

Not quite fair play, old chap: The complexion of cricket and sport in South Africa

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Sport, Space and Segregation: Politics and Society in Pietermaritzburg. By Christopher Merrett. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. 2009. xx + 391 pp. ISBN 978-186914-1615.

Empire and Cricket: The South African Experience, 1884–1914. Edited by Bruce Murray and Goolam Vahed. Pretoria: Unisa Press. 2009. xiv + 326 pp. ISBN 978-86888-5404.

Readers of the right vintage will remember the shabby 1968 encounter between the Union Buildings and Lord's Cricket Ground. What went on to become known as the 'D'Oliveira affair' said more or less all that needed to be said about the state of sport and politics in apartheid South Africa. Basil D'Oliveira, a Coloured South African cricketer who features in both of these books, had left his discriminatory homeland for better cricketing prospects in England, where playing fair did not require a fair complexion. He made more than a decent mark in the first-class game, earning the colours of his adopted country and representing it ably in the test match arena. Then, inexplicably, D'Oliveira failed to be selected for the late-1960s MCC tour of South Africa.

The omission caused an uproar in Britain. Its liberal media concluded, rightly, that the test cricket establishment had not selected an obviously in-form player so as not to tread on the corns of apartheid South Africa. For the renowned cricket writer John Arlott, it was worse than a pathetic failure of nerve; it signified a shameful 'British acceptance of apartheid'.¹ As the selection fuss grew, one member of the chosen squad played fair. Tom Cartwright withdrew from the tour. Sure enough, his spot could only be filled by Basil D'Oliveira. Equally surely, Pretoria would have none of it. An apoplectic B.J. Vorster declared that it was 'not the MCC team', but a team imposed by 'the anti-apartheid movement'.²

That apartheid veto meant the end of the MCC tour and signalled the beginning of the major international sports boycott of South Africa. It was a moment which caught perfectly Marcus Berkmann's recent definition of the meaning 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'.³ It also provided the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* with one of its most

1 The *Guardian*, 22 October 1968.

2 The *Times*, 7 September 1968.

3 M. Berkmann, *Ashes to Ashes* (London: Little, Brown, 2009): 37.

memorable front covers. A September 1968 issue with the heading ‘Goodbye Dolly!’ carried a photograph of Queen Elizabeth with the England team. Depicted shaking D’Oliveira’s hand, in her invented speech bubble she says, ‘I say, aren’t you the chap who’s been blackballed?’ To which the curtsying player replies, ‘From birth, ma’am.’⁴

He was the sort of cricketing figure who could happen only in South Africa. Inevitably, it comes as no surprise that *Sport, Space and Segregation* and *Empire and Cricket* have their fair share – even, perhaps, more – of Basil D’Oliveiras, excluded, marginalised and unappreciated because the coin of segregation and apartheid fell the wrong way. Thus, Jonty Winch’s contribution to the latter volume portrays an 1890s prototype in the Coloured fast bowler ‘Krom’ Hendricks, the speedy Dolly of his day. Despite being a pressing prospect for inclusion in a representative South African touring side to England, he was excluded by a Western Province Cricket Union clique which was determined, as *The Cape Times* put it, to ensure that whites would not be swamped by ‘our coloured friends of all shades and various classes in life ... who have taken to the white man’s athletics with great vigour’.⁵

In South Africa, at any rate, the place of cricket in the social order never quite replicated the game into which it evolved in its imperial country of origin. True enough, as in England, it established itself as an elite sport which spread downwards, as it were, rather than a mass game, like football, that bounced up to attract the middle classes. So, as Dr Merrett shows, in colonial Natal it filtered down from the first-class fields of pale Hilton College to second-class, Western-oriented Indian elites. These, in due course, incorporated some indentured Indian labourers as players for bodies like the Pietermaritzburg Indian Cricket Club.

Here was an amicable version of the master–servant relationship, warmed by the common curry. Again, in England it was roughly the same way round. As R.W. Johnson pointed out some years ago, for all the rigidity ‘of class barriers within the game itself’, in which generally gentlemen were batsmen and workers were bowlers, English county cricket eventually brought the village ‘rustics and the gentlemen into the same arena’ in a mannered style ‘of social integration acceptable to those above’.⁶

At the same time, more porous English codes of gentlemanly sports conduct had no real equivalent in South Africa. The muscular Christianity of college school-educated white Natalians perpetuated wholesale exclusion based on race. On the other hand, back in the mother country, the first-class game was as much about class as the standard of cricket. It was natural for patrician players to mingle together. That is why someone such as the Nawab of Pataudi, an Oxford Blue, ended up batting for England in the 1930s. Anything like this was too much for the colonial arrangements of the game in South Africa. Drawing nicely on a Caribbean analogy in his study of plantation Natal, Merrett cites the observation

4 *Private Eye*, 13 September 1968.

5 *Cape Times*, 13 November 1897.

6 R.W. Johnson, *The Politics of Recession* (London: Macmillan, 1985): 202-3.

that ‘while the blacks worked for whites in the cane fields, whites refused to play with blacks on the cricket fields’ (14).

The Bruce Murray and Goolam Vahed volume is, obviously, about a formative phase of South African cricket, while *Sport, Space and Segregation* provides a dense local Natal history of physical recreation in which cricket features – these attractive new volumes make a valuable research-based contribution to the growing corpus of literature on South African sports history. Written mainly in the social history genre, these studies have come to encompass both general themes of racism and sport as well as more specialised explorations of particular games, like rugby and cricket, and have even delved into obscure sites of popular recreation, like the concentration camps of the South African War.⁷ Still, such modern scholarly – as distinct from racy journalistic – literature on sport and the South African past remains in its relative infancy. Here, one has only to consider the sporting life of the British to see academic range and variety: the research monograph, the re-conceptualising synthesis, the survey for students and interested general readers.⁸

At the same time, respective sports histories display abiding themes. In the old imperial metropolis, it is frequently class in its ritualistic conventions and its symbolism of top dog and underling; after all, golf is lubricated by the relationship between golfers and caddies, tennis turns on tennis players and ball-boys or ball-girls, and hunters command beaters. And, in the case of cricket in its traditional guise, gentlemen players were always batsmen, while the toiling northern proletarians of Lancashire and Yorkshire generally shouldered the bowling and did the more strenuous fielding.

When, in more recent times, captaincy has not gone to a sound Oxbridge man, the England side has been dishonoured. One has only to think of the worldly Tony Greig in the 1970s. Unsportsmanlike on the field, he soon tumbled into bed with Kerry Packer and his commercial World Series. Or, more currently, there is the showy Kevin Pietersen and his brief and blighted Test team leadership. Both overly-competitive South Africans who had jumped ship at significantly different historical times, they turned out to be untrustworthy colonial-born rotters. Among other things, perhaps they lacked the captaincy class embodied by sound figures such as M.C.C. Cowdrey, P.B.H. May and M.J.K. Brearley. ‘Those three initials’, and the reassurance it provides, have long been ‘important’.⁹

For sport in South Africa, it is predictably race which matters most, supplying the hinge on which both books turn. Unerringly, past or present, all the funda-

7 See, for example, J. Nauright, *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa* (London: Continuum, 1998); D. Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1998); A. Grundlingh, A. Odendaal and B. Spies, *Beyond the Tryline: Rugby and South African Society* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1995); A. Odendaal, *The Story of an African Game: Black Cricketers and The Unmasking of One of Cricket’s Greatest Myths, South Africa 1850-2003* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2003); C. Merrett and B. Murray, *Caught Behind: Race and Politics in Springbok Cricket* (Johannesburg and Scottsville: Wits University Press and University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2004); F. van der Merwe, *Sport en Spel in die Konsentrasiekampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Stellenbosch: FJG Publikasies, 2004).

8 For instance, T. Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863-1915* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980); R. Holt and T. Mason, *Sport in Britain, 1945-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); R. Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); S. Wagg, *The Football World* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

9 Johnson, *The Politics of Recession*: 204.

mental dilemmas of the national sporting life have revolved round it, in one way or another. In the 1890s, it was the issue of taking the talent of 'Krom' Hendricks, picked more by historians now than he ever was by selectors then. Seven decades later, despite winning the Natal Open, the Indian golfer Sewsunker 'Papwa' Sewgolum was unable to receive his prize indoors as Indians were barred from the Durban Country Club. Even the end of apartheid has done relatively little to close the book on this sorry story of racial pickiness. Recently, this country had the chairman of its parliamentary Sports Portfolio Committee threatening to have the passports of the national rugby team confiscated because too many of them were white.¹⁰

But what is also striking is the independent, less conformist or dissident tributaries in sporting activities. It is not only the fact that in the 1880s African and white cricket clubs in the Eastern Cape were playing each other. Nor, as *Sport, Space and Segregation* notes, is it the early case of top cricketers 'passing for white', as with Charles Bennett Llewellyn of Pietermaritzburg, a 'mixed-race' descendant of Natal immigrants from St Helena. Although he worked in Durban as a Coloured clerk, he played for Natal as a white man, if 'rather sunburned' (38).

It is more the other nuggets served up by these books. Thus, as W.G. Schulze illustrates in a fascinating chapter of the Bruce Murray and Goolam Vahed history, some Afrikaners took to the quintessentially English game of cricket from its earliest South African years, mixing in with English-speakers until the 1899–1902 war put a fly in the ointment. Thereafter, though, they were swiftly back together again both as players and as administrators, if for a while. For what soon got in the way, and ended up staying there, was rugby. As far back as 1906–7, over half the Springbok rugby team that toured Britain comprised Afrikaners, while the 1907 Springbok cricket side contained only a quick bowler, the deliciously named 'Boerjong' Kotze. All the same, if post-apartheid cricket has not been short of classic Afrikaner names such as Wessels, Cronje and Morkel, there is an interesting heritage to be acknowledged here. No less noteworthy is that even during the war, some Boers who had landed in the soup returned to the pitch. In Ceylon, Republican prisoners-of-war turned out the form players in their camp club against the Ceylonese champions, the Colombo Colts. A fraternal affair, there was no issue whatsoever among the Boers that they were 'playing against the Colombo Colts, a team of colour' (194).

In this country, as anywhere else, it is mostly good sportswriters and not historians who have translated sport into a medium of exchange with readers. As the character Frank Bascombe reflects in Richard Ford's crisp novel, *The Sportswriter*, 'a special store of sports knowledge' has never really been needed when what has counted 'has been plenty of opinions' and an admiration of bodily agility.¹¹ But it is historians who have given the topic interpretative shape and

10 Sunday Times, 9 April 2007.

11 R. Ford, *The Sportswriter* (New York: Vintage, 1986): 43.

analytical rigour, things usually missed by writers for whom sport is mainly comfort, encouraging them to hang about like ‘an old towel in a locker room’.¹²

The books under review reflect well the restraint and intelligence with which scholars can unravel and trace the meanings of South Africa’s sporting life. In his exceptionally densely-documented exploration of Pietermaritzburg recreational experience between the later nineteenth century and the 1990s, the journalist Christopher Merrett provides a full-blown history of the growth of the town’s recreational facilities, fashioned as an urban ‘historical geography of a small South African city in the twentieth century ... through the lens of sport’(xvii). Sport, the author argues, was especially significant, being crucial to the formation of white South African identity, and also creating an arena across which that domination would in due course come to be confronted. As his study shows in exhaustive detail, the establishment and control of recreational facilities, and the intimate linkages between these and health, housing and economic ownership, reflect in acute detail the nature of the path trodden by Pietermaritzburg society – one bounded by the legislative impact of colonial, segregationist and apartheid experience.

From beginning to end, the story told by *Sport, Space and Segregation* is mostly the tale that one expects to read, be it football, cricket, tennis or some other focus. Thus, swimming baths provide as sure a test as any of the Natal waters. Following the construction in the 1960s of a spanking new European suburban swimming pool, worthies were even mulling over separate public baths for Hindu, Muslim and Coloured swimmers; simultaneously, they were pouring cold water over suggestions that beer hall profits be used to fund a pool for Africans, as Natal’s ‘adult Bantu did not patronise swimming baths’ (246). Whether in or out of the water, what urban Africans did in their spare time had always been a problem for Native Affairs officials. In the interwar era, the solution lay in promoting competitive team sports such as football and athletics, in a woolly effort to fashion ‘the ideal urban African’, one who was ‘stable, healthy and apolitical’ (119). Alongside elite anxieties over ‘the uncontrolled use of leisure time and its implications for law and order’ (344) ran the development of sport and its facilities which reflected the long history of a society of insiders and outsiders. ‘Pietermaritzburg sport’, the author stresses, ‘was white sport, a persistent part of the ambition of burgesses to maintain the city’s racial identity’ (345). In its social purpose and reach, it was emblematic of the power relationships within local society.

The persistence and power of Victorian doctrines of ‘separate spheres’, of model workers, model adolescents and of ideal masculinity, or of rational improvement, informs both of these books. Of course, they also have more besides. In addition to his concern with urban geography and the spatial repercussions of sport’s separate spheres, Dr Merrett does a good job of making matters

12 Ford, *Sportswriter*: 44.

of administration and revenue interesting – limited incentives and failed opportunities in organising material resources accounted for many municipal difficulties and setbacks in using sport to sedate subject communities. Another of the merits of his study is its striking – and personal – attention to the ways in which rising non-racial sports organisation acted as a catalyst to the anti-apartheid struggle for basic civil rights. Then, Christopher Merrett stood as a cricket umpire in non-racial matches organised by the South African Council on Sport (SACOS), a body famed for its political pickiness and uncompromising militancy.

André Odendaal, who contributes a succinct foreword to *Empire and Cricket*, was also once a white cricketer who opted to bat with compatriots confined to more stony fields. This book's fourteen essays on the period from the 1880s to the outbreak of the Great War make easy connections on the basis of its underlying themes. In a sense, some of these are neither especially new nor surprising in their suggestive subject matter, but they are presented here in a visually appealing and well-documented manner. Put simply, the argument is that cricket was a pervasive political, social and cultural affair that influenced various other fields of South African colonial existence. Its creed and conduct fed into efforts at Anglo-Afrikaner reconciliation in the run-up to Union. Those who played it were the right kind of males to accompany Rhodes in the colonisation of Zimbabwe. In British South Africa, it conjured up the mirage of life in an export enclave 'of the Home Counties of England, ruled by the middle and upper middle classes' (120).

In a further consequence of cricket's association with wealth, power and status, Bruce Murray shows how the Randlord Abe Bailey, who revelled in cricket first as player then as patron, put the game to grand use. With Union just over the horizon and Springbok cricket putting up a good show abroad, a visionary Bailey pushed for 'the creation of an imperial triumvirate of Test-playing countries, England, Australia and South Africa', under an Imperial Board. This would help to bind more closely together 'the Mother Country' and two of her 'larger dependencies' (272). Following far in the wake of such voracious endeavour was, as other contributions reveal, a flourishing world of African, Coloured and Indian cricket, with its own politics of exclusion and hurt, stunted aspirations and attachment to respectability. Yet here, too, Natal's enthusiastic Indian cricketers remained unequivocally pro-imperial, 'bowled over by British values' (99) and determined to benefit from the 'real game of cricket', played by the 'experts' who were 'Englishmen on the pitch' (98). Natal's Indian traders and other colonial-born elites started by wanting to get their cricket right. Their less deferential descendants, playing in the Maritzburg District Cricket Union in the 1980s, ended up wanting to put the country right as well.

It goes almost without saying that the material here is likely to be of interest to a readership beyond that concerned with sports history, probing as they do the intricate ways in which recreation became enmeshed with larger political, social and economic issues. So, for those in search of new information on, or explanatory understandings of, imperial anglicisation, or the urban geographical workings of racial segregation and resource discrimination, the volumes present illuminating research and many striking perspectives. These range from the role of the 1907 South African tour in decanting white colonial nationalism into the solid

crystal of imperial cricket, to the fate of the solitary Zulu comrade who made it to the line in a 1930s Comrades Marathon and into the *Natal Witness*.

Yet there remains a question, a teasing one perhaps, about more clinically scholastic accounts of sports experience. That is about imaginative tone or idiom. In trying to capture the meanings of sport, how wide a range of experience should one take into account? Put simply, what about its intense mood of desperate yearning and crushing anguish and its other unique qualities?

One way of considering this is through analogy, taking something like Ross McKibbin's magisterial study of social and recreational culture in English society in the first half of the twentieth century.¹³ That adopts a familiar enough perspective. Above all, it was class that remained the principal determinant of individuals' experiences and life-chances, whether it was employment, dog-racing, dance or physical sports participation. It was always far more influential than factors like religion or region.

The only force that equalled class in its power to structure the basis of life was gender. Yet, even there, McKibbin argues, in the most masculine arena of 'sport', class still counted more. For, while it was true that sport 'was largely a masculine activity from which many women were deeply alienated', the degree of their alienation depended, ultimately, on their class. Granted, women of all sorts were subordinated in all sports. But it was only in working-class sports that they were almost entirely excluded. The fundamental reason was that working-class men discouraged women from playing because the standing of sport depended upon an undiluted brand of masculinity.¹⁴ That extended even to watching. Thus, in the early twentieth century, women hardly ever attended football matches, and certainly never took up those classic working-class pastimes of breeding and racing pigeons and dogs. On the other hand, however tightly constricted, middle- and upper-class females were encouraged to play sport, sometimes on the mixed courts and fairways of middle-class sociability.

Classes and Cultures also brings this recurring conceptual line to bear upon English notions of 'fair play', 'good sport' and the ideal of 'amateurism' which help to colour *Empire and Cricket*. Thus, Dr McKibbin looks at the fundamental interwar social divide between amateur and professional cricketers. Hinging on 'odious social discriminations' between amateur 'Gentlemen' and professional 'Players', this class snobbery was stamped by such idiocies as different dress, separate changing-rooms, separate ground entrances and so on, all resembling a sort of caste relationship between squire and peasant.¹⁵ Indeed, Lord Hawke, who, as *Empire and Cricket* (pp.148-54) reveals, did his bit as captain of the 1890s English touring side to teach the South African colonials about gentlemanly amateurism, crops up here several decades later. Then, as chairman of Yorkshire, Hawke prayed to his God that no professional would ever captain England.

13 R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

14 McKibbin, *Classes*: 384. See, also, G.R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 64.

15 McKibbin, *Classes*: 335.

The possible consequences could not be more blood-chilling, for ‘England will become exactly like League Football’.¹⁶

The point of turning to this history is not to suggest that it can be viewed as a mirror of the South African national sporting past. It is rather that it raises in another form a parallel organising category. In other words, anyone who reads *Classes and Cultures* in tandem with *Sport, Space and Recreation* can, as it were, recognise a thick backbone. It is either sport as an expression of constipated English class attitudes and allegiances. Or, as in the case of Pietermaritzburg, it is ‘the agency of sport’ as ‘a muscular demonstration of ethnic intent’ (345).

As a view of society’s sports histories, this is all persuasive enough. Yet, given the nature of the topic, there remains that larger question of imaginative range. Is there, for instance, sufficient consideration of gender on the score-card? In that respect, despite women being excluded or absenting themselves from arenas of male dominance like cricket, Ross McKibbin is more alert than either of these South African studies to the place of women. To be sure, there is something. *Sport, Space and Segregation* does touch fleetingly on ‘the needs of white women’ in taking account of the 1920s development of croquet lawns (63). The Murray and Vahed collection has the Roedean-schooled Tancred women at the backs of the cricketing Tancred brothers, shadow talents at ‘tennis, swimming and lacrosse’ (120). But, in its proclaimed re-contextualisation of ‘old fixed cricket narratives’ (xvii), *Empire and Cricket* still leaves one wondering what women were getting up to during things like the early Anglo-South African tours. Were the old chaps confiding in their wives or, possibly, to the wives of their opponents, that cricket was actually the cultural secret of the British imperial mission?

Beyond this, though, there lies a further point which is perhaps insufficiently addressed generally in more serious sports history. Fairly simple in substance, it has been raised well by the intellectual historian and literary scholar Stefan Collini. While welcoming the space given to sport by *Classes and Cultures*, Collini is still sceptical of the limits of analysing the role of sport solely as the structural articulation of elite tutelage and values, the ordering of recreational space and time for the lower classes, and their resistance to external direction. Even in the snobby case of ‘amateurism’, he stresses, the practice of sport ‘is surely not fully understandable, perhaps not even properly describable’, without some feel for its ‘emotional and stylistic appeal’, the ecstasy of having a good time which is its allure in many otherwise drab areas of life.¹⁷

Both *Sport, Space and Segregation* and *Empire and Cricket* have captivating traces. Christopher Merrett cites the childhood of the gymnastic Precious McKenzie, unwelcome at a Coloured school for being ‘too dark’, in which he played street football, pole-vaulted over water, raced and swam, and got stuck into stick-fighting (149).¹⁸ *Empire and Cricket* has more from some of its contrib-

16 McKibbin, *Classes*: 335.

17 S. Collini, *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 34.

18 McKenzie later won Commonwealth weight-lifting titles representing his adopted countries of England and New Zealand.

utors. These include Richard Parry and Dale Slater, who craft a nifty description of the sly googly ball, ‘a pretence at orthodoxy, a wolf in sheep’s clothing’ (222), with which the South African bowler Ernie Vogler bamboozled English test batsmen in the 1900s.

Perhaps a further stage in writing on South African sport might see more of this. Not merely sober accounts of white cricket or African cricket or Asian cricket nor, even, as Bruce Murray says of *Empire and Cricket*, a cricketing perspective on a key historical period, ‘covering all groups’.¹⁹ It is work which considers sport’s historical meaning through a wider range of registers, taking the measure of its eternal virtues of triumph, honour and heroism as well as its ignominy and disgrace. And which also gets to grips with what it is to be a big hit, not merely on the field, but off it, too. In time, we may then be able to appreciate the deeper historical significance of the contemporary test batsman Herschelle Gibbs, viewed not only as the gifted and erratic Cape Town Coloured cricketer who had the silver spoon of a Diocesan College school education, but understood also as the equivalent of some British sporting folk heroes. Think merely of uncluttered outlaws like the footballer Paul Gascoigne or the cricketer Mike Gatting, revelling in their ‘anti-intellectual brawn and apparent readiness for a scrap’, their moral controversies off the field simply a mirror of their ‘fitful, maverick brilliance on it’.²⁰ It may be possible to present Herschelle Gibbs, as have some observers, as a victim of sticky circumstances. But that would be no great compliment to Basil D’Oliveira.

19 *The Times* (Johannesburg), 21 May 2009.

20 D. Hill, ‘Seeing off the Bulldog’, *New Statesman and Society*, 63(2), 1989: 10.