

From Lord's to the Union: The Imperial Foundations of South African Cricket

Empire & Cricket: The South African Experience, 1884–1914. Edited by Bruce Murray and Goolam Vahed. Pp. 326. UNISA Press, Pretoria. R270. ISBN 978-86888-540-4. 2009.

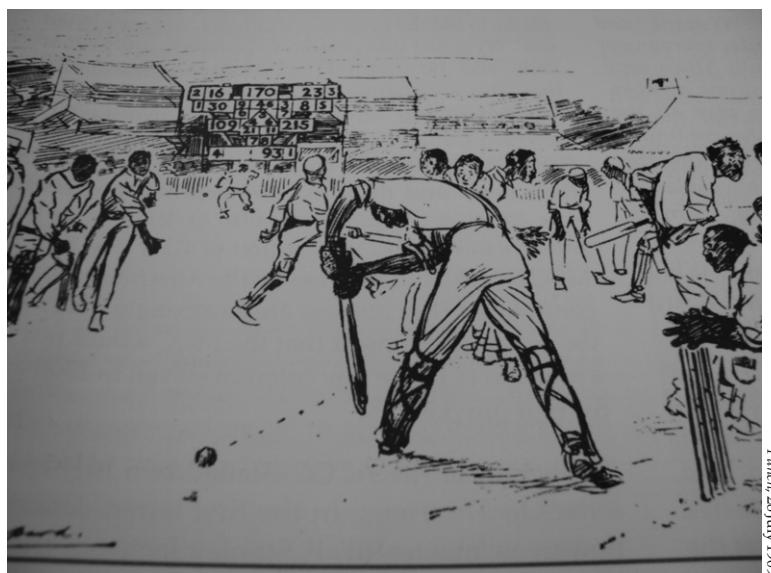
Readers of the right sherry vintage will remember the unsavoury 1968 clash between the Union Buildings and Lord's Cricket Ground. Basil d'Oliviera, the prominent coloured South African cricketer who features in this book, had earlier left his discriminatory country for better prospects in England, where playing fair did not require a fair complexion. Having done well in the first-class game, he was picked for the late-1960s MCC tour of South Africa.

Unfortunately, as 'Dolly' was neither Japanese nor a jockey—and so could not be an honorary white—Pretoria would have none of it. An apoplectic B.J. Vorster wasted no time in declaring that the country would not accept a team imposed on it by the anti-apartheid movement. That spurt of racial petulance meant not only the end of the England tour but the start of the major international sports boycott of apartheid South Africa. In a metaphorical sense, Vorster had run himself out. It all captured perfectly one memorable definition of Test Cricket as a narrative in which everything depends on what has

happened before, and everything that is yet to happen depends on what happens now.

It comes as no surprise that *Empire & Cricket* has its share of Victorian and Edwardian d'Olivieras, marginalised and

excluded from the pavilions because the coin of segregation fell the wrong way. Thus, Jonty Winch's chapter depicts an 1890s prototype in the coloured fast bowler, 'Krom' Hendricks, the speedy Dolly of his day. Despite his strong claim upon selection for a representative South African side to take on England in 1895, Hendricks was excluded by a Western Province Cricket Union clique which was determined to ensure that non-European players did not get too big for their boots.



Triangular imperial cricket: contests or chaos

Bruce Murray and Goolam Vahed have put together an attractive and valuable work of sports history. The fourteen essays in this visually-rich collection probe the fascinating political, cultural and social place of cricket in the relationship between imperial Britishness and South African society in the later-19th and early-20th centuries. Put simply, its overarching argument is that the elaborate hierarchies and constipated formalities of English cricket served as a shadow-play for empire in South Africa, illuminating the game's impact on race, class and cultural identities.

On that score, there is plenty from which to pick. Just as English county cricket brought cloth-clapped labourers and gentlemen squires into the same arena in a mannered style of sporting integration acceptable to those in charge, so some Afrikaners embraced this quintessentially English game, mixing in with English-speakers until the 1899–1902 war queered the pitch. Even then, as Heinrich Schulze shows, Boer prisoners-of-war held captive in Ceylon turned out their form players for a camp club game against the Ceylonese champions, the Colombo Colts. The ethnicity of their opponents was of no more account than cricket being the enemy's sport. Thereafter, rugby got in the way and soon became the preferred expression of nationalist masculinity, with Afrikaners comprising over half the 1906–1907 Springbok rugby team that toured Britain. Yet the 1907 Springbok cricket side still contained the deliciously-named fast bowler, 'Boerjung' Kotze. Those classic names of post-apartheid cricket, Cronje and Morkel, have an imperial heritage of a kind.

Naturally, segregation looms large in several chapters which explore the flourishing Cape and Natal worlds of African, coloured and Indian cricket, forever waiting on the mat and nursing quietly a range of injured sensibilities—over colonial politics of racial exclusion, stunted competitive aspirations, and unrewarded social respectability. Equally, for all that, as Goolam Vahed and Vishnu Padayachee argue, Natal's enthusiastic Indian cricketers remained unequivocally pro-imperial, bowled over by the more lofty promises of British values of fairness, and determined to absorb cricket from the only people who could do it right, superior Englishmen on the pitch. For cricketing merchants and other Western-oriented elites, the dividing line might still be crossed by deference to the Crown and its flannelled representatives.

Another large part of *Empire & Cricket's*

story is its examination of the intricate ways in which cricket's creed and conduct fed into imperial expansion and efforts at Anglo-Afrikaner reconciliation in the pre-Union era. So, those who played it with a straight bat were the preferred kind of no-nonsense men to accompany Rhodes in the colonisation of Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, already entrenched in the leafy collegiate schools of British South Africa, it conjured up the mirage of life in an export enclave of southern England, ruled by the social codes of its middle and upper middle classes.

In that context, Bruce Murray, this book's co-editor, shows well one of the ways in which early South African cricket became entangled with wealth, power and status. In his engaging concluding chapter, we see the Johannesburg mining capitalist, Abe Bailey, talking big and acting big on the field of Anglo-South African cricket. A figure who revelled in the game first as a player and then as a patron, Bailey put the game to grand use. With Union on the way in 1910 and Springbok cricket putting up a good show abroad, a visionary Bailey championed the formation of an imperial triple alliance of test-playing countries. Having England, South Africa and Australia playing under the auspices of an imperial board would help to bind together more closely the 'mother country' and two of

her larger white settler dependencies. Cricket was, after all, the true British Empire game, carried to South Africa as elsewhere by its public school players, soldiers, missionaries and colonial administrators. But for the pushy Bailey, by the 1900s there was also something more. Coordination of triangular tournaments was a strategy to assert and cement South Africa's standing as Britain's newest dominion and its fresh status as an official test-playing country.

Well written throughout and meticulously researched, this wide-ranging collection is an absorbing contribution to sports history and the social history of recreation. In its coverage, it is also nice to see scholarship which is not entirely unmindful of the limits of viewing test cricket solely as a muscular articulation of elite assumptions and values. For its real allure, surely, lies in its stylistic dexterity and beguiling manner. To its credit, *Empire & Cricket* includes the colonial role of the sly googly ball, 'a pretence at orthodoxy, a wolf in sheep's clothing' (p. 222), with which the shrewd South African bowler, Ernie Vogler, bamboozled English batsmen in the 1900s.

Bill Nasson

Department of History
Stellenbosch University
Private Bag X1
Matieland 7602, South Africa
E-mail: bnasson@sun.ac.za