

Cricket, lovely cricket; a summer digression

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Note to Reader: *For the purposes of reading this article knowledge of the Duckworth-Lewis method of calculating cricket results is neither presumed nor even desired.*

If in spring one's thoughts lightly turn to love, in summer for many they turn to cricket. Indeed, cricket itself sometimes carries all the romance of a love affair, which is perhaps why it has attracted such good writing – poetry and prose. One thinks of Neville Cardus, John Arlott and C.L.R. James. James, a Marxist scholar of great distinction, was in love with cricket from his earliest years in Trinidad. Unlike Trotsky, whose political perspective he had once supported, he did not accept the view that workers were deflected from politics by sports. His book, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) has been described as 'the most finely crafted book on cricket ever written' (*Times*) and the *Guardian* reviewer wrote: 'To say "the best cricket book ever written" is piffingly inadequate praise'. James himself described it as neither cricket reminiscences nor autobiography but one which wrestled with the question: *what do they know of cricket who only cricket know?*

What James understood very well were the interconnections – sometimes subtle and nuanced, sometimes blatant and crass – between the sport and the social and political elements in a society. This was particularly true for his beloved West Indies, where he was a leading critic of the refusal to appoint a black West Indian captain even in the post-colonial period. He was eloquent in his advocacy of Frank Worrell, who eventually was made captain and led with great success.

In 1950, the West Indies touring team played a test match against England and for the first time registered a win against them on English soil. This was only two years after the Empire Windrush landed at Tilbury docks with its 492 passengers from Jamaica, who had migrated to find a new life in Britain. The victory was celebrated by West Indian supporters in London and became the occasion for the famous calypso:

Cricket, lovely Cricket,
At Lord's where I saw it;
Cricket, lovely Cricket,
At Lord's where I saw it,
With those two little pals of mine,
Ramadhin and Valentine.

Walcott, Weekes and Worrell held up their men
With wonder shots throughout the game

But England was beaten clean out of time
With the spin bowling
Of Ramadhin and Valentine.

As is the way with calypsos there were many other verses recalling the great event in detail. The two spin bowlers were unknown quantities before this and they had a similar impact on the English batting as the Australian Warne was to have in recent times. This was the kind of victory that is the stuff of cricket legends. As it happens, I had the great good fortune to see this touring team play Hampshire (the fabled cradle of cricket) at the County Ground, Southampton, when Everton Weekes scored an unbeaten double century. In my mind's eye he is still batting against the toiling bowlers.

When the Thatcherite politician Norman Tebbit (now Lord Tebbit) argued a few years ago that the test of Britishness was whether or not you supported the English cricket team he displayed a crassness of judgment that took no account of deeply layered and nuanced way in which people support this team or that (not only, of course, in cricket).

James himself wrote for the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Glasgow Herald* on cricket during the 1930s. He then went to the United States and did not return to England until 1953, so he missed Ramadhin, Valentine and the three Ws in 1950. But when he returned he noted changes in batting, bowling and fielding techniques. But he also observed changes in the crowds – there were more women, there was more applause – and in the relationship between players, spectators and the media. In his essay 'Return of the Wanderer' (*Manchester Guardian* 7-10-1953) he wrote:

'The broadcasters, who were more pioneers in the late thirties, and the television commentators, who are quite new, have perfected their technique and are splendid, if somewhat on the cautious side. I can understand it, for public pressure on the game is far greater than it used to be... It may be merely temporary, but I feel the games and players are less remote, closer to ordinary humanity than in 1938. Hopes, fears, jokes (and anger) are shared by players and spectators, and through the highly developed media of mass communications by millions of people who were formerly excluded. All this makes the game far more interesting to look at than it was in 1933.'

Things, of course, have continued to change and, we might say, with a vengeance. Radio commentaries have their own interesting history. Cricket enthusiasts of an older generation will have unforgettable memories of test match commentaries from Australia in the middle of the night, crackling and ebbing and flowing in volume – very poor in quality yet somehow communicating a sense of the excitement of the event. Distance did seem to lend enchantment. Much closer to home in every sense are BBC's ball-by-ball commentaries – Test Match Special; the commentary box is inhabited almost exclusively by men, the only

exception has been Donna Symonds from Barbados, a shrewd and knowledgeable commentator who covered the West Indian tour to England in 2000. (It was only a year before when women were admitted to membership of the MCC for the first time). The voices are a mixture of public school/Oxbridge (one thinks of 'Jonners', 'Aggers', 'Blowers' and 'C-M-J') leading ex-players (Boycott, Gooch) and visiting commentators. We are let into the micro world of the commentary box, with its arguments (within limits), its joshing, its expert views, its correspondence from listeners, and conversations with celebrity visitors to the box. It is for the most part a cosy melange, which continues even when rain stops play and is punctuated with appreciative remarks about cake, which has been sent in, or even hand delivered to the box, usually by a female listener.

Yet, though it may appear so, this world is not hermetically sealed. Reality can and does come breaking in. Nowhere was this more dramatically displayed than in the case of the Basil d'Oliveira affair of 1968. D'Oliveira was a South African Cape-coloured cricketer where, in those apartheid days, he was not permitted to play first class cricket but who had been introduced into English cricket by John Arlott. He proved to be a fine all rounder and was chosen to play for England. However, when it came to selection for the tour to South Africa, he was not chosen, even though he had been very successful in the on-going series against Australia. This was a very shabby episode with back stairs machinations between the MCC, the British and South African governments, and South African attempts to bribe d'Oliveira not to make himself available for the tour. Vorster, the South African Prime Minister and a one time Nazi sympathiser had sent a telephone message to the selectors making it clear that 'if today's centurion (d'Oliveira) is picked the tour will be off'.

However, that was not the end of the matter. Due to injury d'Oliveira was later selected and the South African government refused to accept the touring party. The conservative government under Prime Minister Douglas-Home behaved very weakly over the issue. Arlott, who once robustly stated, 'politics governs everything we do – the games we play, the way we play them, who we play' made his own views crystal clear. When, 18 months later, the South Africans were due to tour England and the Stop the Tour campaign was in full swing, Arlott stated that he could not and would not be part of the commentary team. Moreover, he took part in a televised debate at the Cambridge Union against the motion that 'politics should not intrude on sporting contacts'. Memorably he concluded: 'Anyone who cares to support this motion will not exclude politics from sport but will in fact be attempting to exclude sport from life.' In the event the then Labour government cancelled the tour.

Of course it is the rise of television and the process of globalisation that has changed the context in which cricket is followed. In televisual terms we are treated to close-ups of play, to instant replays, to slow motion film, all of which may confirm or question the umpire's decision. Sometimes we can hear what is said by the players on the field (as we now hear referees in rugby internationals

explaining their decisions). We have experts who work with video clips to show us what bowlers and batsmen are doing (in this it parallels tennis). In this way what goes on inside the boundary is represented and mediated to us in quite different ways.

But the role of the media is more than allowing us to share in the fruits of this remarkable technology. The media are players in the process of globalisation. They are competitors and bidders for contracts to televise events. Advertisers, sponsors and broadcasters form an interconnected cluster that brings sports events to us. Thus when the BBC, a public service broadcaster that does not 'do' advertising, used to cover international cricket we could plainly see the Cornhill logo of the sponsor inscribed upon the sacred turf. More recently in its coverage of international rugby, the logo of the publicly shamed Royal Bank of Scotland was frequently and unavoidably in vision on the screen since it was in the centre of the pitch.

Paradoxically, the competition for contracts to cover events has meant in the UK that Test match cricket is not available on terrestrial TV channels. The principle of such sporting events being accessible to all viewers is no longer the case. The availability of these events to the licence payer – sometimes referred to as 'the crown jewels'- such as Wimbledon, the Grand National, the F.A. Football Final and Test Cricket – can no longer be taken for granted. It is a matter of Government media policy to intervene if it wishes to preserve the access of these events to all and stop them from becoming pay-as-you view items. For the time being all the BBC can offer is the radio commentary and video clips on the news. That is what many had to rely on as they listened to the dramatic last day of the first Test against Australia recently. I should add that Channel 5 does give us a 30 minute or so summary of the day's proceedings. Incidentally Channel 4, which was widely praised for the standard of its cricket coverage, not least for the shrewd judgments of Richie Benaud, a former Australian captain, no longer has the contract either. As things stand Sky Sports rule the television waves. But, given that the UK has broadcasters, notably the BBC with public service remit, it is for the government of the day to decide whether to put limits on market forces. These market forces, of course, are by no means 'free markets' even though that ideological rhetoric may be frequently used. They are highly oligarchic global corporations who are able to write their own conditions into the contracts they win. Needless to say the international and national cricket authorities have their own rationale that to award contracts to the highest bidder enables them to channel money down to the grass roots of the game. On that the jury is surely still out. Meanwhile, as the Labour MP, John Grogan has pointed out, the Australian government has 'anti-siphoning' legislation in place, which protects free live sport on TV. This means that the whole population will be able to watch the entire Ashes series on SBS. (See, John Grogan, Cricket caught out after its Ashes TV sell-off, Independent July 8, 09.)

The seismic shift in the balance of power between cricket and the media came in 1977 when the Australian media mogul Kerry Packer launched his World Series. The immediate motivation for this was the refusal of the Australian Cricket Board to give Packer exclusive television rights for his Channel 9 station to screen Australia's test matches. The recruitment that took place of star players from all over the world, attracted by much higher wages and prepared to accept the razzmatazz of the new arrangements, caused schisms and splits among the major cricket playing nations. Out of it came new dress codes, a white ball for floodlit matches, one-day internationals.

Castigated as the Packer circus by its critics, the period became seen as a conflict between the traditionalists and the modernisers. The World Series ran for two years and its ramifications for the future structure of the game proved to be enormous, not least on the much-improved wages of the players. Strange to say, however, as I write the leading West Indian players have refused to play against Bangladesh because they claim that the West Indian Cricket Board has not honoured its wages contract with them. In the recent past also the same Board was in conflict with its then captain Brian Lara because he had a different sponsor than they did.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the Packer revolution we have seen the advent of the limited overs game: fifty overs and more recently 20/20. These games have a different ambience and pressure on the players but are proving to be very popular, not least they finish in a day (or an evening) and spectators can see the whole match in one sitting, unlike the three day County match or the five day Test match. This development has been especially noticeable on the Indian sub-continent, with the development of 20/20 tournaments and with star players being recruited from all over the world to participate.

'Always denied entry, by the English gentry
Now we're driving Bentleys, playing 20/20.' (Duckworth and Lewis)

But it is in India and Pakistan that such lucrative arrangements have been interrupted by political events. The Test match series between Pakistan and Sri Lanka was stopped by terrorist attacks on the teams and supporters so that Pakistan can now only play abroad. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai resulted in the 20/20 international series being shifted from India to South Africa. The phrase 'the globalisation of sport' now has new and darker connotations.

Money talks but it also corrupts. The former South African cricket captain, Hanse Cronje, admitted after many denials that he had been approached by Indian bookmakers to throw a one-off international in Bombay in December 1996. The bookmakers offered him and the team a quarter of a million US dollars to do so. He was banned for life from the game. Sir Paul Condon, former head of the London Metropolitan police, was appointed by the International Cricket Council to head its Anti-Corruption Unit and he duly reported that there was a rich seam of

dishonesty on the international circuit. He holds the view that the Indian Premier League (set up to promote 20/20 cricket competitions with star players from all over the world) has all the potential for the kind of corruption that led to the match fixing in the 1990's.

But cricket's own leading officials have walked into situations which proved to be very flaky indeed. I am referring, of course to the Texan financier, based in Antigua, chairman of the Stanford Financial Group of Companies, Sir Allen Stanford. In February of this year he was charged by the US Securities and Exchange commission with on-going fraud of some 8 billion dollars in what has been described as a 'massive Ponzi scheme'. Such schemes rely on the principle of robbing Peter to pay Paul, when money from old investors is used to pay off new investors until the scheme collapses, imploding on its own contradictions. In Stanford's case the collapse was precipitated by the worldwide banking crisis. The story has affinities with that of Bernard Manoff who is now in jail for the rest of his life. Stanford awaits trial for offences to which his Chief Executive Officer has already pleaded guilty.

It was not only the cricket world establishment which was stung by Stanford – but stung they were. He funded the 20/20 Cricket tournament in the West Indies and built his own ground in Antigua for it. The 2008 tournament had an estimated global audience of 300 million. Later that year he signed a deal with the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to develop 20/20 cricket in the West Indies and in the UK. Landing on the Lords cricket ground in a helicopter with a case full of what was claimed to be 20 million dollars to meet the cricket authorities was an event beyond parody. The staged match in Antigua between the England team and his West Indies all-stars, in which the winners (the West Indies) received a million dollars each and the losers nothing in November 2008, was practically the final act in this particular variant of corporate piracy. The unravelling of this post-colonial offshore pyramid selling was well chronicled by Alec Wilkinson in the *New Yorker* (March 9, 2009) in his piece 'Not Quite Cricket.' Among the comments he elicited was one from Giles Clark, Chairman of the ECB: 'There's an awful lot of being wise after the event. In the end, sporting organisations take what they can get from sponsors – and it's not easy to get.' Needless to say, he is still in post. But at least we can be thankful for good investigative journalists who uncover the unpalatable truth beneath the cricketing clichés.

James's refrain – 'what do they know of cricket who only cricket know' – still holds true. The professional game exists in the interstices of politics and commerce. The media collude in this. But they can do more. Sports journalists need to know about the workings of financial institutions which impinge on the game, so that they can sift the wheat from the chaff. They also need to develop a political awareness of the world in which cricket takes place. To do this with clarity and insight will be to give an inestimable service to what, after all, is a great game.

