

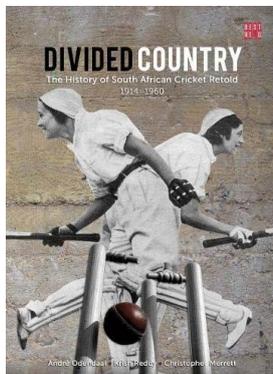


A holistic story of South African cricket across time, space, identity, race and gender

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Divided country: The history of South African cricket retold, 1914–1960

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If the history of South African cricket was to be written, told or retold I cannot think of a better threesome than Andre Odendaal, Krish Reddy and Christopher Merrett to undertake the task. They have each contributed hugely to other projects on the subject of South African cricket in the same spirit as can be found in this book, the second volume in what they expect to be a four-volume narrative. Odendaal is an historian, Reddy a former school principal and Merrett was a university librarian. Each of them brings unique skills, knowledge and experience as academics and cricket historians to this overall project. Among other books, Odendaal wrote the beautifully produced coffee table book *The Story of an African Game: Black Cricketers and the Unmasking of One of Cricket's Greatest Myths, 1850–2003*¹, Reddy co-authored *Blacks in Whites: A Century of Cricket Struggles in KwaZulu-Natal*² and Merrett wrote *Caught Behind: Race and Politics in Springbok Cricket*³.

Here they have pooled their complementary talents to produce a very significant and holistic story of South African cricket across time, space, identity, race and, notably, gender. The role of women in South African cricket would come as a 'total revelation' to most readers, as the authors themselves correctly claim (p. ix). Women's cricket is admirably covered in this book even though the major stories lie in their retelling of the origins and history of the various, sadly racially defined, associations that were formed after the Great War. But the book provides many such revelations, and in this sense is perhaps not a 'retelling' – the story has simply not been told before on this scale, let alone in this detail.

The cricket saga that unfolds happens in the context of the turbulent and divisive history of South Africa; the politics and the cricket story they retell illuminate the same, often inglorious past. These are not two parallel themes but different sides of the same complex reality of modern industrialised South Africa. This second volume picks up the story from the creation of the South African Union, the beginning of the Great War and Gandhi's return to India after some 20 years. It ends (roughly) with the end of the Second Great War, the election of the National Party and the advent of the Afrikaner's own version of liberation and with Gandhi's death by assassination in India. The period has been characterised by Saul Dubow as a time when a 'white South African nation' was being built up, and politics, science, culture and even sport were among the arenas in which this fragile post-South African War (or Boer War) project was played out. For example, Dubow shows how 'science was used to underpin a sense of South African patriot achievement within the broad context of Commonwealth [and imperial] belonging'⁴(p.13). Cricket and rugby played this 'white nation-building' role in the field of sport.

Earlier attempts at forging non-racial cricket in the form of the Barnato tournaments that began around 1888 collapsed in the first half of the 20th century, through the selfish and self-centred desire by some among the various 'race groups' to go their own way. Turning their backs on the nascent non-racial cricket that was being played for the Barnato Trophy, separate racially based leagues were formed for coloured (1926), Indian (1940) and 'Bantu' (1932) players, and later a Malay organisation split from the coloured league which was perceived as being dominated by Christian coloured players. A white women's organisation was formed in 1952 that also took in the organised game in then Rhodesia. These developments mirror to some extent what happened in South African professional football which went 'multinational' in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵

None of these cricket organisations or their mind-blowing acronyms has survived to today. All the while white South African cricket – the 'institutionalised representative of apartheid in cricket' (p.147) – thrived under state support and protection and was spreading its wings internationally, albeit limited to playing their cousins in the British Empire (England, Australia and New Zealand).

These rather ironic developments in local black cricket only began to change in the 1950s. The story of these racially based cricket organisations, their origins and development may at times fill readers with a real sense of revulsion, yet telling their story, however unsavoury, with wholeness and proportionality is vitally important. Among other things it allows the reader to appreciate that cricket among black people in South Africa has its own rich history, both of resistance and accommodation to white rule. It gives the lie to the view expressed by former Springbok rugby captain Dawie de Villiers that 'blacks have only really known Western sport for the last ten years' (p.9).

The cricketing history of each of these leagues is told in great depth and with great care and sensitivity. The book consists of five parts and 32 chapters. The first two parts cover the general narrative of South African cricket set in the context of the unfolding racial saga and identity politics that was and still is South African politics. Parts 3 and 4 provide an overview of each of these racially separate cricket organisations. In Part 5, award-winning cricket historian and statistician Krish Reddy fills in the missing tale of their records and scores with meticulous care. This has to be an (unrewarded) labour of love as well as one requiring a detective's skill. Reddy managed to track down some of the information, photographs and records contained in this book in the basement of the Curries Fountain sports stadium. It is worth buying the book if only for the photographs and other visual material contained in its 442 pages. (Reddy was awarded the International Cricket Council's Volunteer's Medal in December 2009 in recognition of his 'outstanding service to cricket' and the UK-based Association of Cricket Statisticians and Historians chose him as their Statistician of the Year in 2007.)

We learn for example of a South African Indian cricket and football team that toured India in 1922, beating the arrival of Clive Rice's widely celebrated mainly white team in Indian by nearly 70 years! We learn that black women – including Mrs Wauchope, the wife of the respected Eastern Cape notable Isaac Williams Wauchope – were an

integral part of cricket's development from the very beginning, when they played a prominent role in hosting the visiting Kimberly team in Port Elizabeth in 1888, at which match local black people arrived as spectators in large numbers. We learn too of the tensions among white cricketers, especially between English- and Afrikaans-speaking players, and of the challenges faced by working class white and Jewish players in breaking into the game, and a lot more.

With three authors involved in its making, the book does have a certain stylistic inconsistency. I much preferred the first two narrative parts and enjoyed less the story of the racially separate leagues, especially their treatment in Part 4. The detail provided in these middle chapters is no doubt essential and important, but it is plainly less enthralling for the general reader.

I recommend the book to anyone interested in the history or politics of cricket, sports history or South African social history, whether in South Africa or internationally.

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