

I Suppose You Have Heard of the Tom Brown Question?

Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857)

Although *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was not the first school story, it was so skillfully written and so popular that it helped to establish the conventions of the genre for the next hundred years. The formula of the new pupil leaving home for an unfamiliar institution, where he undergoes initiation ceremonies and learns the 'rules', where he struggles to find his way among new friends and enemies (bullies and unpleasant masters), and where he learns to cope with exams and sporting rivalries, are all there in Thomas Hughes's book, to be repeated with many variations ever since. At the heart of these books there is nearly always a great sporting encounter – house matches within the school, or against rival schools.

These sports matches, at least in boys' books, nearly always focus upon cricket or 'rugby football'. *Tom Brown's* first great successor, *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's* (1881-1882) by Talbot Baines Reed, contains both rugby and cricket matches, as do later stories by such authors as Richard Bird, Hylton Cleaver, J. Finimore and Herbert Hayens. Hugh Walpole's *Jeremy at Crale* (1927) and L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953) show how adult novelists have used rugby and cricket matches in more serious fiction.

P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975), the greatest British comic writer of the twentieth century, began his literary career by writing school stories, and George Orwell regarded *Mike*, Wodehouse's cricketing tale of 1909, as his very best book. Although Wodehouse went on to become more celebrated for his works about Jeeves, Bertie Wooster and Blandings Castle, he retained a keen interest in school stories, and wrote a comical critique on *Tom Brown's Schooldays* in his collection *Tales of St Austin's* in 1903.

Here, according to Wodehouse's short story, while travelling on a train the narrator, is suddenly confronted by a fellow passenger. Seeing that he has been reading Thomas Hughes's masterpiece, the red-haired stranger abruptly asks him, 'I suppose you have heard of the Tom Brown Question?' The question, the stranger goes on to explain, concerns the real identity of the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a problem which he insists is similar to the Homeric Question. Was *Tom Brown's Schooldays* produced by a single author, Thomas Hughes, or more than one? The stranger confidently claims that it is perfectly obvious that parts one and two of Hughes's book were written by different

people, and offers what he regards as totally convincing evidence. Part one is a perfectly realistic account of Tom's early schooldays, written, the stranger agrees, by Thomas Hughes; but part two is clearly the work of another hand. Quoting Professor Burkett-Smith's learned monograph on the subject, the stranger points out that while the account of the football match in part one is quite truthful, the account of the cricket match in part two is fatally flawed by two errors so significant as to reveal that it has to be the work of a different author. The errors in the description of the cricket match, says the stranger, are clear. First of all, we are asked to believe that, having won the toss on a perfect batting wicket, in a crucial game against the M.C.C., Tom invites the M.C.C. to bat first. 'Now, my dear sir, I ask you, would a school captain do that?' Even more devastating proof is provided by the fact of Tom Brown's admission that, in selecting the school team to play against the M.C.C., he had chosen his friend Arthur to play; not on merit, but because it would do him good to be in the team. These two blunders, the stranger asserts, prove that the Tom Brown who committed them could not have been the same Tom Brown as described in part one of the book. There must, therefore, have been at least two authors of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. The stranger concludes by suggesting that part two was in fact written by the committee of the Secret Society for Putting Wholesome Literature Within The Reach Of Every Boy, And Seeing That He Gets It – the S.S.F.P.W.L.W.T.R.O.E.B.A.S.T.H.G.I. for short!

Hilarious as Wodehouse's story is, it does raise questions for the modern reader about the truthfulness of Hughes's accounts of the rugby and cricket matches in his book. How reliable is his description of the great match between the School and the M.C.C.?

First of all, one has to acknowledge that Hughes was a very talented and experienced cricketer himself. He captained the Rugby School Eleven in a memorable match against the M.C.C., not only achieving the improbable but not impossible feat of taking a wicket by his own bowling, but also stumping a man, and making the top score of thirty not out. He later played for Oxford against Cambridge in 1842 – his only first-class match – and, although he scored nought in his first innings, he made top score of fifteen not out and carried his bat throughout the second innings. (Cambridge won the match by 162 runs.)

Consequently, you might think that Hughes knew what he was talking about, and, despite Wodehouse's suspicions, the account in part two, chapter 8, of 'Tom Brown's Last Match', is both detailed and convincing. Having won the toss, Tom asks the M.C.C. to bat first – to Wodehouse's later dismay – and they are dismissed by 12.30 p.m. for 98 runs. The School's reply is just 4 runs short of that. In their second innings, the M.C.C. bat carelessly, we are told, although no details are given, and by 7.30 p.m. the School need 32 to win with 5 wickets down. But time is now running out. When Arthur is bowled, leaving the School to make 9 runs with only 2 wickets remaining, it is decided to call a halt to the game. The visitors have to catch their train

back to London, so the M.C.C. are declared the winners in what today would be called a drawn match, having scored the most runs in their first innings.

This is all straightforward enough, and Hughes's account of the match contains no obvious errors. But there are a number of curious features. Despite Wodehouse's comical suspicions, there is nothing obviously unusual about Tom's decision to ask the M.C.C. to bat first, and not just because of what Hughes describes as 'the usual liberality of young hands'. Although the weather is fine, Tom Brown might have thought that his bowlers might have been able to exploit any early morning dew on the wicket; he might have thought that fielding first would help his young side to conquer their nerves; or he might, more realistically, have calculated that if the School batted first and were dismissed cheaply, there would be virtually no match at all. What is disturbing, however, as Wodehouse points out, is Tom's selection of his friend Arthur for the team. He is a worthy character, of course, and his play is not without skill; he is described as a steady bat. But there were other rivals for his place in the team, and even a sympathetic master says that he is surprised to see Arthur selected. Tom admits that he picked him because 'it will do him much good, and you can't think what I owe him.' He is not referring to any financial bribe, of course, but to Arthur's moral qualities. However, it is still as if the selectors of the English team were to prefer a steady but pious batsman to someone more likely to win the game.

Another curious feature of the match is its rather vague organisation. The game seems to start 'after ten o'clock', and stops for 'a glorious dinner', which includes speeches and comic songs, at the end of the School's first innings. Yet somehow they manage to find time to squeeze in the whole of the M.C.C.'s second innings, and most of the School's second innings, before stumps are drawn after 8 p.m. to allow the M.C.C. to catch their train back to London. Another peculiar detail is that, as we might expect, in preparation for the match the ground is very carefully watered and rolled the night before the game starts. But then we learn that, it still being daylight, 'someone suggested a dance on the turf . . .' Soon a merry country-dance is going on to which everyone flocks, until 'there were a hundred couples going down the middle and up again.' What effect this might have on the state of the pitch is never stated, but perhaps Tom Brown was not being quite so generous when he asked the M.C.C. to bat first the next morning!

Thomas Hughes's account of the rugby match also raises some interesting questions. Hughes was at Rugby School from 1833-1842, and eventually became, like 'Old Brooke', captain of Bigside, the area of the school close where matches were played. Although the origins of 'rugby football' remain extremely obscure, it is clear that in the 1830s when Hughes was playing, the game was significantly different from today's. Until formal rules were drawn up and generally accepted from about 1848, every school seems to have followed its own practices. However, such works as the *Centenary History of the Rugby Football Union* by U.A. Titley and Ross McWhirter (Rugby Football



'The Conversation During the Match'

Union, 1970) tell us that in the early days the game was quite similar to soccer. The difference was that the object of the game was to ground the ball behind one's opponent's goal-line in order to win an attempt to score a goal by kicking the ball *over the bar* of the lofty goal-posts. Players participated in their ordinary clothes, and there was no agreement about the number of players on each side; Tom's school House of fifty or so opposed the School's number of over a hundred! Kicking the ball was the main method used to cross the opponent's goal-line. Running with the ball and passing by hand were virtually forbidden. Although William Webb Ellis had famously challenged this convention by running with the ball in a game in 1823, his example had not yet become widespread, and Hughes himself deplored the practise of running with the ball. The only exception seems to have been that if a player made a fair catch from a bouncing ball, he was allowed to run a few steps before kicking the ball back. There were no carefully defined playing positions on the field, such as scrum-half or hooker, but only vague positions, such as (goal) keepers, quarters and players 'in front.' There were a

few rules about off-side and the boundaries of play, but for most spectators at the time matches, one imagines, looked like a fairly anarchical scramble; in Hughes's words 'nothing but a struggling mass of boys, and a leather ball'.

The account of the great football match in chapter 5 of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* is thus a fairly accurate description of the game as it was played at Rugby School in Hughes's own boyhood. Even so there are a few puzzles. What exactly happens after Young Brooke touches down, and scores a try, as we say in the modern game? Old Brooke comes up to take the kick at goal. But he evidently has to kick the ball to another boy, Crab Jones, who then places the ball on the ground for Brooke to attempt to kick the goal. Why does Old Brooke not simply attempt the goal himself, without kicking the ball to Jones and thus risking a possible disaster? Is Hughes in error here, or is he revealing an aspect of the game which is no longer practised?

Two other incidents are also worth noting. Although the duration of the game is only vaguely indicated – it seems to start after afternoon roll-call and ends at five o'clock – there is a pause for refreshments which are supplied by a local tradesman, and some of the older boys apply 'innocent-looking ginger-beer bottles to their mouths.' But, Hughes tells us, 'It is not ginger-beer though, I fear, and will do you no good.' Does the Doctor know about this?, we wonder. Finally, when the game ends at five o'clock, School House have won by a single goal to nil. But we were told earlier that the match was to be for the best of three goals. Now we learn that 'the first day of the School-house match is over', and hear no more about it. What was the final result of the great match? Hughes never tells us.

It is also important to note that, as in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, most accounts of football in nineteenth-century children's books refer to 'rugby football', and not the game we know as soccer (i.e. association football). Despite the growing popularity of soccer as a working-class game, with the establishment of clubs such as Sheffield Football Club in 1857 and Nottingham County in 1862, followed by the foundation of the English Football Association and the regulation of its rules in 1863, boys' school stories tended to be set in middle-class public schools, and to describe rugby matches. It was not until the twentieth century that stories about soccer began to feature more prominently in books about school life. Herbert Hayens (1861-1944) and Gunby Hadath (1871-1954) might be mentioned among the pioneers here. Hadath's *Fall In! a Public School Story*, for example, describes a soccer match between rival houses in a tale of 1916. But the most famous of stories about soccer is still *Roy of the Rovers* (created by Frank Pepper), which first appeared in *The Tiger* magazine in 1954, and continued to appear in various forms until 2001. It was a sign of the times that, when the *Boys' Own Paper* first appeared in 1879, it opened with a story by Talbot Baines Reed entitled 'My First Football Match'. It was a rugby match, of course. But when the *Boys' Own Paper* folded in 1967, its final cover featured a gloriously coloured picture of George Best, Manchester United and Northern Ireland's greatest player of soccer.