

Cricket and Social Class in North America: A Response to the Case Studies of London, Ontario (1860-1905) and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1850-1880)

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The painstaking “record linkage” conducted by the researchers has shown that cricket both accentuated and eroded socioeconomic class divisions in each city. While the findings suggest that cricket club patronization was weakest among the working class, it is regrettable that there was no deeper examination of the strategies adopted by middle class members in maintaining their exclusivity (e.g., “blackballing,” double nomination and high membership fees).

The power of Jable’s findings rests with his consideration of socioeconomic variables other than occupation. He shows, quite conclusively, that Philadelphia’s cricketers from 1860-1880 were predominantly young, wealthy, native born professionals. In contrast, Joyce’s failure to consider these and other variables, including education background, ethnic and religious affiliation, and place of residence (for nineteenth century cities were becoming increasingly compartmentalized on the basis of social class), limits the utility of his findings. Yet Joyce’s study does offer a unique and important consideration, that of status and influence within the cricket clubs. His brief study of cricket “administrators” shows that, from 1860-1905, power and influence within the sport, in London, remained with the high white collar and professional groups.

Among the most exciting theses explored by Jable is the practice of upward club mobility. The quantitative evidence provided would appear to support the notion that cricket came to represent an entry level position into society for Philadelphia’s young, aspiring bourgeoisie. In recognizing the inherent limitations of quantitative historical research, both authors are to be applauded for the brief biographical profiles that they furnish for the leading characters, a supplement which gives meaning to the otherwise lifeless empirical data. Nevertheless, the afficianado of cricket is struck by the failure of either researcher to recognize the existence of the cricket professional. Although the freelance pursuits of the frequently itinerant professional doubtlessly made “record linkage” difficult, it is critical that future studies of cricket in North America seek to address this matter.

Both studies represent interesting and valuable reading, rewarding in their methodological approach and conclusions. Interestingly, their greatest worth may come from the questions that they have prompted as much as from those they have attempted to answer.