

# pastime lost

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As a British literature specialist, I have always been intrigued by Jane Austen's referencing baseball in *Northanger Abbey*, published in 1818 but written much earlier, as well as one of William Blake's illustrations to "The Ecchoing Green" which shows a youth holding a baseball or rounders bat (*Songs of Innocence*, 1789). I show Blake's illustration to my Brit. Lit. survey course, joke that it's our first sports poem for the semester, and then move on to talk about Nature and the Romantics. David Block does not take such a casual approach to discussing the possible English roots of baseball. Block's *Pastime Lost: The Humble, Original, and Now Completely Forgotten Game of English Baseball* (2019), his second book exploring early English baseball as a possible origin of the "American" game, is intriguing reading as he tries valiantly to sort through a wide variety of sources (novels, letters, short stories, newspaper articles and notices, journal entries) referencing English games that may be precursors to American baseball, from "stool ball" to baseball and rounders.

As Block points out more than once, part of his aim in *Pastime Lost* is to revise claims he made in his first book on the subject, *Baseball Before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game* (2005), in particular his assumption that English "baseball" and "rounders" were essentially the same game (250). In *Pastime Lost*, Block establishes fairly successfully that English baseball originated in the early to mid-1700s and developed separately from rounders. In fact, Block suggests early baseballs were soft and struck with a hand rather than a bat. Occasionally, games were even played indoors, as suggested in a letter from Lady Hervey, dated 1748, in which she describes English Prince Frederick's family: "in winter, in a large room, they divert themselves at base-ball, a play all who are, or have been, schoolboys are well acquainted with. The ladies, as well as gentlemen, join in this amusement" (16). A co-ed, indoor baseball game, a sport familiar to schoolboys by 1748—of course, such remarks stand out, and Block dutifully explores them.

After culling through many sources, including many local 18th and 19th-century newspapers, Block develops a theory, based on frequency of mention in print, that the game of English baseball was most popular in home counties such as Berkshire and Surrey, as well as Suffolk and Norfolk, and that its popularity continued well into the 19th century, in company with rather than being replaced by rounders. He cites numerous descriptions of social fetes and community gatherings which include baseball among the entertainments indulged in. For example, Eton, in Berkshire, held a "Brocas Festival" on August 1, 1826, and included such competitions as cricket, "boys running for a hat, and girls racing for a gown" (101), but also a baseball game, which is advertised thus: "Girls under 14 years of age to play Baseball; the Winners to receive 1s. each and a Ribband; the Losers a Ribband each" (102). Under 14 girls earning money for a win in 1826, long before the first professional baseball leagues are formed by men? Very interesting!

Block is not timid in his assertions about the evolution of American baseball and its links to English baseball. Early on, he asserts that "while technically unproven by anything other than

circumstantial factors, the hypothesis that English baseball is the genetic forebear—and likely the immediate direct ancestor of America's National Pastime must be viewed as a near certainty" (5), and, later, he asserts further that "American baseball was not original. It derived from an earlier presence in England" (146). These are interesting assertions, but since *Pastime Lost* really centers on defining English baseball, exploring its roots, and building evidence that it was played as a separate game from rounders well into the 19th century, the hypothesis that American baseball is derived from English remains, as Block himself acknowledges, to be proven. Although he cites an interesting instance during the Revolutionary War where British prisoners in Cambridge, MA used "clubs designed to play at bat and ball . . . hickery-sticks three or four feet long, and near as thick as my wrist" (67) as weapons, that instance alone, as Block acknowledges, does not prove baseball, or rounders, for that matter, has come to America from Britain by 1772. But it does invite, surely, Block and others to continue scouring journals, letters, newspapers, and in this case, court testimony, for further 18th century references to baseball in America.

All in all, Block's *Pastime Lost* is well worth the read. Jane Austen's Catherine Morland may have tried many other sports than baseball (cricket, for example) in *Northanger Abbey*, but David Block, in *Pastime Lost*, has stayed centered on enhancing our understanding of the game Catherine and other children played, with or without a bat in hand.

David Block. *Pastime Lost: The Humble, Original, and Now Completely Forgotten Game of English Baseball*. University of Nebraska. 2019.

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