From Beauty to Duty: A Footballing History of Uruguay, 1878-1917 by Martin da Cruz

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Reviewed by Sofía Masdeu, Yale University

Squeezed between giants Brazil and Argentina, Uruguay has managed to acquire a reputation as

a progressive and politically stable country, as well as Latin America’s strongest democracy. Yet

pressed on Uruguay’s successes, its people are more likely to boast of the country’s football

(soccer) triumphs, effortlessly recalling victories as far back as the early Olympic Games (1924

and 1928) and World Cups (1930 and 1950). *From Beauty to Duty* (2022) seeks to move past

this shabby romanticism with which Uruguayans, inculcated since childhood, approach the small

nation’s successes and instead construct a “footballing history,” as the book’s subtitle puts it.

Rather than drawing upon tirelessly repeated myths of Uruguayan exceptionality, author Martin

da Cruz displays meticulous research on how football swiftly became the national sport,

especially by capturing the deep-rooted connection between the emerging nation and the arrival

of football in the late 19th century.

Uruguay’s identity has always been tied to its massive neighbors. The Cisplatine War (1825–

1828) fought between Brazil and Argentina ended, via British mediation, with the creation of

Uruguay as a buffer state. Football landed on Uruguay’s shores half a century later, as the

country was in the making. Da Cruz claims that “Football arrived when Uruguay’s identity was

at stake. When the country needed to set itself apart from its more powerful neighbors” (10).

This passage exhibits one of the major accomplishments of this book, namely its ability to

provide a solid historical background in a concise and accessible manner. The text offers a

glimpse of the economic, social, and political aspects that had an impact on the football scene,

and vice versa.

Football, da Cruz shows, was introduced when the nation was in need of bringing together a

diverse mass of immigrants, who had arrived in a short period of time to a country smaller than

the state of Oklahoma. On the one hand, the sport helped integrate the European immigrants and

their children and provided them with a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it exercised

exclusion. Even if the situation improved with the years, blue-collar players of Italian descent

such as Foglino, Romano, or Piendibene were the ones who “represented a Uruguayan success

story, the triumph of the working-class immigrant integration into national life” (239), while

others were relegated to the margins. The book thoroughly examines the critical role played by

the working class and the immigrant community, suggesting a parallel between the formation of

a national identity and the appropriation of football nationwide. Nevertheless, the absence of the

black population in the national narrative also finds its parallel on the field, as the author

rightfully stresses.

Historically, Uruguay has sought to erase its indigenous and black heritage, instead playing up its

immigratory component. As the author shrewdly notes, “Football arrived as Uruguay began

consolidating as a nation state. When it saw itself as a new nation. A white nation. It was a nation

born from genocide ... The country also denied its Black heritage. The people who in their

slavery and eventual freedom built the country and fought its wars and formed part of its

working-class mass remained officially invisible, constantly marginalized” (9).

Despite the “cultural walls” (14) the British erected on Uruguayan soil, football was massively

played and passionately felt by its people in no time. Football matches were part of a true public

space where “Children from tenements could stand alongside those of the well-to-do. Immigrants

and Black people could mix with English gentlemen” (49). At the same time, “they only saw

white men and boys and elites play the game. On the pitch, there remained a strong regard to sex,

age, and condition” (49). Just as the British established their own church, hospital, cemetery,

newspapers, and social clubs in Montevideo (most still standing today), the Uruguayan

population also divided those who had the right to play from those who could only participate as

spectators.

In addition to the rapidly changing demographics, the arrival of football at the end of the 19th

century also coincided with a set of internal political disputes. In 1897, a civil war broke out

between the Colorado (Red) and the Blanco (White) party. Even at that time, football was

already operating as a refuge from turbulent grounds. As da Cruz said of a match in Punta

Carretas, at the southern end of Montevideo: “While war raged on in the interior, Uruguayans

gathered at the furthest point of the country for some respite. And in Punta Carretas they found

the perfect escape. If only for two hours the world around them ceased to exist” (39). However,

the succeeding (and final) conflict between fellow countrymen had a major impact on the

flourishing national football league, as players were recruited to join the battlefield. The heavily

historical passages in the book are mitigated by clear-cut episodes that bring the reader back to

the football field, such as the story of the anarchist River Plate F.C.. After the last civil war

ended in 1904, the club changed its jersey from black to red and white vertical stripes to combine

“the red of the Colorados and the white of the Blancos as a homage to national peace, to unity.

To declare the era of Uruguayans killing Uruguayans over” (123).

The book does much more than this. In addition to critically examining the concept of nation and

the ways in which football contributed to its creation, it also delves into early and historical

rivalries (Uruguay vs. Argentina; Nacional vs. CURCC/Peñarol), pioneer clubs (Albion),

historical figures (president José Batlle y Ordóñez, as well as many footballers), and social

movements. For all that, it is a Montevideo-centered book, with no regard to the football scene in

the provinces. That absence mirrors the stark division between the capital and the interior, still

present today, when it comes to the cherished national sport.