

Ric Sessions and Brian Stoddart, *Cricket and Empire: The 1932-33 Bodyline Tour of Australia*. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984. Illus., pp.vii + 150. \$11.95.

Norman Gale, composer of numerous unpretentious verses on the

virtues of cricket, once wrote in a paroxysm of euphoric certainty:

This will be a perfect planet  
Only when the Game shall enter  
Every country, teaching millions  
How to ask for Leg or Centre.  
Closely heed a level-headed  
Sportsman far too grave to banter:  
*When the cricket bags are opened  
Doves of Peace fly forth instanter!*

Unhappily, in cricket as in life, assertion is always easier than implementation. Sissons and Stoddart emphatically prove the point. In firm rebuttal of Gale's gentle optimism, they provide a contradictory case-study - an analysis of the notorious MCC Bodyline Tour of Australia in 1932-33.

It should be made quite clear at the onset that their primary interest is the 'delicate matter of sport and politics'. Consequently their book is as much about political manoeuvre as it is about cricketing confrontation. In a succinct, balanced and fascinating work they are as meticulous in enumerating past off-the-field telephone calls and telegrams between officials of Motherland and Dominion as Bill Frindall is in keeping a record of on-the-field exchanges between modern English and Australian representatives.

The Bodyline Tour in its essentials is quickly described. The MCC played 22 official matches, won ten, drew ten, tied one and lost one. It regained the Ashes by defeating Australia four tests to one. To Australians the result was dispiriting and the means of achieving it provocative. To quote the neat and exact words of Sissons and Stoddart: 'England won by way of a major departure in fast bowling strategy. The English bowlers aimed at or outside the batsmen's leg stumps, and considerably short of a good length... the deliveries came at the Australian batsmen fast, high and in line with their bodies' (4). Of course, this was not the whole of it. Fielders were placed in inner and outer rings on the leg side. Batsmen could duck, allow themselves to be hit offering no stroke or play the ball and ultimately be caught. A number of courageous or foolhardy Australians chose to be hit.

The 'English' villain was in fact, a Scot - Douglas Jardine, Winchester and New College, Oxford, and the English captain (Larwood was instrument rather than instigator). Jardine was more

Darwinist than muscular Christian. He exemplified perfectly Norwood's celebrated image of the ideal public schoolboy: 'Within the rules no mercy is to be expected, or accepted or shown...never on any occasion must he show the white feather.' Jardine broke no rules (at least of the codified variety), but he played to win. He was self-confident, aggressive, ruthless and determined, His character and his strategy provoked something of an imperial crisis!

The Australian public was incensed by the unpalatable combination of violent aggression, humiliating helplessness and ultimate defeat. The importance of their reaction lay in its potential impact on traditional ethnic ties and contemporary political designs. Both might be adversely effected - hence the eventual concern of both national governments. Sissons and Stoddart deal fully with these respective issues.

They devote much space to what they claim is a major and neglected aspect of the bodyline controversy - the firm belief in cricket 'as a code of cultural behaviour throughout the British Empire'. Cricket, they argue, was more than a mere game; it was a symbol of cultural heritage, unity and demeanour. It enshrined moral values and ethical action. Its significance was a bond of empire - moralistic, attitudinal, behavioural, ritualistic. The player was a talisman and Antipodeans, it appears, were as much disconcerted by Jardine's transgression of sacrosanct mores as by physical attack and strategic route. They were confused by the adoption of ethical imperatives which seemingly ran counter to the maxim 'fair-play', and angered by the calculated flouting of tradition by an emissary of the tradition makers. Historical and revered associations were threatened. To paraphrase one perceptive Englishman of the time, England seemed likely to win the Ashes and lose a Dominion.

Nor was this all, The tour took place during the 'Great Depression' which threw a strain on both trade and diplomatic relations between Britain and Australia. The Australian economy was in considerable difficulty and assistance from Britain was sought, for example, in the form of deferred loans. This provided the opportunity for Britain, resentful of high protective Australian tariffs, to attempt to call the Dominion to heel. Allegations of

financial imperialism were heard 'down under'. British resentment provoked Australian counter-resentment. And there were other economic irritations. The outcome of the Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa in the summer of 1932 was satisfactory to neither country.

It was against this background that 1932-33 Tour was seen as a vehicle for restoring harmony and the players viewed as agents of goodwill. The series was to repair relations and create a climate in which constructive political negotiation could be undertaken. Consequently the increasingly vehement attitude of the Australian public towards the English team as the Tour progressed and the critical correspondence which passed between the MCC and the Australian Cricket Board ultimately produced exchanges between government officials of both nations in an attempt to reduce tension, maintain the Tour and re-establish amicable relations. The touring side completed its engagements but amity was re-established only after time had blurred memories, healed wounds and won concessions from both sides.

Sisson and Stoddart tell the story well. For the most part, the exposition is crisp and clear. Very occasionally standards slip. This sentence for example, wins no applause. 'The resultant uncertain handling of the crisis allowed the English team management to enlist the support of its local political representative who ushered the matter into the realms of the official Anglo-Australian relation bureaucracy' (85). A more serious criticism is the glib use of conjecture in the absence of evidence, in an attempt to persuade the reader of the close association between period politics and sport. Two examples must suffice. Both involve S.M. Bruce, the Australian special minister for negotiations in London, who *inter alia* had the responsibility for discussions on the loan issue mentioned earlier. In addition, we are told, 'being keenly attuned to public opinion generally, he would have been also involved in discussions on bodyline' (107-8). Later in the same chapter, the authors report that in January 1933 Bruce went to the Dominion Office 'where undoubtedly bodyline figured in his discussions' (108). Well, did it or didn't it?

It would be churlish to end on a critical note. The final words must be complimentary. Sissons and Stoddart have made a

serious and successful attempt to set sport in the wider societal and political context. And for this they *should be* applauded. Their book should grace the shelves of the social and political historian as well as the library of the 'cricketing buff'

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