

HATTON, Nathan – *Thrashing Seasons: Sporting Culture in Manitoba and the Genesis of Prairie Wrestling*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016. Pp. 340.

Scholarly historical analysis of professional wrestling has arrived—C. Nathan Hatton’s prodigious research and fine writing ground his account of sporting culture and wrestling in Manitoba from its inception among various Indigenous people to the 1930s.

Professional historians are just beginning to realize how an examination of wrestling can fine-tune existing scholarship and historiography. Hatton manages to connect the story of wrestling in Manitoba to various strands of social, political, and military history, such as the advent of the second industrial revolution and progressive reform, both of which affected agricultural output and urbanization; ethnicity and changes in demographics; and the effects of the First World War. The author identifies throughout the era an interplay between amateur and professional wrestling before the latter became mere entertainment, featuring more and more “worked” (choreographed and predetermined) matches. Equally important, Hatton explores what a scholarly examination of wrestling can reveal about changing perceptions of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of identity, and he connects the evolution of sporting culture and wrestling in Manitoba to other sports such as boxing and baseball in Canada and the United States.

The book’s seven chronological and thematic chapters mix both narrative history and historical and historiographical analysis well. He eschews the arcane and often obtuse jargon that plagues a lot of social scientific and cultural analysis, including previous studies of professional wrestling.

The province’s first combative wrestlers were the Chipewyan and Netsilik Indigenous people and the voyageurs. Voyageurs were European traders, trappers, and adventurers who acquired a certain “masculine capital” (p. 25) through drinking, fighting, and acts of bravery. Perceptions of masculinity have always informed the history of wrestling and sporting culture, and the sport’s association with other ‘unsavoury’ activities, such as gambling, drinking, and other forms of ‘vice,’ caught the attention of moral reformers. Thus amateur wrestling, free of the taint of gambling, money, and vice, evolved with the growing interest in constructing and maintaining gymnasiums while avoiding gambling, money, and compensation. Reformers saw wrestling and other physical activities as acceptable alternatives to other forms of entertainment they associated with immoral behaviour and vice.

The continuing popularity of professional wrestling between 1896 and 1914 reflected the importance of ‘muscular Christianity’ and interest in various forms of masculine identity. The second industrial revolution was stirring concern about preserving masculinity in the midst of rapid urbanization and demographic changes that included an influx of non-Anglo-Protestant people into the prairie region. Despite professional wrestling’s growing popularity, reformers, the press, and local public officials sharply criticized what they saw as unsavoury characters,

criminality, excessive violence, and corruption, including the emergence of “fakers,” who ‘fixed’ matches.

The arrival of new immigrants was creating a new market for matches, but that tapped into Anglo-Canadian xenophobia and ethnic rivalries and prejudices. Hatton claims that, while wrestling revealed political, racial, ethnic, and class divisions in its promoting of matches and cards, it also became “contested territory” (p. 13) for such conflicts. So while bouts in the ring reflected xenophobia and ethnic prejudices in a period of emerging British national identity, the sport also engaged non-Anglo immigrants—it “facilitated a level of cultural continuity between the New World and the Old World” (p. 103).

The “Simon Pures”—progressive-era, middle-class, reform-oriented institutions, such as the YMCA—facilitated and oversaw amateur wrestling contests and promotions. Because of the social ills they associated with professional wrestling, government officials and reformers sought to promote and expand amateur wrestling by separating it completely from the seedier professional product. Despite their efforts, the lure of money and a bit of fame left considerable overlap.

The monograph centres around Manitoba’s role in the Great War, which the author views as a turning point for wrestling in the province. While wrestling was collapsing at home, it thrived within various units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in Canada and overseas, with enthusiastic support from the military, which saw sports as fostering masculine behaviour, bravery, teamwork, and camaraderie. Furthermore, athletic clubs staged recruiting drives and fund-raisers for the war effort.

The co-mingling of amateurs and professionals in the forces worried several local and regional amateur organizations, which noted with horror amateurs receiving payment for matches. However, the amateur bodies backed off when they realized they had absolutely no authority over how the CEF conducted its competitive sporting events. Further, Hatton concludes, professional wrestling’s role in Manitoba’s war effort via the CEF distanced it from those unsavoury elements that had enraged the reformers. Last, the co-mingling of amateurs and professionals in the CEF continued to blur the distinction between them.

The province’s “golden era” of wrestling featured some of the prairie region’s first national stars, including Jack Taylor. The early 1920s saw a renaissance of both professional and amateur variants. The former’s emergence coincided with increasing U.S. enthusiasm for the sport, especially on the east coast, and with a decrease in criticism from reformers and the beginnings of regulation. In 1921, Manitoba passed its first law to regulate both boxing and wrestling. Accordingly, professional wrestling experienced a brief postwar resurgence, and several visits from famous American wrestlers, such as Ed “Strangler” Lewis, increased its visibility and appeal.

Amateur wrestling also bounced back in postwar Manitoba. Hatton claims that amateur organizations helped engage numerous ethnic groups, especially non-Anglo Protestants. By the 1930s, however, the newer, “worked” format started to

turn professional wrestling into entertainment, along the lines of vaudeville and radio.

Hatton gleans his insights from a variety of archival sources, such as newspapers, periodicals, manuscripts, and provincial, municipal, and military records. I recommend this book to anybody interested in the history of sport, especially professional wrestling, but also to readers keen about late-nineteenth- and early- twentieth-century Canada, for its interweaving of major historical themes with the history of professional wrestling.

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KLAUSEN, Susanne M. *Abortion Under Apartheid: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Women's Reproductive Rights in South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 327.

Abortion as a topic often brings out the worst in people, whether “worst” is measured by outright misogyny or simple callousness towards women’s and girls’ lives. The fact that poorer women and women of colour suffer disproportionately from lack of access to safe, state-funded abortion services adds an element of class and race contempt to the equation. As I write, this is manifest in the Trump administration’s executive order to defund any organization currently receiving US support that provides abortion counselling, let alone abortion itself. This order threatens to create a surge of unsafe abortions and maternal deaths in the Global South and will wreak havoc on efforts to control population growth in Africa in particular, with predictably devastating impacts. Apparently black lives do not matter in the current White House.

Susanne Klausen’s moving and timely book sheds powerful light on the interplay of abortion policy and the defence of white male supremacy in apartheid South Africa which still resonates there and more widely. Indeed, as I write, this is manifest in the Trump administration’s executive order to defund any organization currently receiving US support that provides abortion counselling, let alone abortion itself. This order threatens to create a surge of unsafe abortions and maternal deaths in the Global South and could wreak havoc on efforts to control population growth in Africa in particular, with all the suffering and inequality that implies. Even in South Africa today, where women are now guaranteed free, state-provided abortion on demand and constitutional protections of their health, privacy, and dignity, tens of thousands of South African women still turn to the often brutally incompetent private sector to obtain abortions. The law may have changed but the attitudes that women fear have not kept up.

Klausen begins by acknowledging her own longstanding abortion rights activism, and the inspiration (and subsequently direct assistance) that she drew from Helen Bradford, the pioneering historian of abortion in South Africa and a powerful critic of androcentrism in the radical historiography. Klausen aims