Eleff, Zev. *Dyed in Crimson: Football, Faith, and Remaking Harvard’s America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023. XI+285pp. Ill, Notes, Index.

Reviewed by Duncan R. Jamieson, Ashland University

While in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, baseball may have been America’s pastime, northeastern elite colleges wrestled with the divide in athletics between the importance of a winning score on one extreme versus manhood, teamwork and love of the game on the other. Harvard, along with Yale and Princeton, took their rivalries seriously, believing that their programs represented both American amateur sport and in a broader sense the nation’s culture.

President of Gratz College in Melrose Park, PA and Professor of Jewish History, with a Ph. D. in American Jewish History, Zev Eleff ‘s subtitle for *Dyed in Crimson* clearly lays out his objectives for this, his latest book. He connects football (and track) with America’s changing cultural heritage, the control Harvard’s alumni had over its athletic program and its acceptance of Puritan ideology until the 1920s when upstart midwestern Jews and Irish Catholics forced athletics, specifically the football program, and ultimately the college itself to face a new reality. Notwithstanding the importance of defeating Yale’s Elis in “the game,” winning came to have a deeper meaning, more aligned with good sportsmanship. Building on the work of Marcia Synnott and Ronald Smith, Eleff “deepens the exploration of that clash between sportsmanship and winning by placing the confrontation in historical context” (9).

The bastion of New England Brahminism, Puritan families with roots back to the colony’s founding, Harvard men were obsessed with winning while Muscular Christianity and Theodore Roosevelt’s “strenuous life” advanced honor and fair play. Earlier, these attributes can be seen in the classic sports novel *Tom Brown’s School Days,* by Thomas Hughes (1857). Both the United States and Great Britain upheld their love of sportsmanship through the rigid distinction between “amateur” and “professional,” the former playing for the sake of the game, with no acceptance of monetary reward while the latter accepted cash. To cite one clear example, Thomas Stevens, the first person to take a bicycle around the world, 1884-1886, held membership in the amateur association, The League of American Wheelmen. After successfully crossing North America awheel, he accepted a Columbia Expert bicycle from Colonel A. A. Pope as a gift, which did not impact his “amateur” status. When, however, he participated in a two-man race with a cash prize, even though he lost, the League cashiered him!

During the 1880s through the 1920s, the decades covered by *Dyed in Crimson*, mass media was limited to newspapers. While most had a regional circulation, some were in fact national in reach, which would include Boston’s major papers. The development of commercial radio in the 1920s and commercial television in the 1950s changed sports coverage. In collegiate football’s beginnings, “the game” meant only the November confrontation between Harvard and Yale. Though I am neither a news nor sports nor football junkie, while I lived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in the 1970s it was obvious “the game,” The Iron Bowl, was between the University of Alabama and Auburn University. When the winter temperature became too oppressive for me, I came back north to Ashland, Ohio, where I soon learned “the game” referred to Ohio State University versus the University of Michigan. Here abounded what are likely urban legends; if Ohio State’s coach Woody Hays were driving back from “the game” in Ann Arbor and ran out of gas, he would push his car over the state line rather than fill up in Michigan, or, for any given year if the coach had a perfect season until the team lost to Michigan the alumni would demand his head. The print, radio and television sports personalities in both states offered very little if any coverage of the Harvard Yale contest. Obviously, these days, “the game” is regional or perhaps even state or conference specific.

Still, the Boston Brahmin attitude is writ large in American culture. The homogeneity that existed for more than two centuries after the first English settlers arrived in North America was shattered by the arrival of the Irish in the 1840s. Though Blacks and Indigenous Peoples often lived in close proximity to the white Protestant elite who between 1776 and 1787 formed the United States, they were of no account because neither had any rights of citizenship. In a real sense, then, it might be argued that the 1840s saw the beginnings of a heterogeneous United States that led to anti-immigration movements that continue to this day. Charles Eliot, Harvard’s longest serving president (1869-1909), opposed both immigration and football, the latter because of its warlike nature. When he stepped down, A. Lawrence Lowell took the helm (1909-1933), and though the number of Jewish students increased he proposed a quota to limit their numbers. Though they often came from impoverished backgrounds they prized its education, but in addition to attending classes and studying they frequently worked during the evenings and weekends to afford the tuition, thus restricting their participation in the school’s culture.

In the 1920s the leadership of athletics in general and football in particular changed dramatically when Bill Bingham became Athletic Director. Though from a humble background, growing up in the mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts, thirty miles north of Cambridge, he had attended the elite Philips Exeter Academy, one of Harvard’s primary feeder schools. Shortly after his appointment in 1926, he hired as head football coach Arnold Horween, a Jewish alumnus who led the Crimson in their 1920 win in the Tournament East West Football Game, now the Rose Bowl, over the Oregon Webfoots, now the Ducks. In addition to not being from historic New England’s Protestant stock, Horween grew up in Chicago and rather than attending one of the elite New England prep schools that funneled their graduates to Harvard, he graduated from Chicago’s Francis W. Parker School, “a hallmark of democracy and Americanism” (66). There he excelled in both academics and athletics, captaining the school’s football team. When it came time to attend college, his coach who had played for Harvard, encouraged Horween to attend. After graduation Bingham brought him on board; together the AD and the football coach shifted the athletics program’s policy for recruitment from social status to merit. Though the east coast alumni resisted the changes, they ultimately accepted the emphasis on both sportsmanshi*p* and diversity.

Readers more immersed in the growth and development of collegiate football will find Eleff’s analysis interesting and worthwhile. Those more interested in Harvard’s shifting culture as I am may struggle with some of the detail, but they will enjoy the analysis of the college’s shifting culture. With this in mind, though not directly connected to Eleff’s subtitle, “*remaking Harvard’s and [Yale’s] America*, readers might be interested in *Harvard Works Because We Do*, Greg Halpern, 2003, and *The Other Side of Prospect*, Nicholas Davidoff, 2022. A 1999 graduate of Harvard, Halpern spent three years interviewing and photographing blue collar service workers while Davidoff offers an analysis of race, class and violence in a neighborhood adjacent to Yale. Though neither of these works address sport in general or football in particular, they do explore the ways in which Harvard and Yale are continuing to grow and develop more of a social consciousness, especially relative to their neighbors in Cambridge and New Haven as well as their service workers.