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James Robinson, from Mancunian Butcher to American College Trainer

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Newton Heath, Manchester, became a hub for pedestrianism during the mid-nineteenth century, with two well-respected running enclosures and over forty establishments linked to sporting entertainments located along Oldham Road. As a community for sporting recreations, athletes occupied the buildings on the thoroughfare between Manchester and Oldham, combining business with their sporting endeavours.¹ However, due to middle-class reform and control, the sport of pedestrianism fell into decline during the latter part of the nineteenth century and amateur athletics emerged as its respectable counterpart. Traditionally associated with the public schools and universities, athletics presented itself as an exclusive sport that favoured those of an educated class, governed by the Amateur Athletic Association from 1880 and established as a means of regulating working-class pastimes.² Those who previously competed and trained in a professional capacity were now banned from amateur competition but a new wave of working-class amateurs emerged who gained access through ability and their association with amateur organisations. Professional pedestrian trainers were not welcome in the new athletic constitution so sought work in other sports, such as soccer, or moved abroad to countries where their expert assistance was required. Biographies have emerged which have detailed the migration of professionals but this is a relatively small area of exploration and there are still numerous individuals who have been erased from sporting history and require further consideration.³ This poster will present the biography of James Robinson (1847-1906) tracing his journey from working-class athlete to athletic director and

¹ Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, 'George Martin, "Wizard of Pedestrianism" and Manchester's Sporting Entrepreneur', *Sporting Lives*, ed. David Day (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University Press, 2011), 170-198.

² Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 59-62.

³ Dave Day, 'London Swimming Professors: Victorian Craftsmen and Aquatic Entrepreneurs', *Sport in History*, no. 30 (2010): 32-54; 'Massaging the Amateur Ethos: British Professional Trainers at the 1912 Olympic Games', *Sport in History*, no. 32 (2012): 157-182; "'What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?'" Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model', *Women's History Review*, no. 21 (2012): 419-446; 'Walter Brickett: a Respectable Professor' (conference paper, Leisure Studies Association, Bolton Museum, Bolton, April 7, 2009); Hugh Dauncey, 'Choppy in France: Controversial Coaching in the Belle Epoque' (conference paper, British Society of Sports History, University of Glasgow, September 8, 2012); Rob Hadgraft, *The Little Wonder: the Untold Story of Alfred Shrubbs, World Champion Runner* (London: Desert Island Books, 2004); *Beer and Brine: the Making of Walter George, Athletics First Superstar* (London: Desert Island Books, 2011); *Tea with Mr Newton: 100,000 Miles – The Longest "Protest march" in History* (London: Desert Island Books, 2011).

uncovering his legacy as America's 'first college trainer'.⁴ Born in Manchester, England, to a family of butchers located off the Oldham Road, Robinson competed in amateur competitions for Manchester Athletic Club before migrating to America to pursue a career in athletics.⁵ Through employment at several New York amateur organisations Robinson gained sporting recognition and subsequently entered the college system as an athletic trainer and "professor" to numerous east coast Ivy League institutions, most notably Princeton University from 1883 to 1906.⁶ A range of sources have been accessed and utilised including newspapers, genealogical records, images and primary texts, to present an accurate interpretation of Robinson's life course, with the twenty-first century digital age transforming the traditional archive and encouraging new perspectives on source material.⁷ Taking a constructionist approach, which looks to both theory and evidence to legitimise the narrative, empirical remnants of the past will be analysed and contextualised to develop a 'narrative truth', providing an accurate biography that is reconstructed through story.⁸

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⁴ *Auburn Weekly Bulletin*, March 20, 1906, 6.

⁵ *England, Births and Christenings, 1538-1975*, James Robinson, baptised 05 Sep 1847 at Manchester Cathedral, Lancashire (C07354-2); *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, August 12, 1871, 8; June 22, 1872, 5; July 6, 1872, 12; July 27, 1872, 5; August 3, 1872, 5; June 14, 1873, ; *New York Passenger Lists 1820-1957*, SS Erin, 18 March, 1879 (M237_416).

⁶ *Census Returns*, James Robinson 1900 (1159/12B/133/1241159); *New Jersey State Census*, James Robinson 1885 (807/114/888625); 1905 (228/11/9/1688613); *Boston Daily Globe*, July 24, 1905, 14; *New York Times*, March 20, 1906, n.p.; William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 309-311; Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, 'James Robinson, Manchester "Ped" to Princeton Athletic trainer' (conference paper, British Society of Sports History, University of Glasgow, September 7, 2012).

⁷ Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, 'Narrative, Biography, Prosopography and the Sport Historian: Historical Method and its Implications', *Sports and Coaching: Pasts and Futures*, ed. David Day (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University Press, 2012), 41-45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37; Douglas Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 54, 267; Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 119-120.

