# More Than a Game: Seasonal Handball in Scotland

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The intention here is to explore aspects of traditional handball in Scotland, with particular reference to the role violence and perceived violence play in the game's practice and reception. Attention will also be focussed on the performative dimensions of the game. The article concludes with reflections on the connection between the game's intense physicality and attendant risks to its continuance. Our concentration will be on two of the most well developed games, those of Kirkwall and Jedburgh. We will also make reference to the games at Atherstone and Ashbourne in England, in order to compare approaches to managing the degree of violence inherent in the game and the threat this poses to the tradition.

From the historical record we know that football was a popular mass sport, joining other traditional games as well-established elements in the lives of ordinary people across England and Scotland. As early as 1314 King Edward II issued a proclamation banning the game and in Scotland, no less than four consecutive Scottish kings passed acts of parliament in 1424, 1458, 1471, and 1491, banning the 'unprofitable' games of football and golf, instead promoting archery in an attempt to maintain a war-ready male population (Cormack 2016: 310). In this endeavour the state had only mixed success and football and other traditional games continued, being especially popular on key dates in the calendar such as Shrove Tuesday (in Scots, *Fastern's E'en*). The favoured locations were the churchyard and the street, the former seen as both a secular and a sacred space. There was special concern over football, citing damage to church property (especially windows), the disruption to commerce, the number of serious injuries sustained and the ease with which the game could turn riotous (Cormack 2016: 315). As John Burnett puts it, "the violent nature of the game is clear; indeed, it was central to the play" (Burnett 2000: 89). There was considerable and prolonged resistance to these restrictions as shown by the multiple examples of church discipline meted out to those playing football over the course of the succeeding centuries. During the 19th century these restrictions resulted in traditional football transformed into handball in some locations, this perceived as less likely to cause damage to property, life and limb.

A painting by Alexander Carse nicely illustrates the very physical and rather wild confusion of a traditional football game. It dates to 1818 and the location is tentatively identified as Jedburgh in the Scottish Borders, the site of the most well-known

of locations for handball in mainland Scotland. It is thought to be the earliest depiction of the game of football. In the painting we can see pushing, shoving, players on the ground, at least one injury, a father taking his boy to safety. Also of note is the proximity of non-players of all ages, including children.

Although once widespread, traditional handball games in Scotland are now found only in Orkney and the Scottish Borders. In Orkney, contests take place in the main town of Kirkwall on Christmas Day and New Year's Day (although not if these fall on a Sunday). The two teams are the Uppies and the Doonies. The Uppies hail (goal) is in the town, while the Doonies hail the ball at the harbour, often in the sea itself. The Uppies may be said to represent the land, agriculture and the season of summer, and the Doonies fishing and the season of winter. There may also be a dry/wet opposition implied. The outcome of the match was held to indicate whether the year ahead would be a good one for the fruits of the land or of the sea (Robertson 2005: 222). Four traditional games survive in the Borders, at Ancrum, Denholm, Hobkirk and Jedburgh, each taking place in the period around Fastern's E'en, the Tuesday before Lent. Players compete in each other's games and this forms an eight-day season of play. A fifth, revived, game at Duns now takes place in July. Most teams in the Borders are Uppies versus Doonies. The timing of the Borders games is at the transition between the period before Lent and Lent itself, and it is tempting to see the games as an expression of this aspect of the calendar. The painting by Brueghel the Elder 'The Battle between Carnival and Lent' (1559) is the best-known visual depiction of this transition conceptualised as a contest. As at Orkney, Borders games often follow the pattern of one goal being identified with water and the other land.

I mention these features because the extraordinary tenacity with which communities have long held on to this tradition in post-Reformation Scotland is not just a reflection of generalised antipathy to their being told not to play, but because these dates – Christmas, New Year and Shrove Tuesday – are deeply embedded in the seasonal calendar. As such we can discern a degree of compulsion among those who practise these traditions; the feeling that these games *must* be played at these points in the year, being seen as natural as the movement of the seasons themselves. The Reformed church swept away the old religious calendar as well as popular festive days; those players of football being hauled up to answer for their disobedience over the centuries are not merely anti-establishment; the removal of these key dates and their associated traditions caused a rupture in the way people experienced the passing of time itself, given that much of the population probably measured time by where they were in the sequence of fairs and festivals. That this tenacity to maintain the tradition exists today is not in doubt, although it is driven more by an attachment to place and the expression of local and regional identity. An extraordinary example of this determination is from the village of Ancrum where in 1974 and after 150 years of play, the game was at risk of dying out. A local

player, in order to ensure the game's continuance, carried a ball, often alone, on each match day from the Mercat (Market) Cross to each hail. He did this for 22 years until, by changing the date to a Saturday, he was able to secure two viable teams and the game restarted (Hornby 2008: 120).

As to the game itself it is worth setting out its general features. Play begins from a central point, a neutral, communal space, often the Mercat Cross of the town or where it once stood. Each ba' has a certain amount of money attached to it, having been sponsored by people or businesses. It is thrown up and the two teams compete to take it back to their own territory and score or 'hail' it at a designated place. The individual who hails the ba' (not the team) claims the money. This is the first of several differences with modern competitive sport. There is no visual distinction between the players, any number can play on each side, there are few if any rules, no referee (except Duns, see below) and no boundaries showing the limits of the play-space. In Jedburgh and Kirkwall the hails are relatively close, the action taking place within the towns themselves. In other locations in the Borders, however, the hails may be further apart; at Hobkirk the goals at one point were spread over an area of 23 square kilometres (Hornby 2008: 106). Being sponsored and supplied by individuals, several balls may be played one after the other and thus play may last for many hours, continuing for as long as it takes for all the balls to be hailed, even after dark. Smuggling the ball in one's pocket or hiding it for collection later are acceptable. We can therefore say that in this play-world, the notion of cheating is absent.

In Kirkwall and Jedburgh, where one lives or was born within the towns determines whether one is Uppie or Doonie. For the purposes of the game, visitors are included in the topographical schema; in Jedburgh, Doonies are both those from the lower section of the town and also 'outsiders'. In Kirkwall, visitors are Doonies if they arrive by ferry and disembark at the pier and Uppies if they arrive by air (Robertson 2005: 6). The overarching logic of the tradition thus presents as a total system, designating a role to and incorporating all those present, even unwitting observers.

The near-complete lack of regulation and control of play means that both players and onlookers are at risk of potentially serious injury. This is particularly the case in Kirkwall where around three hundred individuals play in a relatively compact space watched by around 1000 spectators. Border ba' games attract smaller numbers so injuries are less frequent.

Wooden barricades in Jedburgh protect the windows of shops (but crucially not the onlookers). This said, while minor injuries are common every year, more serious incidents are rare. In Kirkwall the most significant in recent years were as a result of a collapsed scrum in 1988 where three players lost consciousness, two requiring resuscitation – there were five hospitalisations.

## ON PHYSICALITY AND THREAT

In thinking about the question of violence in this tradition, it is worth making some general observations. As a concept, it is obviously highly subjective. Whether the way the game is played can be considered violent is a matter of

perception. If approached from the perspective of law and order then the game is clearly a challenge to the norms of civic life and reckless in its apparently casual approach as regards the risk to life and property. This, however, reflects an 'alien eye' which ignores context or at least assigns little importance to it. From the standpoint of the players, their behaviour, even if a punch or two is thrown occasionally in the heat of the moment, is not inappropriate in the context of a game which is by nature rough and ready, highly physical and carries risks. A degree of violent behaviour is justified as an integral component of the tradition. What exactly is violence in this context? The contorted faces and desperate struggling are startling, even upsetting to the outsider, but to both players and those who support the game this intense physicality is legitimate, justifiable and expected. More than this, it is rational; pushing, shoving, elbowing, disregard for the proximity of others, targeted aggression; this it is how one gets to the ball; this is how the game is played. There is, then, a tactical reason for this behaviour; it is not irrational, or 'out of control' or likely to lead to an escalation of violence.

Just as in centuries past, the game takes place in the street, not in a clearly delineated play-space. Onlookers share this space and are not kept safe by the usual barriers, buffer zones and marshalling they have come to expect at public events. However much the players and unofficial, hovering overseers try, the potential is there for bystanders to be injured. It is the nature of the game; the players are uncontained, free; they may go where they wish, pressing into shop doorways or spilling into the shop itself. This disregard not just for the proximity of non-players but even their shops and homes makes it difficult for non-locals to compare it to anything else but the kind of riotous, reckless vandalism that they may have seen on TV. This idea that the players may go where they like to retrieve the ba' – into private property if necessary – is accepted by locals but hard to fathom for the outsider. However, this privilege of unimpeded access to homes was also a feature of seasonal guising or mumming, where entry to the interior space was an expected and usually welcome experience, if a potentially unsettling one. Again we see a collision of points of view and a problem of perception.

As we have noted, the game involves trying to score what would be in conventional sport an 'own goal'. The struggle and fitful progress looks familiar and it could be argued that this reversal in the expected direction of play makes little difference to the essential nature of it. However, this format removes what is surely a core aspect of competitive sport; the encroachment, through skill and superior strength and stamina, into the opponents' 'half' through overwhelming their defences, placing them in an inferior position. The format thus also removes much of the defensive aspect and with it the sense of being diminished or humiliated. This in itself mitigates against lasting ill-feeling and the kind of frustration which leads to physical aggression and real violence. As we have noted, in a game where the ball can be secreted in pockets or even, I have been told, taken away in a child's buggy to be 'hailed' at leisure, the concept of 'unfairness' is absent.

This in turn means that inter-player tension is relatively muted, especially at smaller games. Indeed, participants generally cooperate to keep the game going. The monetary value on each ba' is modest and hardly worth behaving in such a way as to fracture a relationship or cause a deliberate 'foul' or injury. This is the nature of the intimate communication that binds all the players together. The game is fleeting, ephemeral. The divisions up/down are only strongly invoked for a day, an annual deconstruction and reassembly of a coherent fellowship of players and their community or communities. The game looks like something to do with conflict, but it is far more a cooperative activity which relates to the expression of local and regional cultural distinctiveness.

Even in the medieval period, such games had a 'double faced' aspect:

> They allowed for the expression of intimate unity and solidarity and for the expression of equally intimate and intense hostility, without giving the slightest impression that the participants themselves saw anything contradictory or incompatible in these fluctuations. Shrove Tuesday football, a ritualized and, according to our notions, fairly savage brawl between neighbouring groups, is a striking example of this compatibility between emotionally charged activities which seem to be incompatible according to present standards. (Elias & Dunning 1986: 180)

Media coverage of traditional hand ba' in Scotland focusses on its rough, highly physical character and the occasional low-level violence, pointing to a perspective which aside from marvelling that the game exists at all sees such encounters as thrilling in way quite distinct from more contemporary sport. For some of the tourists attending the game at Kirkwall, their interest and participation reflect a search for not just an exciting experience, but also perhaps reflect contemporary taste for less regulated, more extreme, raw and violent sports such as mixed martial arts or bare-knuckle boxing. The bull-run at Pamplona would be a good parallel with the Kirkwall ba' game, attracting thrill-seekers from round the world, most of whom achieve 'bragging rights' and live to tell the tale. Getting the balance between tension, excitement and safety is important for a successful event:

> A game of football constitutes a form of group dynamics with a built-in tension. If this tension […] becomes too low, its value as a leisure event declines. The game will be dull and boring. If the tension becomes too great, it can provide a lot of excitement for the spectators but it will also entail great dangers for players and spectators alike. It passes from the mimetic to the non-mimetic sphere of crisis. (Elias & Dunning 1986: 89)

The suggestion that contemporary sport is too tame for some is explored by a study of the rising popularity of bare-knuckle boxing. Outlining what he terms the trend for 'de-sportization', Raúl Sánchez-García argues that the format of US bare-knuckle fighting increases the *perceived* danger of the practice although it does not increase real harm, such as in the number of concussions. (Sánchez-García 2020: 1645–1646). His argument is that for all the primitive, shocking appearance of bare-knuckle boxing, it is not inherently more dangerous. We might

say it is becoming popular because of a change in taste and a pivoting away from mainstream boxing which is not raw or thrilling enough in a world where, certainly in my country, children are being taught mixed martial arts and kick boxing. Perhaps this helps us understand the hand ba' and its relationship to violence. It is a raw, tough, rough event which has the *appearance* of real violence, but is not in and of itself *inherently* violent and compares easily to mainstream rugby in terms of injuries. That it is *superficially* violent is not being disputed here, but we know that unlike in previous centuries serious injuries to players in modern times are rare. The real risk attached to the game comes from falling and being crushed. This has been addressed through the convention of stopping play until the fallen player has got himself up. The potential injury to unwary onlookers is a constant, but we cannot say this is connected to the game itself.

We can illustrate the connection between risk, perceived violence and actual violence through a discussion of a selection of video material.

In the documentary-style video from Kirkwall in 2007, that the ba' is a game characterised by friendly rivalry is made very plain from the outset (Doonielads 2007). However, the arrival of one of the teams is presented in the spirit of a war movie, with ominous, cinematic music accompanying the "battalion" of stony-faced players as they approach their rivals. The ba' is then thrown up and "battle" begins, now to a raucous, guitar-heavy soundtrack into which has been mixed the noise of the game and shouting from the players. One punch and one other momentary example of ill-feeling have been selected to be included in the edit. We can note the film was uploaded by 'Doonielads', clearly players from that side of the town. The mixed message is plain to see; the tradition is one of friendly rivalry and co-operation, but the temptation to highlight the disorder, incipient threat of injury and potential for violence is clearly irresistible; indeed one gets the impression that pride in the tradition is linked to these features. Understandably, there are comments from viewers from outside. One German contributor asks why they are fighting each other. Another, also German, suggests he could travel to the game and looks for other volunteers. One comment asks if there is a connection between the game and street violence. In the comments, however, there is also a stern warning to outsiders:

> The Ba is a local tradition, it is not an attraction for adventure tourists to come and try. Passions and loyalties go back generations. If you are not raised around it then you will neither understand it nor have any knowledge that will make you any use to the team you decide to play for. The game doesn't need any more players. (Chinalurch 2010)

The trouble is, having portrayed it in the way the locals have, it does have the character of a challenge, a representation of extreme machismo which invites a response from those eager to test their mettle. Visually we can suggest that connections would easily be made with the violent disorder associated with bitter rivals in mainstream football, further suggesting that those who engage in hooliganism elsewhere would find in the Ba' an opportunity for this behaviour,

licenced by tradition.

In the next video from 2018 in Kirkwall (Sinclair 2018), anxiety about the future of the game has become an obvious concern. We hear an organiser presenting the game as a family tradition, imploring the players to have fun, be safe and for there to be "no punching". He makes reference to an earlier violent incident which he doesn't want to see repeated. The implication that any serious disorder will likely bring about the end of the tradition is made explicit: "I don't want to be the last man who throws up the Kirkwall ba – look after yourselves […] believe in it", a direct and impassioned appeal to the next generation of players. This video, however, also frames the encounter in the spirit of a battle, this time using the theme music from a spaghetti western. The real risk here comes from a non-local player who may not understand or heed the warning given by the organiser.

A similar point is made by an official at the game in Ashbourne, England, in a video entitled "We entered the world's most dangerous football game" filmed by outsiders who visit to play (Alsop 2020). As at April 2023 it had been viewed 3.4 million times. Curating content to maximise visits to a YouTube channel is an obvious driver for the creation of sensationalised material. The video appears on the site via a still image of the creator's bloodied nose:

> Listen to the marshalls. The protection of property and the continuation of the game is their priorities [sic]. You play the game at your own risk […] If you are not a local person, then this is a game for local people who understand the rules. Please, please look after it, listen to what those people are telling you at all times. (Alsop 2020)

It may be for local people, but it is a game now very widely known. In 2006 a film company from Los Angeles attended, which produced a full-length production "Wild in the Streets", narrated by prominent actor Sean Bean and screened at film festivals in the USA.

In Atherstone in England play closely resembles that of the Scottish games, the big difference being that as in Ashbourne we find the very close involvement of numerous marshalls. When someone falls to the ground, a voice says 'keep on your feet' or 'stand him up', clearly recognising trampling as the main risk (Urban Pictures UK 2020). Two policemen are shown nonchalantly walking in a quiet street, looking backwards – the message to the viewer presumably being that they have no involvement in the proceedings. Despite the unexceptional levels of physicality and the smiling faces seen here and there, the title is "Brutal Atherstone Ball Game 2020 takes place in the UK". Specifying the country strongly suggests that this video is intended to be outward-facing.

However, all is not always well at Atherstone. The numbers can be enormous with many, many hundreds either playing or spectating. The video "Violent mass brawl erupts at UKs notorious Atherstone Ball Game: Extended" is an over-18s account of the game from 2019, deliberately packaged to emphasise violent content (Urban Pictures UK 2019). Although the film has been edited to show the worst of the behaviour, it is hard not to see this is an example of a game which

has the potential to get out of hand, where the robust performance of a traditional sport can spill over into thuggery. Cynical, sensationalist editing shows the police doing nothing and the mayor apparently looking down approvingly on the mayhem. There is a lot of fighting and the crowd cheer as property is damaged. We also glimpse a frightened child and some blood. In contrast with the previous video from Ashbourne – by the same makers the following year – the marshalls are shown to be ineffective.

How representative are these videos of the game at Atherstone? The first clip, showing nothing very controversial, was from 2020 and the second, apparently violent one from 2019. Was there really a 'violent mass brawl' on the latter day, or just the usual, very rough sport underway? According to Wikipedia, this second, heavily edited video was viewed 3.4 million times on Facebook (Atherstone Ball Game). There is a huge gulf between the Scottish games and this last example, but such violent images are lapped up by the media and have a profound impact on local councils as they look for an excuse to regulate or even stop them. For local organisers, videos like this illustrate the challenge they face in managing and controlling their own games; each incident of this kind makes the future of all traditional handball games more fragile. Following the 2019 game the local paper asked an organiser for his reaction to the violent images which were being widely shared:

> Mr Bernard, who has been involved with the Ball Game all his adult life, acknowledged the scenes being shared on social media do threaten the future of the event, but are "nothing new" in the centuries-old tradition […] "We discussed it as a committee that night and it's not on, it's hard to say what we can do about it, though. In the past, when things have got out of hand, we've put it out there that the future of the Ball Game is under threat and it calms down a bit the following year."
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> "I know some of the lads who were involved and I've spoken to them, they threaten the future of the Ball Game. But then it comes back again. It is the nature of it. It's nothing new, if you look on Pathé News to the 1950s and 60s, you will see what they were getting up to back then, it's always been there. But what we've got now is everyone has phones, everything is crystal clear and they can chop together all the worst bits and that's all people see." (Bridge 2020)

The same journalist asked a policeman for comment – his reply is also revealing:

> Sergeant Neil Pearsall, who has been involved with the policing of Atherstone Ball Games for nearly two decades, stressed there was an acceptance a 'level of violence' is involved.
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> He said: "I can confirm that no arrests were made before, during or after the ball game. I have seen the videos on social media and *whilst we do not condone violence of any kind*, the event was marshalled very well by the organisers with minimal Police presence."
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> "I have policed the ball game on and off for nearly 20 years and *due to its nature and traditional values there will always be a level of violence involved*. The people who take part, spectate and the actual players are aware of this." (Bridge 2020; my emphasis)

This "light touch" approach of the police is typical across all games. The sub-heading to the piece was "no arrests made or casualties reported at annual Shrove Tuesday event" and the first line "Claims a man's ear was 'ripped off' during the 820th edition of the Atherstone ball game have been dismissed by event organisers" (Bridge 2020). Although this pragmatic approach may seem a matter of choice, no locally-based official of any kind would relish being the agent who brings an end to the tradition. In other words, although the power to cancel rests primarily with local council and law enforcement, a certain amount of pressure is exerted on them by the community they serve – the expectation is that they are 'onside'.

It could be argued that the many sensationalist uploads of selected scenes framed as ritualised violence misrepresent the permissive ethos which characterises the tradition. Packaged as evidence of a tradition which facilitates assault, thuggery and damage to property, these videos risk placing the local authority and police in a position where they feel compelled to act.

## PERFORMANCE

We move now to consider some of the performative aspects of the game. As we have noted, in Scotland main play begins at the site of the mercat cross, the symbolic heart of Scottish towns. In Jedburgh, although theoretically the town's business is going on as normal, this occupation of the symbolic centre signals it is now the players' time; their domination of the communal space is a visual assertion of this. The stage is set for a transformation of the familiar, the creation of a parallel reality where, yes, you can still go to the butcher's shop but you do so at your own risk and in any case cannot see what is on offer because the windows are barricaded. Perhaps this is part of the problem; the illusion of normality created by open shops and roads lulls the watching crowd into a sense of false security. The players are not exactly heedless, and will avoid crashing into onlookers if possible, but nor are they committed to arresting their momentum once on the move. Given the numbers of bodies and the physical robustness of many of the players, in many situations they are literally unstoppable. It is up to others to protect themselves and their property. The absence of police and officials adds to the disorientation and unfamiliarity. In Jedburgh the ambulance is to be found in the car park, one street away from the square where the core action takes place, as if not to transmit the idea that injuries are anticipated.

The town square and the streets have been de-familiarised, re-conceived conceptually even for the Jedburgh natives. As a stage, the ancient town square is itself transformed from its quotidian character into something more highly marked, profound, more active. In modern times the future of the tradition rests on what happens in that space on this one day each year. Through the performance of the game, the meaning of the place has thus changed, become unstable; relationships with it have changed. Notions of access and ownership fracture and become fluid; the game invokes and enhances locals' attachment to place and the past, while for visitors it alienates and confounds. In this way we see the game having the function of a kind of drama, temporarily

creating an alternate world in order to articulate and comment on the real one. Here, it speaks to the value of tradition; as the men struggle over the ba' – in their established, hyper-robust way – they simultaneously display their determination to see the game continue, despite threats to the contrary, and articulate the continuity of the community or network of communities who practise the distinctive tradition. Watching the game can provide the local observers with an alternate means to understand their environment, their history and themselves, invoking notions of loyalty and belonging as markers of identity.

It is significant that the majority of these games begin and are largely played not on a green field out of town, but in the historical, social and economic heart of the communities. Kirkwall and Jedburgh are both traditional Scottish towns; small shops, the architecture chiefly solid 18th and 19th century. Jedburgh has its castle and abbey, Kirkwall its cathedral; there are monuments and statuary aplenty. The close identification of the game with the built heritage enables it to embody the same notions of cultural and historical value possessed by the space itself. The streets *house* the tradition; the game is woven into the fabric of the community, memories of each annual occurrence forming part of the way the streets are read and understood. Although anomalous and baffling to the outside observer, over time the ba' has been normalised in its location, as natural a feature as the other venerable institutions which surround it. This may explain the particular horror attached to threats of the game's discontinuance, so intertwined it is with notions of belonging to the cultural landscape and collective social memory.

Particularly for the outsider, the sense that the game resembles a form of dramatic dialogue with those who would wish to regulate it or see it discontinued is suggested by the similarity of its staging with more familiar forms of protest which also involve taking over public spaces without official permission and feature the disruption of commerce and the movement of people. In other words, it looks like a challenge to the establishment. The deliberately decontextualised violent imagery selected by some media is central to this dialogue. Speaking of activists who use "performative violence" to challenge the state, Jeffrey Juris notes it is "a specific mode of communication […] producing concrete messages challenging global capitalism and the state. At the same time, dominant media frames reinterpret the resulting images as random acts of senseless violence, undermining activists more generally" (Juris 2005: 413).

The 'concrete message' robustly communicated through their play (and supported by those invested in the tradition) is their determination to see the games continue on their terms. This message can be undermined by sensationalist imagery misrepresenting the true picture. There is thus a kind of information war taking place. Local media, as in the Atherstone example above, can be relied upon to downplay any injuries or disturbance.

## ON PERFORMANCE AND MASCULINITY

These traditions are exclusively male and to a significant degree function as a convenient annual

expressive component of manliness. We speak here not just of adult men; in both Kirkwall and Jedburgh, a boys' game precedes the men's.

In Jedburgh, we can discern the well-established societal link between sporting prowess and status, the ba' game mirroring the school playing field as a site where these behavioural norms are ingrained from a young age. The town looks on as their sons are inducted into this male preserve, normalising the celebration and dramatisation of male solidarity, courage, physical prowess, assertiveness and confidence.

Indeed one might say the exclusion of women and girls is necessary for the game to achieve these functions. Significant, if short-lived prestige is attached to the boy who hails a ba'. Quite young boys take part – perhaps as young as ten – but the majority are in their last couple of years at school. Over the years I have conducted fieldwork in Jedburgh we have encountered many examples of boys proudly sharing their minor injuries with me and speaking appreciatively of those they knew who suffered more significant mishaps, such as breakages.

This game can thus function as a very public proving ground for emerging masculinity, providing an annual opportunity for the community to observe the boys' journey through adolescence as their physical strength and presence develops, culminating at the age of 18 when they join the men's game.

There is a role for girls and young women, who crowd close to the action in the market square of Jedburgh to cheer on their classmates or favourite boy. The ba' has ribbons attached, which come loose as it is handled by the players. These can be presented to a girl, or retrieved from the ground where they fall.

There is no such proving ground associated with the young women's development; as David Gilmore puts it:

> An authentic femininity rarely involves tests or proofs of action, or confrontations with dangerous foes: win or lose contests dramatically played out on the public stage. Rather than a critical threshold passed by traumatic testing, an either/or condition, femininity is more often construed as a biological given that is culturally refined or augmented (Gilmore 1990: 12).

As may be seen in the videos linked to this discussion, there was perhaps a surfeit of testosterone on display in the men's game. One might think, therefore, that the opportunity for the projection of typical markers of masculinity by the adult players to the watching women and non-playing men might be a motivation for their taking part. After all, one could argue the element of risk is vital to creating the necessary environment for this display and the deployment of physical strength and bravado. Evidence of stamina and the ability to endure pain are part of the theatre of the game, accompanied by the visual and audible cues of grimacing and grunting.

What is interesting of the games of the Borders – those I know best and can comment on with most authority – is that the game presents as an experience for the players alone. Other than when they score, they do not acknowledge those who watch, nor respond to the shouts of the onlookers; they concentrate on the game and themselves only.

They are turned inward. They see only each other, communicate only among themselves. Often there is little sound; indeed there may be silence, a weird hiatus as they are locked into each other in a scrum, almost immobile, until something happens and play resumes.

We speak here of onlookers and in Jedburgh it is perfectly possible, if exhausting, to run with the players and follow the action. The same is true of Kirkwall. We noted earlier, however, that in some locations the hails are kilometres apart. Here it is not just a case of an audience being unheeded by the players, but once they move beyond the central area they are by themselves and no one is watching. Only the most dedicated of followers would trudge through the snow to watch the men struggling over a small leather ball, in the pitch dark of a Scottish winter. This underscores the kind of intimate phenomenon we have identified and the nature of how and what it communicates. Others may enjoy the spectacle and relish the dramatisation of a shared heritage, or gawp at its strangeness, but it is not intended for them. It is not a performance of this kind. Nor is it spectator sport; indeed it is highly debatable whether this kind of event implies an audience at all – the game can be successfully conducted by two individuals alone in a field (Hornby 2008: 131). As we have noted, this is not a contest which has the chief aim of diminishing the other, or where victory brings lasting prestige or even of demonstrating superior skill to any real extent. The sense of it being a team effort is undermined by the fact that to some degree players are out for themselves, that the game only happens once or twice a year and designations up/down have no or little meaning at other times of the year. Real rivalry based on frequent encounters over time or individual or group characteristics are absent. The fact that in the Borders games around Jedburgh, players from different villages form a network of participants means there is a lack of differentiation on which the logic of a true agonistic encounter rests. At the local level, such as in Jedburgh and the small villages nearby, introducing intra- or inter-community disharmony through the deliberate creation of ill-feeling benefits no-one and if anything, works *against* participation in the tradition.

## REGULATION AND THE FUTURE

The dilemma of traditional handball is that is in danger of disappearing through being banned, yet in order to remain in its present form it must resist detailed regulation or institutionalisation. Kirkwall has had a committee since 1949. Their remit is limited to selecting who throws up the ba' to start the game, ensuring access to materials to make the ball and deciding where the balls should be subsequently displayed after play. They also, importantly, arrange for a disclamatory notice to be placed in the newspaper and in shop windows. It is Orkney Island Council, not the Committee who pay for repairs (Robertson 2005: 62–64). Such a notice does not necessarily absolve the Council, Committee or perhaps even individual players from legal action.

Atherstone's Committee was formed in 1986 and now fundraises in order to pay for the taking out of liability insurance and paying marshalls.

They are very alert to the possibility of the game being discontinued. This may not necessarily be down to official and public reaction to a serious injury or fatality; one obvious problem with insurance is that once a successful claim has been made the premium will rise, perhaps beyond what can be afforded, leading to the end of the tradition.

Having no organising committee and by claiming that the event is 'a happening' and not a planned event, the local councillors and organisers at Jedburgh ensure there is no individual or group against whom to lodge a claim. I am told that every year the local council Events Planning team contact local councillors seeking a risk assessment statement, the councillors replying that they do not know who the organisers are. Billy Gillies, Jedburgh stalwart, had this to say to local newspaper the *Southern Reporter*:

> Nobody runs the ba'. It's a labour of love – a real enjoyment. There's no organisation. If you organise it, it becomes something different. It's the old men that keep the ba' alive because it's them who pass on the tradition each year to the young folk. Every year they say it's better than the last. (Hornby 2008: 112)

The aim at Jedburgh is therefore that it must remain an example of 'informal heritage' or, to use the phrase we hear from players and locals every year 'a happening'. Of the notion of heritages Christian Barrère observes:

> Even where they are informal, they result from a selection. Only some elements of the past pass through time. Those that do have a particular value, which justifies their transmission from generation to generation as well as their preservation. This value is generally linked to a specific attribute, a particular quality. (Barrère 2016: 88)

And here is the problem. The 'particular quality' of the ba' *is* its unregulated nature. Yet in practice this aspect only very rarely leads to serious incident or difficulty on the ground. There is a recognition – albeit reluctantly by some – that the tradition comes first, that its continuation trumps concerns about broken windows. As we have argued above, we might say the men are *performing* their claim to have the right to play in this format. With any tradition, we would expect development over time; the main change here is the injection of acute anxiety and concern for the survival of the whole tradition, which has actually affected the game itself as it is played physically and produced a heightened sense of the players' responsibility to themselves, to those around and to the tradition. This is a form which has become hyper-vigilant, fearful of the single incident which would bring it to an end – indeed, fearful of the future. Ironically, as some may think that we are witnessing the performance of violence, what we are actually seeing in Jedburgh and Kirkwall is largely this new, highly self-conscious 'be careful' approach above all else. Photographers have always clustered around the players – the regional authorities, if not the world, are watching. Visually, these heaving masses of maledom resemble images of protestors occupying erstwhile shared space, seeking to force a change in the order of things. It may look like disorder and is certainly disruptive of the normal flow of day to day life, but unlike violence in the

service of societal change, this game is actually about the preservation of the status quo. It may appear to be subversive of order but in fact has the contrary aim of entrenching that which has always been, protecting itself against the forces of change which threaten its existence.

As Simon J. Bronner observes:

> Tradition […] involves a negotiation between individuals and their various communities, often about alterations to the traditions responding to changes at the time of the enactment. As traditions, rather than rules, customs and norms are subject to change; individuals often creatively influence or innovate traditions. This malleability also makes traditions vulnerable in a complex, diverse society and puts more pressure on participants to be concerned for outsiders' perceptions raised about the traditions as they are performed by insiders. (Bronner 2005: 26)

This process has been ongoing for some years and over the past twenty I have observed a change in its character – less rowdy, and producing more interventions from those who stand close by. In a very perceptive essay on violence in folk football Laurent Fournier, a French colleague of traditional sport who has attended Jedburgh regularly, observes:

> Fieldwork on folk football matches thus shows that violence is eliminated at different levels: the fear to see the game being banned in the next years, the fact that everybody knows each other in the game, and the presence of women and children among the spectators has led the players to a lot of self-control in spite of the roughness of the play. (Fournier 2013: 47)

Fournier uses the term 'roughness' and of course this is exactly what we are observing. Roughness is built-in, mandatory, an expected and embedded characteristic. This is how it is played. It 'comes with the territory'. It is unruly – literally so, as there are no rules – but there are codes of conduct and conventions which govern how it is played; no one left on the ground (Robertson 2005: 41) and no punching. However, as we have noted above, it is precisely the apparent violence or threat of it that attracts or repels outsiders. Some outsiders will see the surface features and express shock; others, as argued above, will be attracted because unlike modern, highly-regulated sport the game offers the 'thrill factor', the seductive possibility that an actual fight will break out, that violence will emerge and escalate. This is not a fanciful observation; one need only watch ice hockey to see how popular the periodic fighting is with the spectators. Ironically, the game the ba' most closely resembles, rugby, is as rough a game as can be imagined. The difference is that Scottish handball takes place on the street, and the street is where we live and work and shop and walk with our children and thus the game is easily perceived as threatening, especially since it appears players have 'taken over' the space and we feel vulnerable. But I have rarely if ever seen anything which we would class in the category of unrestrained violence or anything with a threatening character. It is intensely physical, yet can be, well, gentlemanly – and I think this sums up the ba', certainly in the Borders. If we put our Jedburgh ba' players into striped and spotted shirts and placed them on a pristine green pitch there would be little to distinguish from the official

game of rugby as regards physicality. Indeed that some kind of connection with the official sport is being made is indicated by the common practice of players wearing rugby shirts. Hugh Hornby's photographs for his book on the phenomenon *Uppies and Doonies* show every single player at the revived game at the Scottish Border town of Duns wearing a rugby shirt (Hornby 2008: 137). The game there has been adapted to a modern urban environment and lasts only around 30 minutes. Hornby remarks "Rather than brute force, familiar concepts in modern sport, such as agility, speed, finding space and 'pass and move' play a much greater part" (Hornby 2008: 137). This perhaps suggests a possible future, should the more traditional form be required to change. At Duns, there is even a referee. Substituting the ba' for the approved rough sport of rugby was attempted in Kirkwall on Christmas Day in 1875, when Kirkwall Football Club held a rugby match on a field, timed to coincide with the traditional game. The game between Uppies and Doonies went on for two hours in heavy rain. The local paper noted that this innovation would not succeed unless backed by the authorities. It was not, and on New Year's Day the ba' took place on the streets as usual (Robertson 2005: 91).

## CONCLUSION

Although we are disputing whether there is any intentional violence exhibited by players in these games, the highly physical performance of the game aligns with Riches' statement that violent acts achieve "both instrumental and expressive functions" (Riches 1986: 11). However shocking to the uninitiated, the jostling, pushing and shoving are in the service of the game, of scoring and winning. Such behaviour is tactical, practical, rational and usually unemotional, in that it is seldom retaliatory and genuine ill-feeling is rarely witnessed. These actions are also expressive of a shared understanding among the players and those watching; this is our tradition, this is what it looks like and we are both permitted and expected to behave in this way. Indeed if an individual wishes to play they must, by and large, exhibit these behaviours, which are legitimised by this same tradition.

If from the community in which the game is played, a majority of those gathered to watch share the same understanding. The local community may have temporarily lost control of their streets, but the players have not lost control of themselves. The problems arise from the non-local perspective, which, in seeking to read this oddly transfigured environment, can only call upon images of unrest, chaos and lawlessness, or more highly-regulated sporting encounters where discipline has broken down. Quotidian order has been raucously destabilised, but as a facet of the venerable European carnivalesque, a wished-for, periodic interruption to the seasonal round.

The absence of central control and physical barriers means that any of those watching could become a 'victim', injured as a result of the nature of the game. This, however, is accepted; the normal expectation of personal safety is ceded in favour of being part of the action. When we reflect on what circumstance might give rise to actual violence, ironically it is the failure of a player

unfamiliar with the local codes to stay within the accepted boundaries of physical contact. Such an individual undermines the tacit ground rules and threatens the tradition itself. The police are largely passive, having respect for unwritten local rules, not wishing to suppress that which they may see as peculiarly their own. These games continue amid a careful balancing act; a treasured lack of restraint set against the risk to continuance if the authorities are provoked. One might speculate that it is helpful that the games survive at the extremities of Scottish geography; being far from the metropolitan centres, this more easily allows the maintenance of unofficial methods of problem-solving which mitigate against central control of the tradition.

Whilst the influx of curious tourists to the games at Jedburgh and Kirkwall may be welcome economically, ironically the public visibility which results via media exposure represents a threat to the very activity which brings visitors in the first place. Those games in the small villages are relatively secure, their out-of-the-way location attracting few outsiders and the more spacious layout offering only limited potential for damage to property. The main threat to their existence is the paucity of young players.

Christian Barrère identifies three kinds of informal heritage: 'heritages that are informal prior to becoming institutionalized and formal, heritages that will remain informal, staying out of the perimeter and off the lists of official heritages [, and] informal aspects of formal heritages' (Barrère 2016: 88). It remains to be seen how long traditional Scottish handball, with its long and cherished history, can remain 'out of the perimeter'.

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