

THE SPORT OF ROWING

To the readers of *www.Rowperfect.co.uk*

This is the sixth installment on *www.Rowperfect.co.uk* of the latest draft of the beginning of my coming new book. Many thanks again to Rebecca Caroe for making this possible.

Details about me and my book project are available at *www.rowingevolution.com*. For seven years I have been researching and writing a four volume comprehensive history of the sport of rowing with particular emphasis on the evolution of technique. In these last months before publication, I am inviting all of you visitors to the British Rowperfect website to review the near-final draft. Your comments, suggestions, corrections, agreements, disagreements, additional

sources and illustrations, etc. will be an essential contribution to what has always been intended to be a joint project of the rowing community.

All my contact info is at my website. I will also be at the FISA Coaches' Conference in London in January. Or you can email me anytime at:

pmallory@rowingevolution.com.

For a short time you can still access the first five installments, which have been updated thanks to feedback from readers like you. Additional chapters for your review will continue to appear at regular intervals on *www.Rowperfect.co.uk*.



The Sport of Rowing

A Comprehensive History

by
Peter Mallory

Volume I

Genesis

draft manuscript January 2011

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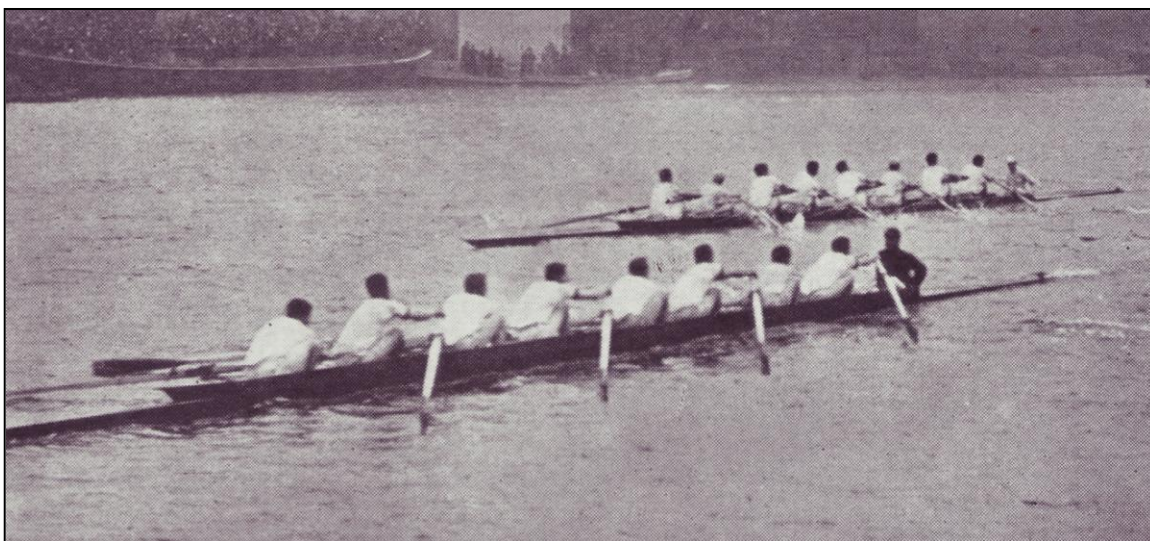
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17. Documenting Decline

Richard Burnell – The Aging Process – English Orthodoxy Endures



Burnell, *Swing Together*

1897 Oxford Blue Boat

Boat Race Winner

Bow **J.J.J. Koop** 11st. 6lb. 73 kg, 2 **G.O.C. Edwards** 12st. 1lb. 77 kg,
3 **C.K. Phillips** 12st. 0½lb. 76 kg, 4 **C.D. Burnell** 13st. 9lb. 87 kg,
5 **E.R. Balfour** 13st. 8½lb. 86 kg, 6 **R. Carr** 12st. 11½lb. 81 kg,
7 **W.E. Crum** 12st. 3lb. 78 kg, Stroke **Harcourt Gold** 11st. 11lb. 75 kg,
Coxswain **H.R.K. Pechell** 8st. 0½lb. 51 kg

“My father used to rub the outside of his shoulders
against the inside of his knees at full stretch forward.”

- **Richard Burnell**

Richard Burnell, Historian and Philosopher

Olympic Rowing Champion,⁸³⁰
journalist and historian **Richard Desbor-**
ough “Dickie” Burnell (1917-1995) came

⁸³⁰ See Chapter 77.

from an old Eton and Magdalen⁸³¹ College,
Oxford rowing family. His father, **Charles**

⁸³¹ another of the twenty-three colleges that made
up the University of Oxford in the early 19th
Century; for Americans, pronounced “maudlin,”
a word derived from Mary Magdalene, who was
often portrayed as a weeping penitent in
Christian art. They use black blades with a white
lily.

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Desborough Burnell (1876-1969), had rowed in the Oxford Blue Boats from 1895 to 1898 and won the Boat Race all four times. Of the thirty-six seats in those four winning shells, thirty were filled with Burnell and his fellow Etonians.⁸³²

Ten years after he took leave of Oxford, C.D. Burnell was called out of retirement to represent his country in the 1908 Olympics. In a boat quickly dubbed the **Old Crocks**, he and his mates brought home Olympic Gold.⁸³³

Burnell fils: “The walls at home were well hung with oars and rowing photographs.”⁸³⁴

The University experience of young Burnell, however, was less exhilarating than that of his father. He represented Oxford in 1939, the last Boat Race before the war, and they lost by four lengths.

The Aging Process

Unfortunately, though Warre, de Havilland and Bourne had done much of their writing on Classical Technique during the first three decades of the 20th Century, Britain’s post-Fairbairn Golden Age had not lasted consistently even much past the end of the 19th.

This was clearly demonstrated when historian Burnell analyzed historical times from Henley. “From 1870 to 1890 there was an improvement of about ten seconds in every five years, but from the early ‘90s until somewhere around 1925, there was virtually no progress at all.

“The average times today [1951] are just what they were sixty years ago.”⁸³⁵

⁸³² Eton’s primacy continued well into the 20th Century. When R.D.’s son, **P.C.D. Burnell** rowed for Oxford in 1962, he and five of his teammates were Old Etonians.

⁸³³ See Chapter 24.

⁸³⁴ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 76

To say that history tends to repeat itself has become trite, but there is one phenomenon which has indeed repeated itself over and over during the two centuries since sport rowing was invented at Eton College. It recurs virtually unnoticed to this day.

Approaches to rowing that achieve initial success tend to **deteriorate over time**. As a movement matures over a period of three years or ten years or fifty years or however much time, it gets bigger and stronger and more purposeful and tougher . . . and soon *slower!* Eventually, as we review the full span of rowing history, we will see this phenomenon occurring over and over and over *ad infinitum* up to the present.

The symptoms seem to mimic the **Aging Process** in biological organisms: loss of energy and flexibility, loss of vision and hearing, hardening of the arteries, memory loss and on and on.

Ideas and approaches which began as fresh and innovative slowly become rigid rules imposed inflexibly. The focus moves from the goal of moving boats to the goal of following the approved individual steps prescribed to achieve the goal of moving boats.

English Orthodox Endures

The fascinating thing is that English Orthodox Technique survived at all. One person gives the credit to Steve Fairbairn!

Luckman: “Never underestimate the English upper class prejudices of the period about being taught anything by a mere colonial such as Steve. I believe that is why English Orthodoxy was clung to so tenaciously, even though demonstrably biomechanically unsound, because after all, harumph, it is English!”⁸³⁶

⁸³⁵ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 17

⁸³⁶ Luckman, personal correspondence, 2010

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Richard Burnell believed that he had inherited from his father a clear and precise description of the Golden Age of British Rowing. He hadn't.

Burnell: "In the first place, there was the long forward swing. My father has often told me that he used to rub the outside of his shoulders against the inside of his knees at full stretch forward. The body was packed right down on to, or even between the knees, at the forward position. The beginning was a lightning drop, effected by a sudden upward movement of the hands. Simultaneously there was an upward and backward spring of the body off the knees.

"It has been described as a 'Shoulder Catch.' The important thing was that the leg drive did not master the opening of the body angle. The leg drive was there, but *the opening of the body angle started fractionally before it.*

"And the beginning was taken with straight arms.

"Throughout the stroke, the legs were not permitted to master the backward swing of the body, so the knees were still largely bent when the body reached the perpendicular, and even when the body was approaching the finish, they were still substantially bent. They were only flattened, and the slide only reached the backstop at the last moment of the stroke. The arms did not flex until the body was passing the perpendicular. [my emphasis]"⁸³⁷

Interestingly, this was *not* the technique of the great Boat Race winners of the late 1880s. This was *not* the technique of Warre or de Havilland or Bourne. What had been passed down to Burnell was *not* the

concurrent *Schubschlag* Fairbairn/Muttlebury/Nickalls Classical Technique but the sequential English Orthodoxy that had been described in 1897 by Rudie Lehmann in the *Isthmian Library* volume⁸³⁸ and that Burnell could see all around him in 1952.

Page: "After 1892, those who had either rowed with Steve or had been coached by him were gradually disappearing from the active rowing scene, and rowing on the Tideway and the Cam began to fall back into the bad ways that Steve had tried to eradicate."⁸³⁹

Warre and de Havilland and Bourne were **revered** by the Orthodox community but largely ignored in their inconvenient details. Lehmann's books came at just the right moment. His fame as a coach gave them credibility, and they were carefully read and **followed!** After only a few years, mainstream British rowing could carry on as if Steve Fairbairn had never existed.

Just as English Orthodoxy had absorbed the invention of the sliding seat with hardly a ripple, so it quickly regrouped and resumed its original dogmatic path after being only briefly rattled by the virtual doubling of slide length after Ned Hanlan.

To Be Continued

It turns out that Richard Burnell not only analyzed and wrote about rowing history. He *made* history, too.

Like his father, the younger Burnell would compete in the Olympic Games a decade after his University years, and this will be discussed later in Chapter 77.

⁸³⁷ Burnell, *Swing*, pp. 24, 33-4

⁸³⁸ See Chapter 16.

⁸³⁹ Page, p. 38

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18. Rowing History's Greatest Lesson

Inbreeding – Intolerance – Mutation to Kernschlag

Inbreeding

Part of what happened with Late English Orthodox Technique was akin to **inbreeding**, one of the four mechanisms of change in population genetics.⁸⁴⁰

Professor **John A. Winder** of Oregon State University: “In nature, large populations are often segregated into smaller breeding groups by geography or by catastrophic events that isolate small subpopulations from the main population. Perhaps an island is formed by a flood or earthquake, isolating animals and plants that cannot swim or fly to the mainland. If the isolated group is very small, relatives begin to mate at increased frequency, causing increased inbreeding.

“When inbreeding occurs, diversity is lost within subpopulations over time as individuals within an interbreeding subpopulation become increasingly more related and consequently more similar in appearance and function.

“As organisms become more uniform within each subpopulation, they become much less resilient and lose the ability to respond to environmental changes.

“Another result of inbreeding is the increased expression of deleterious genes. In non-inbred populations, bad genes are often masked by other genes and not expressed. This is possible because they tend to pair with genes that are functional and dominant. With inbreeding, there is an

increased probability that two deleterious genes will pair up and thus be expressed fully.”⁸⁴¹

When inbreeding takes place, diversity within a population is lost, and in living organisms, the maintenance of genetic diversity is often key to survival.

In the biological world, if a population loses diversity, it is unable to respond to changes in its environment. This leads to population decline and, in extreme cases, extinction of sub-species and/or species.

Conversely, populations that maintain some degree of genetic variation possess potential to adapt and change in response to new environmental challenges.

In rowing philosophy, diversity also seems to be crucial for survival and success. If a rowing program is rigidly based on a narrow set of ideas (or ideals), it will be unwilling or unable to change in response to shifts in equipment or training or competition or to other emerging challenges or opportunities.

Intolerance

It would seem reasonable that as performance stagnates and even declines, the desire for change would increase. In fact, throughout rowing history the opposite has tended to occur, and that is what happened in Britain after 1890.

Sadly, we will discover that English Orthodoxy is only the first of many, many

⁸⁴⁰ See the Introduction.

⁸⁴¹ Winder, pp. 5-6

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historical instances of an approach to rowing which has deteriorated over time and yet has been clung to ever more desperately by its adherents as it became ever more unsuccessful.

This phenomenon is not peculiar to rowing alone among human endeavors. Any group or organization tends to resist change once it has become firmly established. Absence of diversity tends to lead directly to narrow mindedness. Established ideas become codified and revered. New ideas are treated as heresy. A “circle the wagons” mentality sets in.

If change becomes necessary, such organizations are too static and lack the flexibility needed to respond to the challenge.

By contrast, organizations that tolerate a diversity of viewpoints and ideas possess the potential to change, adapt, survive and thrive.

Organizations that wish to have the ability to adapt must encourage diversity of thought. This can be fostered by including individuals with varied backgrounds and by fostering an environment open to the creation and/or importation and application of new concepts and approaches.⁸⁴²

English Orthodoxy: A Cautionary Tale

Just as with an organism in nature, history demonstrates that an approach to rowing must evolve or die, and lack of diversity may well result in functional extinction. English Orthodoxy, especially in the wake of Rudie Lehmann, suffered just such a fate. As it had been passed down to each new generation, subtle distinctions morphed into dogma. Recessive genes became dominant. Orthodoxy became

fossilized, petrified, a mere caricature of itself.

Burnell described it as “a series of postures, of positions passed through during a set of formula movements,”⁸⁴³ which became the end in itself instead of the means to an end.

“The Orthodox conception of rowing was an analysis of the movements of the perfect oarsman. It was not a conception of how to achieve them.”⁸⁴⁴

We will discover that the fossilization of English Orthodoxy has been repeated on many levels throughout history as coaches have gotten bogged down in the details of a particular technique and in the process have lost sight of the underlying rhythm and purpose of rowing.

Mutation

During history, if a rower or a coach wished to share a particular insight or approach, the idea had to be communicated through words or pictures or by example, and over and over this has turned out to be a daunting task.

In rowing, the equivalent of genetic mutation can come from listening to instructions from your own coach and remembering them wrong, or from seeing something in another crew when it’s not actually there, or from reading something a coach has written and misunderstanding the original intent.

It can come from trying and failing to describe to others what you yourself do naturally.

Perhaps all it takes is getting the emphasis wrong. Rowing technique is a matter of enormous subtlety. Trying to describe it can be like trying to grasp smoke.

American coach **Steve Gladstone**: “It is very dangerous to observe another crew

⁸⁴² This discussion is substantially based on Winder, pp. 2-3

⁸⁴³ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 34

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 35

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and attempt to copy them. One can never be absolutely sure of the purpose of a particular drill or a particular aspect of style, and it is very easy to jump to the wrong conclusions.”⁸⁴⁵

Andrew Carter: “I believe very firmly that there are myths in rowing that may originally have been grounded in fact, but mimicking over years or the misinterpretation of information has significantly distorted the truth.

“With my area being biomechanics, I really am sensitive to these myths, mantras, and misinterpretations, and I am continuously amazed at how ‘high up’ in the coaching community they not only exist but are perpetuated.”⁸⁴⁶

The result is mutation, the unintended and accidental transformation of an idea as it passes from one individual to another. As in biology, mutation may occasionally work out for the better. Indeed, mutation in nature is the engine of change for advancement.

But most of the time . . . it is not for the better. It is for the worse . . .

More is Better! . . . or Is It?

It seems to be part of human nature for a rower or a coach to conclude that if a particular aspect of technique or training is good, then more of it must be better. So a technique tends to become more extreme, more exaggerated over time. It seems to be part of the natural maturation process.

If a little discipline is good, then more discipline must be better. If erect posture is good, military posture must be better. If mileage is good, then more mileage must be better.

We will discover frequently during rowing history that the “more is better” philosophy will play itself out in the area of force application. A technique originally based on *Schubschlag* tends to gradually evolve over time into *Kernschlag*.

Apparently, if pulling hard is good, then pulling harder or more affirmatively or more assertively or more aggressively *must* be better. Ignoring the fact that *both Schubschlag* and *Kernschlag* already are a product of maximum effort, making the catch the primary focus of the pullthrough seems to appeal to our primitive human sensibilities. It seems to be human nature to want to “use a bigger hammer” to get a job done. Leg muscles are well suited for generating explosive effort. If you start pushing them down faster and faster and faster, if you focus on punching more and more, it can happen to a technique so gradually over time, over months or years or even decades, that I don’t know if you’d notice it even from within the boat.

At some point, a smooth force application with emphasis on applying maximal force as quickly as possible, theoretically and experientially a laudable goal, mutates into an explosive force singularity upon entry, a punch followed by the rest of the stroke. This two-part pullthrough has been universally understood on both the cerebral and practical levels to be dysfunctional when it comes to moving boats.

We will soon find that this very mutation path was certainly a major factor in the decline of English Orthodoxy.

History’s Greatest Lesson

Over and over, the second- or third-generation mutated and dysfunctional *Kernschlag* version of a successful original smooth *Kernschlag* or *Schubschlag* technique will turn out to be an evolutionary dead end. Why has this not been obvious to

⁸⁴⁵ Gladstone, personal conversation, 2005

⁸⁴⁶ Carter, personal correspondence, 2005

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the coaches and to the rowing community as a whole?

Often, the closer one studies a problem, the more invisible becomes the solution. Balance and perspective get lost as the focus is narrowed.

Perspective is everything!

One factor contributing greatly to the

tragic recurrence of this phenomenon over the decades is that until now rowers or coaches have not had available any comprehensive history of rowing technique so that this historical pattern could be detected and learned from.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

- **George Santayana**

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19. Fairbairnism

Fairbairn's Beliefs Concerning Technique

In 1903, after nearly sixteen years in his ancestral home in Australia, **Steve Fairbairn** (1862-1938) returned to Great Britain in order to become the rowing coach of Jesus College, Cambridge, and later of Thames and London Rowing Clubs.⁸⁴⁷ What he discovered was that the Golden Age of British rowing was already long over. The technique that he had taught to his Cambridge teammates in the mid-1880s, what Haig-Thomas & Nicholson would later call the **English Style**,⁸⁴⁸ had been almost entirely forgotten.

To Steve's mind, English Orthodoxy had become a straight-jacket, and he determined to fight back. He led a messianic campaign against the *status quo*, becoming a true revolutionary, endeavoring "to get more oarsmen to think for themselves."⁸⁴⁹

Future historian and Fairbairn-hater **Peter Haig-Thomas** was coached by Steve during his rowing career: "In 1903, Steve Fairbairn coached Cambridge for about a fortnight at the beginning of February. We all thought him a very good coach, and he coached us in the **English Style**, in which he himself rowed."⁸⁵⁰



Portrait at Jesus College by James Quinn, 1926

Steve in his Cambridge blazer and cerise Leander scarf

"Selection in a Boat Race crew qualified one for membership of Leander. Many are the members who never dipped an oar in the water in anger for the club and have even rowed for other clubs against Leander while maintaining membership of Leander. It is entirely conceivable that Steve would sit for his portrait dressed in Cambridge blazer and Leander scarf, especially as it was bound to piss off Rudy Lehman!" – **Charles Luckman**

⁸⁴⁷ He returned briefly in 1897-98.

Page, p. 28

⁸⁴⁸ See Chapter 15.

⁸⁴⁹ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 227

⁸⁵⁰ Haig-Thomas & Nicholson, p. 54

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Mike Spracklen

Rowing Notes, 1926, *Slowly Forward*, 1929, *Chats on Rowing*, 1934

Fairbairn was a man of infinite ego, and especially in the two decades before his death in 1938, he would publish prolifically on all facets of rowing. According to his son, **Ian Fairbairn**, “he was sincerely convinced that somehow or other he had learnt the truth about rowing and owed it to other men to teach them that truth.”⁸⁵¹

And apparently he felt he owed it to them not to mince words. He called the English Orthodoxy he confronted upon his

return “Awfuldoxy”⁸⁵² and once wrote that rowing techniques in England were like the seasons in Australia, “bad, damned bad and bloody awful.”⁸⁵³

Many believe that in the century since 1903, Fairbairn has become the single most influential coach in rowing history. According to Yale University coach, **Steve Gladstone**, “There’s nobody within three lengths of him!”⁸⁵⁴

⁸⁵¹ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 18

⁸⁵² Edwards, p. 19

⁸⁵³ Mendenhall, Ch. XVI, p. 4

⁸⁵⁴ Gladstone, personal conversation, 2004

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He has certainly been the most controversial and the most polarizing figure who ever pulled an oar, who ever raised a megaphone or put pen to paper.

There truly *is* nobody within three lengths of him!

Fairbairn was a “Naturalist.”⁸⁵⁵

In Fairbairn’s opinion, English Orthodox coaches had devolved into teaching body mechanics and rigid posture instead of teaching rowing.

He told his rowers to concentrate on what their blades should be doing and let their bodies *naturally* take care of themselves. He believed that the subconscious mind knows better than the conscious mind what it should do in any given situation, and this is very important when applied to skills.

Geoffrey Page: “Steve taught his oarsmen to think of the end product rather than a predetermined conscious pattern of movement. He asked them to concentrate on bladework and left them to work out how best to do it.”⁸⁵⁶

In Fairbairn’s opinion, the difference between his own approach and the rigidity of post-Golden Age English Orthodoxy was “the difference between Prussian Militarism and *natural* action.”⁸⁵⁷

Karl Adam (1912-1976) was a revolutionary mid-20th Century German coach who will be discussed at length later in this book.⁸⁵⁸ He was strongly influenced by Steve and recognized the Fairbairn approach as **cybernetics**, the study of how organisms *coordinate* complex tasks, rather

than **biomechanics**, the application of the principles of mechanics to the study of human motion.

Karl Adam: “The original [English Orthodox] method of teaching rowing through a progress from one position to another on a machine was like learning a song note-by-note rather than by learning the melody.”⁸⁵⁹

English Orthodoxy versus Classical Technique

Both approaches to rowing technique have always had the same goal. They have just gone about achieving it from opposite philosophical directions. Even though they did not really disagree on any truly fundamental aspect of technique, English Orthodoxy had become **process-oriented** while Fairbairn was **goal-oriented**, and that was a stunningly revolutionary approach one hundred years ago.

It is still revolutionary today.

And that was really the biggest difference, perhaps the only *really important* difference, between the English Orthodoxy of Rudie Lehmann and the Classicism of Steve Fairbairn (and Hanlan and Warre and de Havilland and Bourne).

Burnell: “Orthodoxy was a precise style. Fairbairnism was not a style at all, but a method of teaching.”⁸⁶⁰

So simple, yet so profound. British rowers have been arguing with one another for a century, and all that it has ever been about is *attitude!*

Steve focused on the fact that the rower’s job was to move the boat, and that rowing technique had no purpose other than to allow him to do that effectively.

⁸⁵⁵ Dodd, *World Rowing*, p. 84

⁸⁵⁶ Geoffrey Page, qtd. by Dodd, *World Rowing*, p. 162

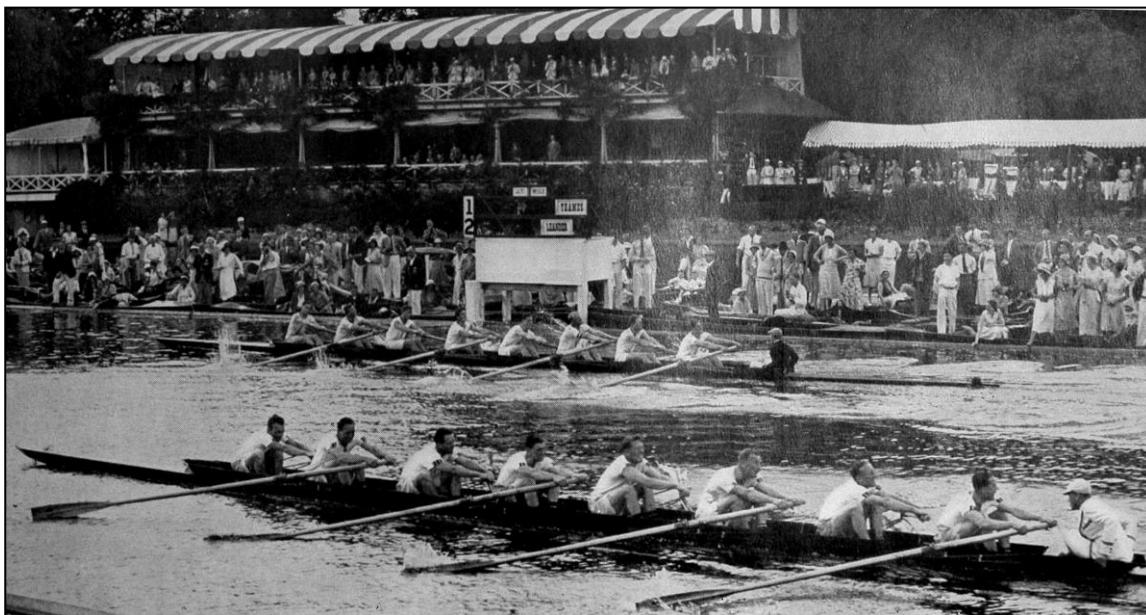
⁸⁵⁷ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 132

⁸⁵⁸ See Chapter 92.

⁸⁵⁹ Adam, p. 3

⁸⁶⁰ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 39

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Burnell, *Swing Together*

1932 Grand Challenge Cup Final
Leander Club (English Orthodox) over **Thames R.C.** (Fairbairn)
“No essential differences.” – **Burnell**
Bell-Note entries in foreground.

Of all aspects of coaching in the entire history of rowing, this is surely the most important!

Fairbairn was an Egalitarian.

Steve was a man from the egalitarian post-frontier colonies of Australia. He encouraged his rowers to become “good watermen,”⁸⁶¹ a term with stunning class implications for the blooded members of his college crews, and in so doing, he ruffled many feathers.

In Australia, professional scullers were still heroes, and Steve drew inspiration from them, believing that “one may count on their views being sound, because they earn their bread and butter by it.”⁸⁶² This was a

complete break with English Orthodoxy, which abhorred the low-brow perspective of men with broad backs and calloused hands.

Fairbairn was a Metaphysician.

Steve wouldn’t immediately tell you how to achieve his ideal pullthrough. As described above, he would just encourage you to make the movements feel natural and count on your subconscious mind to bring the right mix of muscles into play.

But indeed meaningful *stylistic* differences between the two approaches had evolved because nothing was sacred to Steve. He questioned *everything!*

Fairbairn’s Ideal Pullthrough

If you were coached by Steve Fairbairn, you would be instructed to actually look at

⁸⁶¹ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 189

⁸⁶² *Ibid*, p. 152

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your blade and watch how it moved through the water. What he wanted you to see (and hear) was a catch which resonated like “a true **Bell-Note** as the blade strikes the water,”⁸⁶³ leading to a strong but steady pullthrough where “the oarsman should feel the boat running out from under him.”⁸⁶⁴

Toward the release you should “think of driving the water away as fast and as far as you can; think of making the water come up boiling with a final whip.”⁸⁶⁵

This is pure *Schubschlag*.

Fairbairn was fond of quoting Thames Rowing Club immortal **Jimmy Hastie**: “‘Take hold of the water as hard as you can, row it through harder, and finish it out hardest.’ – (*Jimmy Hastie*, Chapter 1, Verse 1)”⁸⁶⁶

This was not new. Tom Egan and Alfred Shadwell had also chosen *Schubschlag*. What was new was Fairbairn’s teaching method.

Legs and Backs

Fairbairn is often quoted as saying, “The foundation of all rowing is the leg work,”⁸⁶⁷ but this must be put into proper context. He was contrasting his approach to the original pre-1886 pre-Fairbairn/Muttlebury English Orthodox rejection of leg work at the entry, which had gradually returned to favor after he had left England.

As Steve Fairbairn watched his own oar, he discovered that it acted in fundamentally different ways depending on the coordination of back and legs, whether they were used one-at-a-time or together, sequentially or concurrently.

He concluded that they must be used together, concurrently.

Though he wrote, “You must use your legs from the very start,”⁸⁶⁸ it was equally important to him that back swing began at the very same time. “The body is sprung off the stretcher, and the feet keep pushing off the stretcher all through the stroke.”⁸⁶⁹

Legs and backs used concurrently all the way from entry to release.

Posture

English Orthodoxy held that “the oarsman must sit ‘at attention’ . . . A person standing at attention relies on his feet and the ground unconsciously. The chief object of the oarsman should be a similar relation to his stretcher.”⁸⁷⁰

Fairbairn: “The body should be taut; but there must be no cast-iron rigidity about it.”⁸⁷¹ To Steve, rowing the English Orthodox Technique was like “trying to walk up a hill in parade formation, instead of surmounting it by natural action. That is often how I have described the difference between the old ‘Orthodoxy’ and my system.”⁸⁷²

English Orthodox: “The shoulders must be kept square . . . Overreaching with the shoulders and the trick of following the oar round with the outside shoulder – the latter in particular – are very common faults, and at all costs to be avoided. Their effect is to spoil beginning and to weaken the entire stroke.”⁸⁷³

Fairbairn: “I believe the right thing is to let the shoulders reach well and naturally forward, and during the stroke let them be

⁸⁶³ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 259. For a further discussion of the Bell-Note, see later in this chapter.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 173

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 416

⁸⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 271

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 97

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 161

⁸⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 386

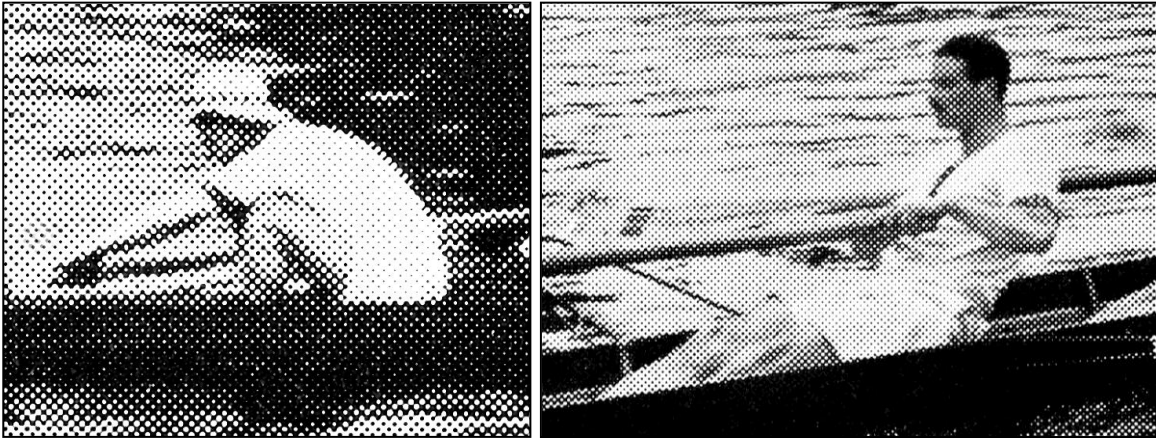
⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 521

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 151

⁸⁷² *Ibid*, p. 246

⁸⁷³ Rowe & Pitman, p. 23

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Fairbairn on Rowing

Classical Technique *ala* Steve Fairbairn

Ian Fairbairn, Thames Rowing Club in 1923 and 1924

Comfortably erect “whalebone” posture, back swing from +45° to -30°

While at Eton, Ian won School Sculling in 1913 and School Pulling in 1914. He rowed in the winning Ladies’ Plate eight of 1914. He did not row at University because he was injured during World War I.



Fairbairn on Rowing

Classical Technique in the 21st Century

Bryan Volpenhein, USA Eight in 2004

Comfortably erect posture, back swing from +20° to -30°

Volp got more leg compression, which limited his body angle forward.

Contrast the shin angles at full reach.

rowed back naturally. Trying to make the shoulder-blades meet at the finish encourages the action. By this drawing movement of the shoulders one can get a foot more reach and apply the weight a foot longer.”⁸⁷⁴

Jesus Bell-Note

English Orthodoxy prescribed a “lightning-drop” vertical entry, as did most 19th Century coaches.

⁸⁷⁴ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 164

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Warre: “The hands must be raised sharply, and the blade of the oar brought to its full depth at once.”⁸⁷⁵

Fairbairn disagreed. “If the blade is dropped in, it backwaters at the pace the boat is running. If it ‘backsplashes in,’ it backwaters even more.”⁸⁷⁶

Instead, Fairbairn prescribed “a running hit,”⁸⁷⁷ the so-called **Jesus Bell-Note**.

“The oar must be rowed in, and as it hits the water it must be moving faster than the boat is running past the water, to generate any power.”⁸⁷⁸

If done smartly, the diagonal path of the lower edge of the blade would carve a hole in the water behind it as it entered. When that hole collapsed against the back of the blade, one would hear a clapping sound that reminded some of the pealing of a church bell. Steve called this “a true Bell-Note as the blade strikes the water.”⁸⁷⁹

The phenomenon had been noticed and admired much earlier in rowing history, though it was given a less romantic name.

Brickwood, 1866: “If they all get hold of the water fairly and at once, the peculiar noise appertaining to this catch, which is like the sound produced by a stone falling perpendicularly into the water after being thrown up into the air – a **rotten egg**,⁸⁸⁰ as it is called – will be distinctly audible some distance off.”⁸⁸¹

In 1950, coach **Mike Spracklen**⁸⁸² started rowing at Marlow Rowing Club, on the Thames near Henley.

“What the coaches taught me at Marlow was that if you want to hit something hard,

you get a run at it, and that’s what Steve Fairbairn taught.

“People talk about the Steve Fairbairn Bell-Note. They drove the blade into the water from high. They oversquared the blade to stop it diving, and as the blade went into the water and traveled through, it made a sound like a bell-note.

“It’s got to be at the right depth and the right speed to do it. It was a very precise, very accurate, very good movement. I’m sure we’ve all heard about a Bell-Note, but I’ve not coached or seen anyone able to do it at race pace.

“Steve Fairbairn’s guys did it, and the way they did it was to drive in from behind, and by doing that, they were able to get hold of it.”⁸⁸³

One can reproduce this sound today, most easily with a little experimentation while the boat is at rest. When you hear it for the first time, you will recognize it.

The Ferryman’s Finish

English Orthodoxy: “It is essential that the body should not be pulled forward to meet the oar.”⁸⁸⁴

Ian Fairbairn: “There was one point in body-form about which Steve was for long sorely puzzled: that was what happens to the body as one stroke was finished and the forward movement to the next is being begun. Must one use the last part of the draw at the handle of the oar with the hands and arms in order to start the forward movement?

“This was the question which puzzled him. Should one row with what used to be called in those days the **ferryman’s finish**, a finish which most coaches, including Steve for many years, sternly set their faces against? And here Steve’s unswerving belief in the unity of all athletics strongly

⁸⁷⁵ Qtd. by Haig-Thomas and Nicholson, p. 31

⁸⁷⁶ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, pp. 133-4

⁸⁷⁷ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 53

⁸⁷⁸ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 255

⁸⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 259

⁸⁸⁰ in American children’s pool-side slang, a **can-opener**.

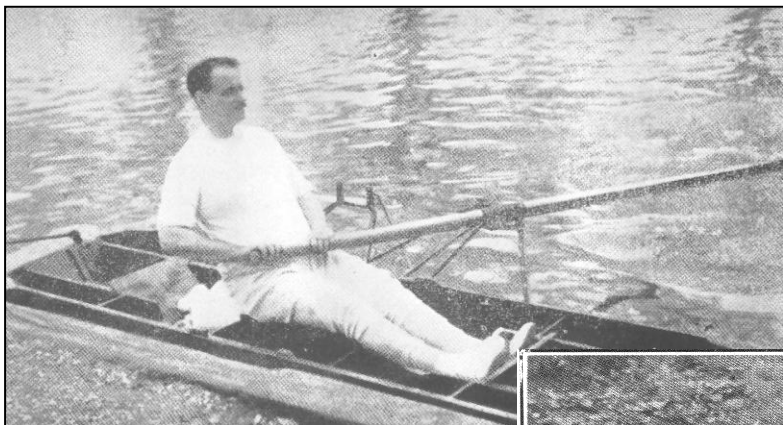
⁸⁸¹ Brickwood, p. 55

⁸⁸² See Chapters 130, 149, 151 and 159.

⁸⁸³ Spracklen, RCA Coaches’ Conference, 2005

⁸⁸⁴ Lehmann, *Complete*, pp. 48-51

ENGLISH ORTHODOX MEETS CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE



Fairbairn on Rowing

Steve himself demonstrating what “he originally thought must be the right attitude of the body at the finish on the stroke.”

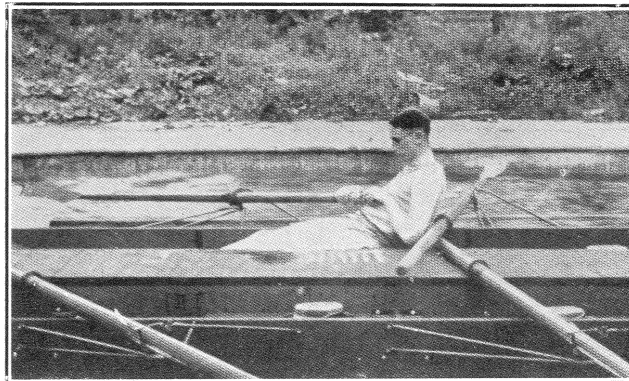
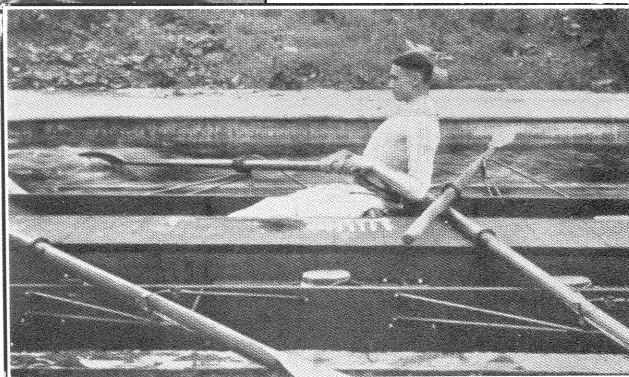
influenced him at first towards a conclusion which he subsequently abandoned.

“It was to his mind a fundamental part of that unity that whatever an athlete is doing, the spinal column should rest on itself, as in the attitude of a man standing at attention, and this he originally thought must be the right attitude of the body at the finish on the stroke. (See the illustrations on this page.)

“Later on, two considerations varied his thinking on this point. First, that it must be a physical necessity to use the last part of the draw at the handle of the oar in order to start yourself forward, and secondly, the realization that length at the finish, in which he believed as firmly as anybody else ever has, is controlled not by the distance that the shoulders travel back, it being the stomach or lower ribs which limit the movement of the oar handle at the finish.

“And on this second point he satisfied himself, as for all I know others may have done before him, that taking the shoulders back beyond a certain point pushes the stomach forward and so shortens the finish.

“He [later] wrote: ‘When you feel that you have thrown the boat away and at the same time pulled the body forward on to the stretcher, you will have got the hardest point of all, and no one will be able to teach you anything.’”⁸⁸⁵



Fairbairn on Rowing

Fairbairn used these photos to demonstrate that the ferryman’s finish actually made the -30° layback finish longer in the water.

Most Significantly, Arm Usage

English Orthodox: “As long as possible, let it be remembered, the arms

⁸⁸⁵ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, pp. 36-7

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must be kept straight, acting merely as connecting rods between shoulders and oar-handle, while the body and legs supply motive power.”⁸⁸⁶

“The arms must begin to bend when the body is just beyond the perpendicular. The object to be kept in view is to let the body and legs – the stronger forces – do as much of the work as possible, and to reserve the arms – the weaker force – for the recovery, the purpose for which they are needed.”⁸⁸⁷

Initially, this English Orthodox approach of straight arms sounded reasonable to Steve. It seemed intuitively wasteful to attempt to use the arms early in the stroke when the strength of the legs and back effectively prevented them from bending, and that probably was his opinion while he was still rowing at Jesus College and Thames R.C.

If so, he changed his opinion at some point after he began to coach.

Fairbairn: “I experimented, and asked the crew I was coaching to use their arms as hard as they could, and to see if they could tire them. They found that they could not tire their arms, and they *drew* the boat along very much faster and better by trying to use them.

“On examining, I have found what happens is, if one pulls [= arms] at the oar, the muscles down the sides of the back are brought into play. The harder you draw, the more these back muscles will be brought into play and developed, and the better the [body] weight will be applied.”⁸⁸⁸

Fairbairn credited his professional sculler acquaintances for instinctively knowing how important the arms were. He quoted **W.G. East**, a champion sculler of England, who wrote, “The amateurs say they



Mike Spracklen

William Giles East
Winner of Doggett’s Coat and Badge
King’s Bargemaster

do not use their arms when rowing. All I can say is, every professional does.”⁸⁸⁹

Arms have always been the poor relations of rowing, so often underappreciated and misunderstood. Contrary to the opinions of most rowers and coaches, the use of arms is *not* merely a peripheral issue in discussing rowing

⁸⁸⁶ Rowe & Pitman, p 24

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 26

⁸⁸⁸ *Fairbairn On Rowing*, p. 253

⁸⁸⁹ Qtd. by Ibid, pp. 162-3

ENGLISH ORTHODOX MEETS CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE

technique. As has already been mentioned, we shall eventually come to appreciate that it is one of only three great issues which have truly divided coaches throughout history down to the present, the other two being whether to use the ferryman's finish and the choice between *Schubschlag* and *Kernschlag*.

Steve Fairbairn was the first amateur coach to seriously reconsider the seminal role of arms on the pullthrough and then write extensively about it.

Fairbairn: "People say you must not use your arms [at the entry], but the oar has got to be drawn evenly into the body, and I don't see how you are going to do it without using the arms."⁸⁹⁰

"The endless chain movement of the oar means that the handle has to be continuously moving sufficiently faster than the body, so as to arrive into the body just as it finishes its swing back."⁸⁹¹

"The hands have got to pull at once – that is, directly the body starts to spring off the stretcher. The hands have to pull the oar into the body from the start.

"The old fear was that this would tire the arms is another fallacy."⁸⁹² By forgetting the body and limbs, and concentrating on working the oar, this difficulty disappears."⁸⁹³

Fairbairn's Evolution

Spracklen: "Steve introduced his own ideas, and his crews were successful, but instead of respect for his achievements, he found himself under attack from the English coaches. They disliked his criticism of their style, and it is evident that there was some envy of his success.

"Fairbairn was unforgiving with his criticism of the way they rowed. His outspoken and provocative comments annoyed the English coaches, who defended the way they rowed vehemently. But Fairbairn's success gave him confidence and his criticisms increased, which served only to drive the two sides further apart. The press jumped on to the bandwagon, which only escalated the antagonism between the two sides."⁸⁹⁴

Geoffrey Page: "He was frequently accused of ruining English rowing, mainly by what he termed the 'Orthodox Brigade.' He always had a ready answer to his critics, of course, and in one of the many letters he wrote to my father⁸⁹⁵ between 1923 and his death, he said, 'People have said to me: "If that is rowing, I don't know anything about rowing." To which I have replied, "I never said you did."⁸⁹⁶

Spracklen: "Steve was a controversial character who loved an argument – particularly with the exponents of English Orthodoxy, but I think his views changed [in response to the criticism] over the period of time he was actively coaching.

"After reading four of his books, I noticed that Fairbairn contradicted himself numerous times, and I deduced that his method developed in retaliation to criticism he received over a period of time. (We both know about coaches who 'rock the boat' with controversial methods that are successful.⁸⁹⁷)

"For instance, in his book entitled *Rowing Notes*, 1926, Fairbairn writes, 'The back should be as straight as possible. A straight back is the best position of rest, and it is the best position for length as the body

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 252-3

⁸⁹¹ Ibid, p. 398

⁸⁹² Ibid, p. 130

⁸⁹³ Ibid, pp. 252-3

⁸⁹⁴ Spracklen, *The Fairbairn Method*

⁸⁹⁵ **Freddie Page**, master and coach at St. Paul's School, London, and five-times captain of Thames Rowing Club.

⁸⁹⁶ Page, p. 71

⁸⁹⁷ For Spracklen's own experience being viewed as controversial, see Chapters 151 and 152.

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can swing through the longest arc and give the lungs and other organs most room.⁸⁹⁸

“But later in *Chats on Rowing* written in 1934, Fairbairn wrote, ‘The old teaching of holding the back straight is wrong. The back should be allowed to bend naturally with a *whaleboney* action to get full reach forward and back, and the shoulders should be allowed to play as far forward as possible. [my emphasis]’^{899,900}

Spracklen makes the persuasive point that various photos of Fairbairn rowing, starting with the recently discovered photo of the Fairbairn/Hutchinson pair included in Chapter 14, clearly demonstrate that from his early days as a student with Jesus College Boat Club until well into middle age Steve rowed not with a “whaleboney back” but with English Orthodox posture. In addition, that is the technique he taught his early crews.

Spracklen: “One of the first crews he coached early in his career is seen here [following page] in classic Orthodox Style with straight backs, knees apart, heads up and straight arms. It was natural for him to teach his early crews to row in the way that he himself had [rowed].

“It was in the years that followed that Fairbairn changed his method of coaching, but as it was Orthodoxy that provided the basis on which he developed his own ideas, it was only with knowledge of both sides that I could have a better understanding of both points of view.

“The old English Style was also the foundation of the rowing we know today, which in itself was an incentive for me to learn more about rowing technique of the past.”⁹⁰¹



www.freefoto.com

Steve Fairbairn often wrote of the back being “elastically rounded like a piece of **whalebone**.”
Whalebone Arch in Whitby, North Yorkshire
Compare to **Ian Fairbairn** on a previous page.

“[In those later years as a coach,] Steve Fairbairn gradually changed until almost everything he said about rowing opposed the Orthodox Style.”⁹⁰²

Current Harvard coach **Harry Parker:**
“You have to make an allowance for the fact that Steve was fighting a religion, and you have to overstate things to get your point across.

“He had a lot of it *really* right, but he overstated some of it.”⁹⁰³

⁸⁹⁸ Fairbairn on Rowing, pp. 174-5

⁸⁹⁹ Fairbairn on Rowing, p. 434

⁹⁰⁰ Spracklen, personal correspondence, 2010

⁹⁰¹ Spracklen, *The Fairbairn Method*

⁹⁰² Spracklen, personal correspondence, 2010

⁹⁰³ Parker, personal conversation, 2004

ENGLISH ORTHODOX MEETS CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE



Mike Spracklen

1910 Jesus College 1st Mays Eight, Head of the River

Coxswain **C.A. Skinner**, Stroke **G.E. Fairbairn** 12st. 76 kg, 7 **H.C. Hudson** 11st. 11lb. 75kg, 6 **H.J.S. Shields** 11st. 9lb. 74 kg, 5 **G.F. Elmslie** 12 st. 7lb. 79 kg, 4 **B. Milburn** 12st. 11lb. 81 kg, 3 **L.A. Pattinson** 12st. 7lb. 79 kg, 2 **H.P. Hill** 11st. 4lb. 72 kg, Bow **J.M. Manifold** 10st. 3lb. 65 kg

(“**Eric**” Fairbairn was the son of Tom, Steve’s eldest brother. He later died in World War I.)

“It is most unlikely that Steve would have allowed a crew taught by him to have been photographed holding a truly Orthodox posture that he vehemently contested.” – **Mike Spracklen**

The Jesus College and Trinity Hall boathouses are visible in the background.

British coach **Jumbo Edwards**:⁹⁰⁴ “I always felt that Steve in his engaging, mischievous way wrote his books not to be taken too literally but to give the oarsman food for thought and to rectify the exaggerations of Orthodoxy.”⁹⁰⁵

Perspective

Even now, after over a century, the rift between English Orthodox and Fairbairn

rowers has not ended. Astonishingly, during his lifetime the Fairbairn question was part of everyday British conversation for rowers and non-rowers alike, like religion or politics, which rowing has often resembled. Editorials concerning technique appeared on the front page of *The Times* of London. The **Nestlé collector cards** containing the illustrations on the following page could be found in packages of chocolates for sale at the corner shop.

Compare that to the visibility of the sport of rowing in the social awareness of average person today anywhere in the world.

⁹⁰⁴ See Chapter 78.

⁹⁰⁵ Edwards, p. 9

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The list of issues concerning rowing technique that Steve Fairbairn raised and addressed at the beginning of the 20th Century has not been expanded in all the years since. He had already identified and discussed in detail every aspect of technique that a modern coach must also deal with, and almost every single choice he made has strong and successful adherents in today's international rowing field. In fact, between 85% and 95% of 21st Century World and Olympic finalists could trace their roots directly back to Steve Fairbairn (and through him to Ned Hanlan)!

Steve is as relevant today as he was in his own era.

The Oarsman's Song

The willowy sway of the hands away
And the water boiling aft,
The elastic spring and the steely fling
That drives the flying craft.

The Steely spring and the musical ring
Of the blade with the biting grip,
And the stretching draw of the bending oar
That rounds the turn with a whip.

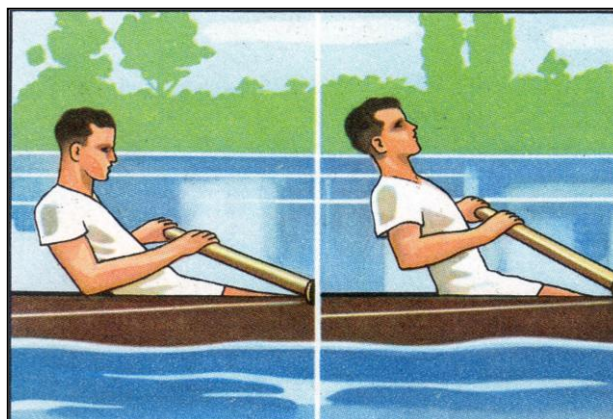
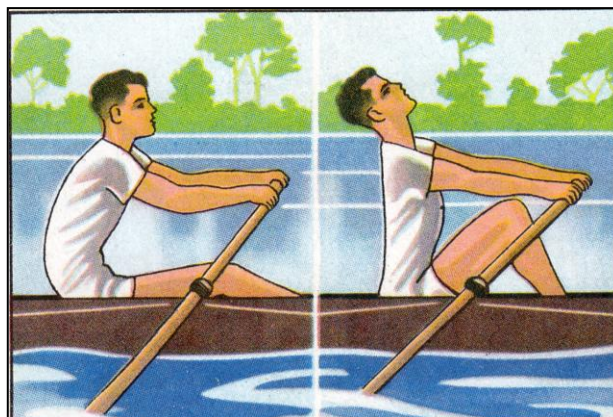
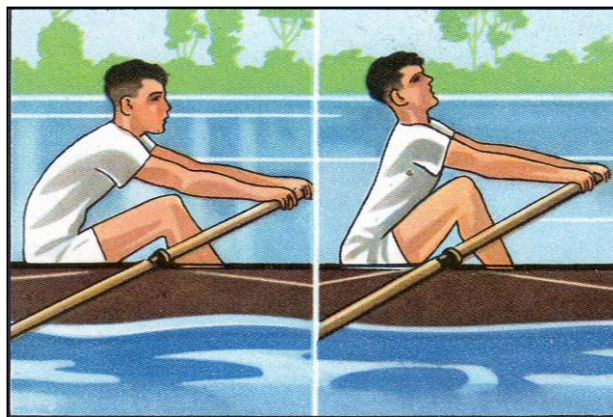
And the lazy float that runs the boat,
And makes the swing quite true,
And gives the rest that the oarsman blest
As he drives the blade right through.

All through the swing he hears the boat sing
As she guides on her flying track,
And he gathers aft to strike the craft
With a ringing bell-note crack.

From stretcher to oar with drive and draw,
He speeds the boat along.
All whalebone and steel and a willowy feel –
That is the oarsman's song.

Steve Fairbairn⁹⁰⁶

⁹⁰⁶ Fairbairn *On Rowing*, p. 89; Qtd. by Page, p. xii. This is perhaps the best and most famous of traditional rowing verses. Two fine books, Chris Dodd's *Water Boiling Aft* and Geoff Page's *Hear the Boat Sing*, derive their titles from its lines.



Nestlé & Anglo-Swiss Condensed Milk Co. Ltd

Fairbairn **Orthodox**

Part of a series of 144 collector cards entitled "Sport," inserted into packages of chocolates in 1938.

(The first card shows the moment shortly *after* the entry.)

ENGLISH ORTHODOX MEETS CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE

Chris Dodd: “Not surprisingly, the history of Jesus College Boat Club, published in 1928, was dedicated to

Fairbairn. He shared with royalty, it said, the distinction of being known chiefly by his Christian name.”⁹⁰⁷

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Fairbairn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline for the first letter 'S'.

⁹⁰⁷ Dodd, *Henley*, p. 137, Brittain & Playford, p. 79

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20. The Jesus Style

Inevitable Decline of Fairbairnism



Burnell, *Swing Together*

1949 Ladies Plate, First Round Jesus College over Bedford Modern School

“The fantastic over-squaring of the blades, the men’s heads, hopelessly weak knee positions, no true swing forward from the hips at all.” – Burnell

Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, Fairbairnism as a movement was just as susceptible to the aging process, to inbreeding, to stultification and regression, as had been English Orthodox Technique before it.

Burnell: “The Fairbairn method, which had discarded rules and spurned style, gradually built up its own rules and developed its own style.”⁹⁰⁸

Mike Spracklen:⁹⁰⁹ “At first, he taught to row with a straight back. He taught this way, but he didn’t like the disciplined

approach. When you teach somebody a movement, they are rigid in their movements to begin with, and as they get on, they become more fluid, but if you’re only rowing for a short time of the year, that rigidity stayed. He needed more flexibility. He didn’t like the regimented approach.

“So he coached oarsmen to relax, and the curved back crept in more and more.”⁹¹⁰

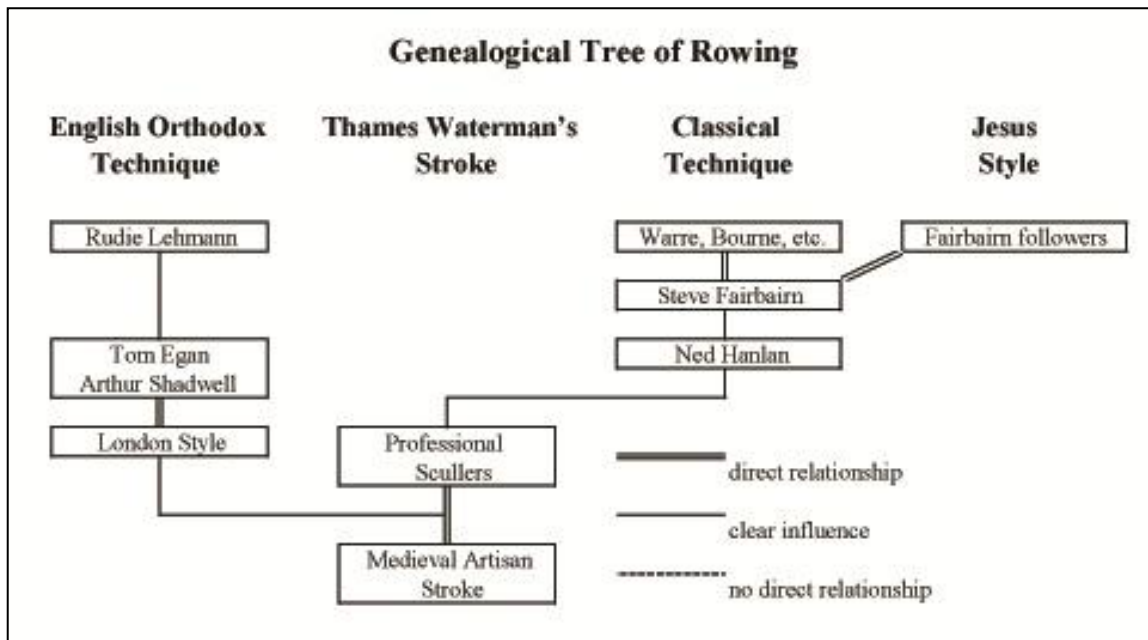
Freddy Brittain in 1928: “Praise is continually withheld from Steve and his crews because the road by which they have reached their destination has not been the well-beaten high road along which the

⁹⁰⁸ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 57

⁹⁰⁹ See Chapters 130, 149, 151 and 159.

⁹¹⁰ Spracklen, RCA Coaches’ Conference, 2005

ENGLISH ORTHODOX MEETS CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE



crowd tries to progress. This attitude has reacted upon Steve and his supporters, and gradually there has grown up a feeling of splendid isolation which at times has caused exaggeration of unorthodox methods far beyond what Steve himself would choose.”⁹¹¹

Burnell: “Just as lesser Orthodox coaches had killed the leg drive by slavishly insisting on the opening of the body angle, so did lesser disciples of Fairbairn, seeing that he encouraged men to use their legs even at the expense of body angle, began to teach men to drive legs down and slides away.”⁹¹²

Haig-Thomas & Nicholson: “The only characteristic in common to all these crews is a total failure to link up leg-work with body-work, which means that the second part of the stroke is taken firmly on the back-stop entirely with the arms and shoulders.”⁹¹³

Burnell: “The hit at the beginning gradually developed into a row-in almost opposite the rigger.

“‘Rowing round the turn’ developed into rowing right out.

“Freedom to watch the blade reached the stage where men rowed with their heads permanently tucked underneath their arms.

“Early squaring of the blade reached a point where some men practically gave up feathering altogether, and the use of unlimited slides became an excuse for neglecting to swing at all.”⁹¹⁴

Chris Baillieu,⁹¹⁵ 1977 World Doubles Champion under Mike Spracklen: “By the time that I got to Jesus [1969], rowing there had become utterly corrupted. They thought that they were doing what Steve Fairbairn taught, which they thought meant basically hitting the water from a great height with your blade.

“My view is that Steve was an innovator, and he was always ahead of the game. Their view was that when Steve died

⁹¹¹ Brittain & Playford, p. 84

⁹¹² Burnell, *Swing*, p. 57

⁹¹³ Haig-Thomas & Nicholson, p. 25

⁹¹⁴ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 57

⁹¹⁵ See Chapter 130.

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everything stopped. They were worshipping a totem, which is not as he was at all.”⁹¹⁶

Spracklen: “They took the stroke with their legs with such force that with their round backs it looked as though Fairbairn crews were bum-shoving, shooting their slides away.”⁹¹⁷

Schubschlag had evolved past ordinary *Kernschlag* into dysfunctional *Kernschlag* segmented pullthroughs. This is the second occurrence of **Rowing History’s Greatest Lesson**,⁹¹⁸ a technique deteriorating in the subsequent generation.

This new phase in the manifestation of the teachings of Steve Fairbairn acquired the name “**Jesus Style**,” named for the college at Cambridge where Steve was coaching, and it was ironic, for according to many English Orthodox adherents, Steve Fairbairn was the Antichrist.

And so at this point in history there existed two approaches to rowing among world professionals:

Thames Waterman’s Stroke Classical Technique

and three distinct branches of rowing technique among English amateurs:

English Orthodoxy Classical Technique Jesus Style

Steve Fairbairn was responsible for the last two. In 1951, **Burnell** wrote, “I have heard it said of Fairbairn that he began by doing more good to English rowing than any other man had done, and finished by doing it more harm.”⁹¹⁹

Spracklen: “Fairbairn’s success can be identified as two main areas. The first was ‘Mileage makes Champions.’ His crews simply did more training, and this was the

biggest benefit of all. He was also quick to realize the benefit of legs and taught powerful leg drive. These two points alone gave his crews distinct advantage over Orthodox crews.”⁹²⁰

Negativity

Steve never won the hearts and minds of many of his countrymen. By the middle of the 20th Century, the Jesus Style “had pretty well transformed English rowing after a titanic struggle with English Orthodox Technique,”⁹²¹ but as late as 1958, twenty years after his death, negative feelings remained at a fever pitch.

That year, **Peter Haig-Thomas** and **Archie Nicholson** filled their book⁹²² full of religious metaphor, accusing Steve of coaching a “second-class” technique and of hopelessly dividing the British rowing world.⁹²³

“Steve clearly enjoyed being an ‘*enfant terrible*,’ but it was irresponsible for a coach of his immense prestige – he was undoubtedly the greatest coaching personality of his day – to embody his bold and often unsound experiments in the form of books.

“These books have been accorded the sanctity of Holy Writ, and the result has been the ruin of all that English rowing had achieved in ninety years of development.

“During his lifetime, Steve’s influence brought freshness into a rowing world that needed waking up. But when one surveys the results today, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the influence of his latter coaching has been disastrously stultifying.”⁹²⁴

⁹²⁰ Spracklen, *The Fairbairn Method*

⁹²¹ Dodd, *World Rowing*, p. 127

⁹²² See Chapter 76.

⁹²³ Haig-Thomas & Nicholson, p. 60

⁹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 62

⁹¹⁶ Baillieu, personal conversation, 2008

⁹¹⁷ Spracklen, RCA Coaches’ Conference, 2005

⁹¹⁸ See Chapter 18.

⁹¹⁹ Burnell, *Swing*, p. viii

ENGLISH ORTHODOX MEETS CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE

On one level, much of the Haig-Thomas & Nicholson book was a vicious attack, but at least part of the blame deserves to fall directly on the shoulders of Steve Fairbairn himself. For every passage he wrote positively, he probably wrote two more as a negative attack on English Orthodoxy. Many purported followers of Fairbairn heard only his anti-Orthodox message, and they applied it with a sledge hammer.

The results were an insult to Steve Fairbairn and indeed to British rowing. Haig-Thomas and Nicholson were certainly right about that.

Nevertheless, it takes two sides to create a disagreement, and both sides share responsibility for the dysfunctionality of British rowing during much of the 20th Century.

The irony was that the Haig-Thomas and Nicholson book, *The English Style of Rowing*, was really a passionate plea for Britain to abandon the two warring extremes, English Orthodoxy on the one hand and the Jesus Style on the other, and return to the technique of England's Golden Age. But that technique, their *ideal* technique, which they called the "**English Style**," was the approach that Steve *himself* had introduced to the Cambridge Blue Boat in 1886. What Haig-Thomas and Nicholson were describing was the original essence of Fairbairnism.

In retrospect, despite what Fairbairn wrote, the various iterations of English Orthodoxy of the 1840s through the 1890s and beyond were hardly evolutionary dead ends. They embodied the wisdom and experience of more than half a century of fine rowing. They helped shape our sport, and their history still has much to teach us.

And echoes of the 1886 Fairbairn approach have reappeared throughout the 20th Century. In fact, the **Classical Technique** of the British Golden Age has carried on to become one of the two branches of the rowing genealogical tree that can be found in abundance in international competition today, the other being **Modern Orthodox Technique**, an outgrowth of the Thames Waterman's Stroke but the *spiritual* cousin and successor to English Orthodoxy. Modern Orthodoxy will be discussed in later chapters.

Of all the stems and twigs that have sought a path away from the Classical Technique branch, the Jesus Style was the first and perhaps the most significant and long-lasting of the many to come. Most have ultimately withered while the Hanlan/Fairbairn Classical branch continues to grow straight and tall into the 21st Century.

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21. Fairbairnism Spreads Around the World

Australia – Germany – Frame-by-Frame Film Analysis

In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, the sport of rowing migrated with English soldiers, missionaries, administrators, businessmen and expatriates to the far reaches of the British Empire, to Africa, the Asian subcontinent, the Far East and the Americas and also to continental Europe as far as St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Thames professionals came along. An unintended consequence of the British ban on professional coaches was that they frequently had to go abroad to make a living. British coaches and oarsmen brought with them the controversy between English Orthodox and Fairbairnism.

Spracklen: “The sport had begun in England, from where it spread to other parts of the world. As the Englishmen were seen as the leaders, others looked to England for guidance which began with the Orthodox Style of rowing. Fairbairn’s success gathered in momentum and quickly spread around the world. Other nations set their standards on what was happening in England, and many changed from Orthodox to the Fairbairn method.”⁹²⁵

Fairbairnism Down Under

In Australia, Adelaide University Boat Club Historian **Edwin Michell** found the following poem in the personal library of Sir Henry Simpson Newland, member of the Adelaide crew which defeated Melbourne in

the 1934 Intervarsity Race. It is worth quoting in full:

**IN MEMORIAM
OLD VICTORIAN STYLE OF ROWING
Obit 3rd November, 1934
R.I.P.**

Old Noah some hundreds of aeons ago,
Was desirous of moving about
And his sons with the sedentary life on the Ark
Were becoming remarkably stout.

So he knocked up some oars out of best gopher
wood,
And sat all his sons on the hatch,
And they got the old Ark running quite well,
And developed a wonderful catch.

One day as they paddled around the old globe,
They espied a fast moving craft,
And hailed them on board with the greatest of
glee,
And hitched their long vessel aft.

A know-all young man who rowed in this crew
Remarked as he watched the sons’ style,
“**Your leg work is good, but your shoulders,
Oh Hell!**”⁹²⁶
We’d lose you in less than a mile.

On the Yarra⁹²⁷ we row, not just play at the
game,
We’ve thrashed all the crews there from
scratch.

**Our secret is shoulders, and after that legs,
To ensure a really good catch.**”⁹²⁸

Then Noah said sweetly, “We’ll give you a go,
And the race will be straight for three miles.

⁹²⁵ Spracklen, *The Fairbairn Method*

⁹²⁶ English Orthodox criticism of Fairbairnism

⁹²⁷ a river in the Australian State of Victoria with the City of Melbourne near its mouth.

⁹²⁸ English Orthodoxy

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It's legs and swing only that count in a race,⁹²⁹
And to Hell with your old Melbourne styles.”

He had six in his crew with his sons and their wives,
Their style and their oars were both rough,
But the drive with their legs was remarkably good,⁹³⁰
And their muscles and sinews were tough.

So they started the race and the ‘Vics’ got the lead,
And the Ark was a ponderous weight,
And Shem started rushing, and Ham caught a crab,
And Japhet was apt to be late,

But he got them together and quickened the pace,
And the ‘Vics’ were soon in the rear,
And finished in style by at least half a mile,
And the ‘Vics’ had no breath to cheer.

“Now the moral of this is, you know-all young man,
That a style may be one person’s fad,
And a style that suits one crew will never suit all,
Nor has done since I was a lad.

But the essence of rowing is swing and leg-drive,
And taking it through in one piece,⁹³¹
And that is the essence, and always has been
And will be ‘til rowing doth cease.”

Fascinating. So Noah was really the first Fairbairn coach!

History will show us that there remain descendents of these 1930s Australian rowers still arguing the same arguments, fighting the same fights into the 21st Century.

Fairbairnism in Germany

During the first few decades of the 20th Century, many of the best *émigré* British

coaches found work in Germany. Rowing had found a particularly good fit in German society, which had a militaristic bent long before the First World War. Children were encouraged to join rowing programs, “the aims of which were to abolish social ranking, involve all classes in character-forming activities and instill a love of nature, punctuality and discipline.”⁹³²

And, by and large, the technique they were being taught was based on Fairbairn’s teachings. In 1936, the German Olympic eight from Rudergesellschaft Wiking e. V. 1896 in the Berlin suburb of Niederschönweide, was coached in the Fairbairnesque technique by Karl-Heinz Schultz, who had actually met Steve as a young rower.⁹³³

Frame-by-Frame Film Analysis

The remarkable 1936 **Leni Riefenstahl** documentary, *Olympia*, gives this book its first opportunity to analyze in detail visual evidence of the rowing technique of an historic crew.

Depending on the original medium, the speed of the original filming or videotaping and the stroke rating of the crew, a “motion picture” of a single pullthrough is generally made up of between ten and forty individual frames.

Films of crews in the heat of competition can vary widely in quality based on the era, the equipment, the weather, the distance from the camera to the lane in which the crew is rowing, and the skill of the camera operator.

Accordingly, interpreting these films can be a challenge.

I have chosen the following format for summarizing a particular technique in this book:

⁹²⁹ Fairbairnism

⁹³⁰ Ibid.

⁹³¹ Ibid.

⁹³² Dodd, *World Rowing*, p. 170

⁹³³ Ibid, p. 180

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Riefenstahl, *Olympia, Teil II: Fest der Schönheit*

1936 RG Wiking Berlin Men's Eight Olympic Bronze Medal 5 Gerd Völs

Technique was **Jesus Style**, with leg drive far more aggressive than Fairbairn recommended. These photos give us our first hint that the sequential-concurrent question is more complicated than it might initially seem. The German technique was hybrid-concurrent, leg and back effort beginning concurrently at the entry, but leg drive strong enough to initially immobilize the back swing, and so giving the *appearance* of sequentiality, leg motion first, back motion second.

0°, +40° to -20°, **Effort:** 0-7, 0-10, 0-10, **Appearance:** 0-7, 3-10, 4-10

Shin angles at the entry and body angles at the entry and finish are measured in degrees from vertical (0°), using a protractor on the image. Generally, I round to the nearest 5°. For shins, beyond vertical at the entry is positive, and less than vertical is negative. Body swing forward is positive. Layback is negative.

The beginning of the stroke is arbitrarily assigned the time value 0 and the end the time value of 10.

I have carefully superimposed individual film frames upon one another to ascertain, when possible, the beginning and ending of the leg, back and arm *effort* and the beginning and ending of the leg, back and arm *motion*, which is often different, and then expressed them on the 0-to-10 time scale.

A rowing stroke can then be summarized as follows: **-10°, +45° to -30°, 0-9, 0-10, 5-10**, which would mean that in this hypothetical case:

- leg compression brought the shins to within 10° of vertical at the entry.
- body swing was from 45° forward of vertical to 30° past vertical.
- leg *effort* began at the entry, and leg motion ended 90% through the stroke.
- back *effort* began at the entry, and back swing ended at the release.
- arm *effort* began half-way through the stroke, and arm draw ended at the release.

Whenever possible, I have also characterized the dynamic rhythm of the stroke, something which can be difficult to judge from static frame-by-frame

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illustrations in a book. When available, I have included in the text contemporary corroboration for my rhythm characterization.

I have also disclosed where the film is to be found so interested readers can refer

directly to the source and draw their own conclusions.

Fortunately, a great deal of archival newsreel footage is accessible on-line, and this will only increase over time.

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