

Professor Eric Dunning, 1936–2019

**Ivan Waddington and
Stephen Mennell
reflect on the life and
work of Eric Dunning**

Professor Eric Dunning, of the University of Leicester, distinguished sociologist, prominent advocate of the process-sociological perspective, and founding father of the sociology of sport, has died after a long illness.

Eric was born in Hayes, Middlesex, the second son of Sidney Dunning, a London bus driver, and his wife Florence Daisy, a school dinner lady. After Acton County Grammar School, in 1956 he entered what was then University College Leicester. As a first-year undergraduate he attended Norbert Elias's introductory lectures in sociology. He was so entranced that he switched from his intended subject of economics to become a sociologist, graduating with an external London University BSc (Econ) in 1959. At Acton County he had learned German, which proved to be of great significance: he was one of very few students who were able to read Elias's magnum opus, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, in the original 1939 edition (a copy of which he borrowed from the Head of Department, Professor Ilya Neustadt). The book was not published in English translation, as *The Civilizing Process*, until many years later.

Seeking an area for postgraduate research, Eric asked Elias whether football was a respectable field for research. At that time it was not: among British sociologists there was often, as Eric remembered, "a contemptuous dismissal of sport as an area of sociological enquiry". He later recalled that his initial bibliographical search revealed almost no research on sport that was sociological, in the sense of being orientated around sociological concepts and theories. Dunning and Elias set out to change that, and in effect founded the sociology of sport, which is today a very thriving field.

But Eric Dunning always considered himself a sociologist tout court, not just a sociologist of sport, and from the start he took part in the academic debates of the

1960s, which were especially lively in what was then the very large Department of Sociology at Leicester. One of the lines of tension was between the mainstream, more positivist, Popperian and functionalist tendency of which John Goldthorpe was an outstanding leader, and the developmental tendency led by Elias and Neustadt, which the 'moderns' regarded as 'ancient'. One of Eric's earliest published papers, written with Earl Hopper, was a critique of Goldthorpe's acclaimed contribution to the then vigorous debate about the 'convergence thesis'.¹ A decade later, he pursued his intellectual differences with Goldthorpe by writing a critique of Popper.² Throughout his career, in the department and beyond, he was one of the most prominent champions of Elias's 'process sociology' in all its aspects, culminating in his 2013 book with Jason Hughes.³

The ideas associated with process sociology were applied from the beginning to the sociology of sport. Eric's postgraduate work focused on the development of football from a rough and wild folk game, closer to 'real' fighting than to modern sports, into the modern game, characterised by formal organisation and elaborate written rules, one object of which was to regulate, and steadily to reduce, the socially permitted level of violence within the game – a manifestation of a civilising process.

After completing his research, Dunning went to the United States for a year, where he worked under Alvin Gouldner at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, and where he met and married his first wife, Ellen. He returned to Leicester in 1962 to take up an appointment as an assistant lecturer, but Ellen was unable to settle in England; the marriage broke up and she returned to the USA.

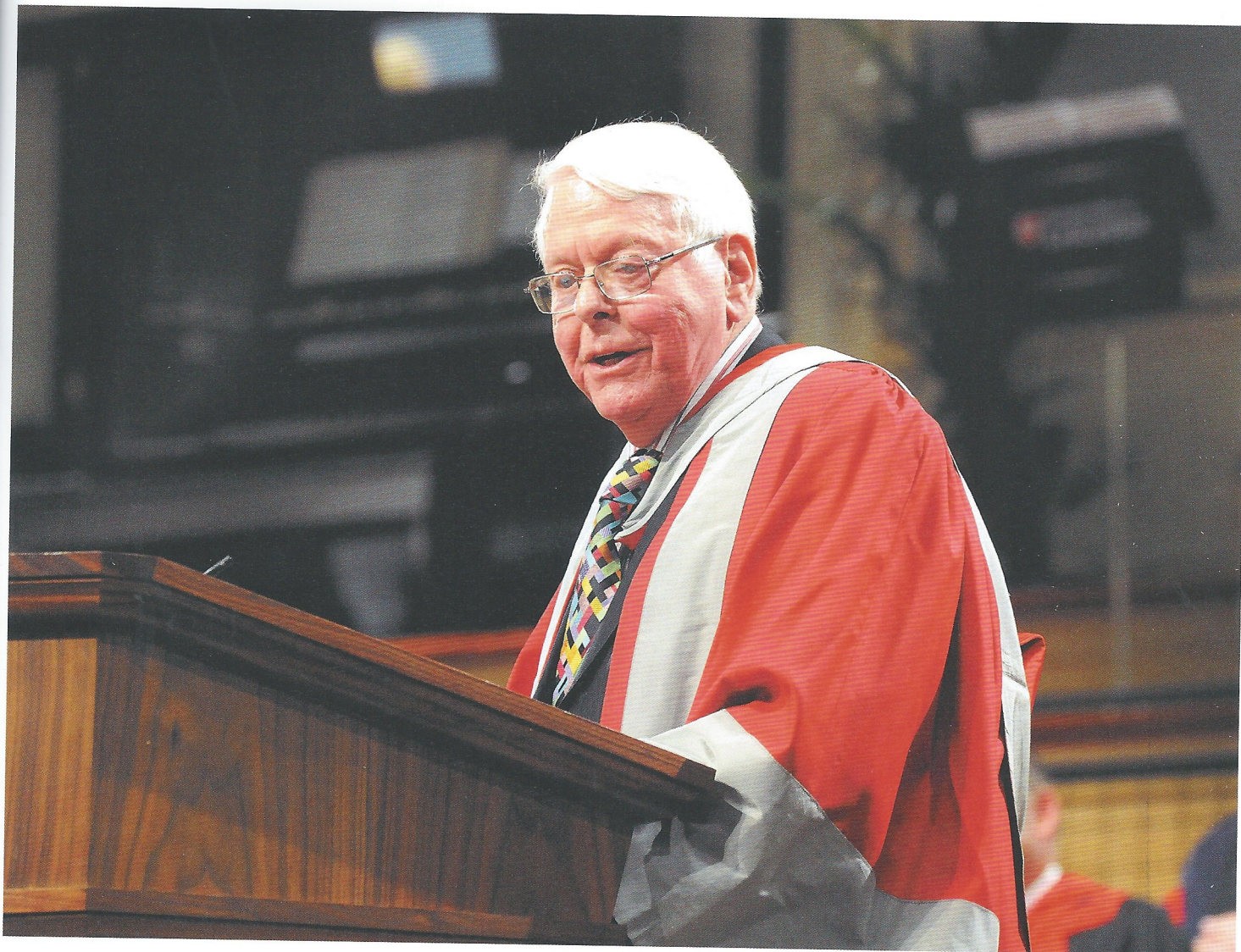
The two papers which Dunning published on football in 1963 and 1964 were among the earliest, and in Britain were probably the very first, published pieces of research to examine sport from a properly sociological perspective.⁴ There were no organised academic groups concerned specifically with the study of sport and no specialist journals in the field. When the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) was founded in 1978 with just 21 founding members, it referred to the sociology of sport as 'this newly emerging field'; by this

time Dunning had already been working in this 'newly emerging field' for almost two decades and his first book in the area, *The Sociology of Sport*, had already been published seven years before NASSS was founded.⁵

Dunning authored or edited 14 books and wrote almost a hundred scholarly papers on sport. *Quest for Excitement*, co-authored with Elias, has been widely influential in generating a more theoretically informed sociology of sport and has been translated into six languages.⁶ Their essays, separately and together, covered the development of sports and leisure from the ancient Greek Olympics to the present day. Among many other things, they stressed how sports gradually developed rules to maintain the 'tension balance' or level of excitement for both players and spectators; the offside rule in soccer or the lbw rule in cricket are examples of this. The theme is developed in *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players*, his study with Ken Sheard of the development of rugby football, which is arguably the best sociological study of the development of any sport.⁷

From 1984 onwards, Dunning and his Leicester colleagues produced several books on football hooliganism, and the work of what became known as the 'Leicester School' is without doubt the most substantial and influential work in this area, the starting point for all subsequent research.⁸ They observed football hooliganism at first hand, and served as advisors to (among others) Lord Justice Taylor in his report following the Hillsborough disaster. But their historical perspective served as an antidote to some of the more hysterical commentary of the time on the problem of disorderly spectators. They were able to show that it was not a new problem; it could be traced back many decades. Nor was it associated exclusively with soccer, and it was not uniquely a British problem either. What was probably true, though, was that violent incidents had over time become more associated with sporting events and less with industrial, political or civil conflict in general.

Eric's outstanding contribution to the sociology of sport was recognised when his book *Sport Matters* was awarded the NASSS prize as the best book published in the field in 1999.⁹ In 2008, he was presented with a Festschrift; the cover photo of the University



of Leicester football team around 1960 shows Eric hidden in the back row because, typically, he was the only player who had forgotten to bring his shorts!¹⁰ A conference in his honour was held in Leicester in March 2017, a little after his 80th birthday; tributes were paid by many of his former students, who include (among many others) Jason Hughes, Ken Sheard, Katie Liston, Patrick Murphy, Dominic Malcolm, Joe Maguire, Ken Green, Andy Smith, Chris Rojek, Grant Jarvie, Daniel Bloyce, Martin Roderick, Dan Burdsey, Rod Watson and Raul Sanchez Garcia.

Eric was an inspirational lecturer and a natural teacher who conveyed complex ideas with great clarity. To colleagues and students he always gave unstintingly of his time and his help and advice. To his friends he will be remembered as a bon vivant who loved wine and jazz, a teller of jokes and shaggy dog stories but, above all, as an extraordinarily kind and generous person. We will remember Eric as a larger than life character and a great companion.

He is survived by his second wife, Judith, from whom he was divorced, their two children Michael and Rachel, grandchildren Florence and Isabelle, and his brother Roy.

Notes

1. Eric Dunning and Earl Hopper, 'Industrialisation and the problem of convergence', *Sociological Review*, NS 14: 2 (1966), pp. 163–86.
2. Eric Dunning, 'In defence of developmental sociology: a critique of Popper's *Poverty of Historicism* with special reference to the theory of Auguste Comte', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 4: 3 (1977), pp. 327–49.
3. Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
4. Eric Dunning, 'Football in its early stages', *History Today*, December 1963; 'The evolution of football', *New Society*, No. 83, April 1964.
5. Eric Dunning (ed.), *The Sociology of Sport: A Selection of Readings* (London: Frank Cass, 1971. Published in North America by the University of Toronto Press in 1972 under the title: *Sport: Readings from a Sociological Perspective*).
6. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986; revised and enlarged edition, Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 7]).
7. Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: a Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979).
8. Eric Dunning, John Williams and Patrick Murphy, *Hooligans Abroad: the Behaviour and Control of English Fans in Continental Europe* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy and John Williams, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism: an Historical and Sociological Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy, Ivan Waddington and A. Astrinakis, *Fighting Fans: Football Hooliganism as a World Phenomenon* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002).
9. Eric Dunning, *Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 1999).
10. Dominic Malcolm and Ivan Waddington (eds), *Matters of Sport: Essays in Honour of Eric Dunning* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

– Professor Ivan Waddington, University of Leicester, and Professor Stephen Mennell, University College Dublin.