the exception, and moral perdition follows. To be a "plus man" is to be branded with shame. To him must be said what Herbert Spencer is alleged to have said to the young billiard player:—"A moderate degree of skill is a graceful accomplishment, such extreme proficiency as you display argues an ill-spent youth."
Somewhat different considerations, however, must be taken into account when we turn from golf for middle-aged men to cricket and football for boys. Cricket is not for a small boy a relapse into barbarism, but an elementary lesson in social organisation. It makes him one of a tribe, one of a band of eleven co-operators under a captain, like the peasants of an Anglo-Saxon village tilling under their "boreholder." It is discipline, not relaxation—or rather, I should say, discipline more than relaxation; the discipline in cricket being the powder masked by the sweets of varied imitations of fighting and the chase. As I have indicated above, to the batsman his bat is a club, the red cricket ball the head of the enemy. But to the fieldsman it is a flying bird to be caught. Then again to the bowler it is the missile with which to bring down his quarry. But this surrounding atmosphere of barbarism is, for the small boy, the boy under fourteen, only his normal ethical atmosphere; for him the potent, vital, educative element in cricket is the element of organised co-operation, of order and obedience, and of team loyalty. So valuable is this element for the boy under fourteen, that one may well doubt whether it would not profit the nation to substitute cricket fields for those buildings modelled partly on the prison and partly on the factory known as public elementary schools. But here again to realise the importance of giving boys elementary training in civilisation is also to realise the folly of never going beyond the elements. Oxford and Cambridge must give up encouraging their students to spend the best part of the summer days in the cricket field before they can become worthy of the name of university.

It is a matter worthy of the attention of all who aspire to democracy as a social and political ideal that boys of the wealthy class get much cricket, boys of the poorer classes but little, and that little under inferior conditions. It is as important to democratise the opportunities for moral training as it is to democratise knowledge. But at least whether a given boy gets much cricket or little, whether he gets it on a rolled and shaven field or in a back alley, it is still cricket. The game in the slums has "hitched its wagon to a star," it is governed, like the game played at Eton and Harrow, by the rules of the M.C.C. But in football there is a class distinction, which is getting gradually more and more marked, in the nature of the game played. Association exclusively is the game of the public elementary school, Rugby to an increasing degree the game of the public school. Which is the better? This question has been, and is being much argued, but entirely with reference to unimportant side issues. Association, if I may trust my memory, between thirty and forty years ago was imposed upon many schools by mothers. They demanded a game that was not "rough," something that involved less tumbling upon the ground,
less dirtying and damaging of clothes. Victorian femininity utterly failed to realise how ridiculously insignificant is a boy’s raiment in comparison with the growth of his soul. Association is not a bad game; it is indeed an excellent game, capable of instilling that willing obedience to a law seen to be necessary which is the only possible basis of freedom, and that quick individual and personal initiative combined with social co-operation which is the necessary raw material of national efficiency. These merits it has in approximately an equal degree with Rugby. And yet there is in Rugby a moral superiority so great that this class distinction between the two games is calculated to prolong indefinitely the ancient severance between gentle and simple. Other things being equal the boy brought up on Rugby will make a better man and a better citizen than the boy brought up on Association. To explain this statement it is necessary to examine further the nature of the two games.

Football of all varieties is directly derived from tribal warfare. Yorkshiremen have handed on to me descriptions given by their fathers or uncles of football as it used to be played in their native villages. It was a mimic battle, closely imitating the reality, between village and village. The ball was placed on the connecting road where it was crossed by the parish boundary. The rank and file of villagers on either side tried to drive the ball by main strength into the centre of the opposing township, to plant the signal of victory in the enemy’s stronghold. Meanwhile those whose means enabled them to be mounted hovered round in the fields, inviting the footmen of their own side to throw the ball out to them. When a horseman caught it he rode at full speed for the hostile village; the defending horsemen pursued him, smote him on the head with their heavy whip handles, seized the ball, to be themselves pursued in turn.

In form Rugby has undergone less modification than Association. The student of old Greek military tactics, which were derived directly from warfare between village and village, instinctively illustrates them from Rugby football. The “All Blacks’” scrum formation is in principle identical with the Theban phalanx, invented by Epaminondas. Phalanx conflict is dropped in Association, the game becomes a continual series of individual conflicts between forward on one side and half or full back on the other. In Rugby mass conflict alternates with individual conflict. But in spirit Rugby has been much more profoundly civilised and humanised than Association. Consider the manner in which individual combatants meet one another in the two games. In Association the defence meets the attack by the shoulder charge. In Rugby the defender claps his arms lovingly round the attacker. If he knows how to collar properly he puts his whole energy into
that embrace and sinks gently to the ground with his opponent. The difference in psychic reaction is considerable. I am convinced that the schoolboy feels just one degree more friendly to a school-fellow when he has collared him, just one degree less friendly when he has charged him.

Now if the basic elements of a sound and secure social order depend on moral qualities which are fostered among boys equally by cricket, Association, and Rugby, the higher developments of civilisation depend on the success with which school life, largely by means of school games, trains boys to obey the maxim "Love your enemies." Before we can love our enemies we must have enemies to love; and our first duty to our enemies is to fight them earnestly and overcome them fairly. All active civic life is conflict, all social advance is warfare. But the success of civic life and of social advance depend upon the power of the citizen to crush down all feelings of personal enmity towards opponents. He must love his enemies while he fights them. He must have learnt—

"To set the cause above renown,
   To love the game beyond the prize,
To honour, while you strike him down,
   The foe that comes with fearless eyes;
To count the life of battle good,
   And dear the land that gave you birth,
And dearer yet the brotherhood
   That binds the brave of all the earth."

There is, I believe, no school game quite equal to Rugby football for training boys to this standard of citizenship. I give all honour to those masters in public elementary schools who are training their boys in Association football. But I should like to put the question very seriously before the Board of Education, whether it ought not to take steps to make Rugby instead the national winter game for British boys of all classes.

GILBERT SLATER.