

David Frith, *The Slow Men*, Richard Smart Publishing, Mosman, 1984
pp.199. \$14.95.

This was a most ambitious undertaking. David Frith attempted to trace the history of slow bowling from Tom Boxall to Abdul Qadir. He has succeeded remarkably well. Few Test spinners of any note have been denied a reference here, and the most successful among them have been honoured with a graceful paragraph or two. Frith's latest book is about styles and techniques, skills and temperaments. It is an intriguing synthesis of fact and anecdote. There is a good deal here about human foibles and idiosyncracies as well as cricket victories and defeats.

The Slow Men is not only a review of spin bowling; it is also a serious lament. Frith is much disturbed by the prospect of the total disappearance of slow bowlers, especially leg-spinners, from the game of cricket. The emphasis of pace bowling, in his judgement,

has gravely hurt modern cricket, robbing it at least of its aesthetic balance. He is not so much yearning for a return to good bowling as for the return of traditional variety. He would like to see the teams of today looking more like the great Surrey team of yesterday, with stars like Bedser, Loader, SurrIDGE, Laker, and Lock sharing the attack. In essence, he is repeating the dirge so mournfully sung by Patrick Murphy recently in *The Spinner's Turn* (London, 1982).

Both Frith and Murphy are convinced that the art of spin bowling will perish unless something is shortly done about the preparation of wickets, the wasting of time by the fast bowlers, the demands of the one-day game, and the present emphasis on containment. They imply, too, that the success of recent West Indian teams, with their battery of fast bowlers, is encouraging the next generation of cricketers to focus on speed rather than on guile. Perhaps they are too pessimistic. These things, as cricket history shows, are cyclical. Frith and Murphy might also have been more optimistic about cricket's future had men like Garner, Holding and Marshall been bowling for England instead of the enemy.

The fault, if anyone can speak about blame in such matters, must rest with the bowlers themselves. It is up to them to counter the supremacy of the bat by constantly improving their skills. But the slow bowlers, especially the leg-spinners, have signally failed to improve their craft during the past twenty years at least. While batting techniques have been perfected to counter spin, they have been less fruitful against speed precisely because the fast bowlers have recently done more to upgrade their own specialty. They have been bowling faster and more intelligently than before, using the crease as well as subtle variations of pace more effectively than the majority of their forbears. Before he was unfortunately banished forever from the Test arena, one only had to look at Colin Croft, who seldom bowled from the same spot, to see why he could so often bamboozle the batsman simply by changing the angle of his delivery.

But just as the celebrated W.G. Grace once killed off a whole generation of fast bowlers almost single-handedly, some batting genius might possibly do the same to the current crop of speedsters. Then will bowlers have once again to resort to trickery rather

an sheer speed. Neither Frith nor Murphy has given adequate thought to this possibility.

If this book has a weakness, it is one that springs from the narrowness of Frith's research. His knowledge of Australian and English cricket is superior to his awareness of cricketing developments elsewhere. It comes as a surprise, for example, to find no reference whatever to a player like C.B. Williams, who was arguably the best spin bowler in the West Indies during 1945-50. Frith might well have found a helpful clue or two in such works as Arthur Carman's *Wellington Cricket Centenary 1875-1975* (New Zealand, 1975) or Bruce Hamilton's little-known, albeit useful, *Cricket in Barbados* (Bridgetown, 1947). It is also somewhat disappointing to find no mention, among Frith's 'Main Sources', of such obvious works as H.D. Altham & E.W. Swanton, *A History of Cricket* (London, 1948); C. Martin-Jenkins, *The Complete Who's Who of Test Cricketers* (London, 1980); or A. Wrigley, *The Book of Test Cricket* (London, 1965).

This, however, is a minor criticism, and probably not even a fair one. Frith, after all, is writing for a general rather than a scholarly audience. The book, on the whole, is well written and forms a good sequel to his best-selling *The Fast Men*, which appeared in 1975 and is already in need of updating. What we need now, to complete a beautiful trilogy, is *The Medium Pacers* by the same author. It will be his best work if he widens the scope of his research and looks more carefully at the history of cricket in India, Pakistan, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and the West Indies.

Keith A.P. Sandiford
University of Manitoba