

Writing a Biography of F.R. Spofforth ‘The Demon’ (1853- 1926): Australia’s First Cricket Folk Hero

RICHARD CASHMAN

University of New South Wales

Spofforth has long been acclaimed as a hero chiefly on the basis of a spectacular performance in 1882 when he played a big part in the first Australian victory on English soil. The famous Ashes tradition, which dates from this Test, is related directly to this heroic performance.

Spofforth’s Australian first-class career (1873-88) coincided with the rise of organized sport in Australia. He made his state debut in 1873 at a time when first-class cricket was taking off and when crowds were very much on the increase. He came into cricket at the time just after the overarm bowling style was made legal (1864) and was one of the first fast bowlers to study and develop the art of fast bowling. The sporting press was also becoming more significant and there was a much greater public demand for a hero. Spofforth was also fortunate that he reached his peak at the dawn of regular Test competition between Australia and England.

Writing on Spofforth presents the following problems and possibilities:

(1) Spofforth was an important performer in a crucial era in the formation of Australian sport culture. Focussing on him will throw some light on the meaning of sport and its social context in this era. Some of the more obvious ingredients were nationalism and inter-colonial rivalry. Professionalism in sport was far more accepted than it later was.

(2) I have termed Spofforth a ‘folk hero’ because it seems clear that the sporting audience of the 1870’s ‘demanded’ a hero. Colonial society, along with the press and the hero himself, played some role in his elevation.

Watching Australia’s latest cricket folk hero in season 1985-86, the ‘street-wise punk’ Greg Matthews suggested that there have been cycles of Australia cricket heroes which materialise when they are most needed. Spectators yearned for a Spofforth in the 1870s, as they demanded a Trumper, a Bradman, a Miller, a Walters and a Matthews in various later decades.

(3) Spofforth, however, was different in one significant way from later heroes, he was a national/imperial hero whereas the others were clearly domesticated. While national self-assertion was an important element in Spofforth’s time, imperial values were very much admired: in fact, Australians applied the values of the motherland in a ‘manner more British than the British.’

It was significant that both Spofforth, and prominent Test captain Murdoch, later settled in England acting out the ultimate colonial ideal which was to make it in England. Spofforth lived there from 1888-1926. I haven’t yet explored colonial reactions to this move. I suspect that there was some ambivalence on the part of the hero himself. He moved to England after

he married into English society, possibly because his wife did not like living in Australia. I suspect, also, that Spofforth has been remembered less by later generations who came to prefer less 'imperial' heroes. Australia has no Spofforth stands, memorials, plaques, books or even articles.

(4) Spofforth, like Matthews, appears to have had no inner doubts or reluctance to accept the adulation of his society. Unlike some of the other potential heroes of the era, Spofforth made the most of his opportunities and seemed to save his best performances for the big occasion. Spofforth was shrewd, cunning, ruthless - a heady bowler who was very much of an individualist - who had plenty of brushes with other players and with authority.

(5) A final challenge will be to come to terms with the technical achievements of Spofforth who is said by some to have revolutionised the art of fast bowling. Such an inquiry will force me to confront many technical issues about how fast Spofforth actually bowled; how he got batsmen out; the state of the wicket; the character of the ball; the strategies and theories of bowling, batting and fielding. There is also the challenge of attempting to realise how he thought about the game itself.