

THE TRUMPER BIOGRAPHIES

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Ashley Mallett, *Trumper: The Illustrated Biography. The Greatest Batsman of Cricket's Golden Age*. Macmillan, Melbourne, 1985, pp.228. \$29.95 -
and Peter Sharpham, *Trumper: The Definitive Biography*. Hodder &
Stoughton, Sydney, 1985. Illus. pp.245. \$24.95.

These books provide welcome and long overdue studies of
Australia's most stylish batsman. It is odd that, although Trumper

died over sixty years ago, no acceptable biography has been produced until now. Lionel Brown's *Victor Trumper and the 1902 Australians* (1981) was a thorough account of a single season but Jack Fingleton's *The Immortal Victor Trumper* (1978) fell well short of the mark.

Mallett does not attempt a definitive biography, admitting in his introduction that 'no doubt there are bits and pieces missing', but this does not detract from the publication. The *Illustrated Biography* is a large format 'coffee-table' book which, like its predecessor (Michael Page's *Bradman: The Illustrated Biography* published in 1983), relies on extensive illustrations and a light, but thorough, summary of the cricketer's life and exploits. Indeed I hope that the Macmillan company continues this excellent series.

In addition to the illustrations, Mallett has found Trumper's diary of the 1902 tour of England, extensive though well edited extracts of which form the basis of chapter six. Initially it seemed that Mallett had taken the sickeningly 'too good to be true' hagiographic approach to his subject. Introducing the book he observed that 'By every account Trumper was an exceptional human being. He was generous to a fault and a devoted husband, father and son...' and declared later that 'Perhaps only a man of genius cannot be condemned for overlooking the daily humdrum of ensuring that one's clothes are always neat and tidy' (p.3). Happily the diary of Trumper's 1902 tour provides a more balanced view of his character, revealing an occasionally vain and selfish man. Throughout the tour Trumper appeared to be impressed, though certainly not obsessed, by records, and when he retained the record for the most number of centuries by an Australian on tour (despite the efforts of Noble and Armstrong to relieve him of it) he wrote: 'Batted well... Still have the record' (p.76). Similarly, later in the tour, when a mix-up with his opening partner, Reg Duff, led to his being stranded down the wicket he expressed some bitterness: 'Run out 2... easy run' (p.84). Trumper's selfishness or vanity was evident later in his career when he refused to play for New South Wales because he had not been appointed captain.

Mallett makes a number of factual errors and although not numerous they should perhaps be mentioned. First, Australia's inaugural national cricket administrative body, the Australasian Cricket Council, was disbanded in 1900, not 1898. Second, during

the New South Wales Cricket Association's dispute with players who had agreed to play for the Melbourne Cricket Club rather than the newly formed Board of Control for International Cricket in 1906/7, the Paddington District Cricket Club refused to suspend Trumper and Monty Noble and was itself briefly suspended from the Association. Third, Australian players were given a choice between taking a share of the net profits or a £400 lump sum on the 1912 tour of England not the 1909 tour. In 1909 they simply took a share of the net profits as in all previous tours. Finally, I am at a loss to understand the source of detailed conversations between Board members during meetings of the Board of Control on 30 and 31 December 1911. They certainly did not appear in the minute books of the Board, no shorthand notes were taken of meetings and all meetings were closed to the press.

Despite these minor criticisms, and overlooking a frequently repetitious and jumpy style, Mallett has produced an entertaining and readable account of Trumper's life. It perhaps lacks the depth of research that serious students of the game will demand; that detail, however, will be found in Peter Sharpham's *Trumper: The Definitive Biography*.

Sharpham has produced a thoroughly researched and documented biography of Trumper's career, providing the substantial basis for Mallett's lighter format that Irving Rosenwater's *Sir Donald Bradman* (1978) provided for Page's illustrated biography of Bradman. The depth of Sharpham's research is evident from the outset, though his extensive quoting (he appears to have collected every recorded contemporary account and opinion of Trumper's batting) is at times a little tedious. The first two chapters, describing Trumper's childhood and early playing days, are especially interesting, confirming, among other things, his previously suspected illegitimacy. The main part of the book is a chronological account of Trumper's international career, from his belated selection for the 1899 Australian tour of England following double centuries in two inter-colonial matches, to his final tour, to New Zealand, in 1914, the year before he died from Bright's disease at the age of 37. I could not fault Sharpham either in terms of accuracy or omission in his description of Trumper's career though some might question his assessment that Trumper... 'on his day was at least equal to the

best bowlers in Australia' (p.106). Sharpham has also found many original photographs, including a shot of the sports store in Market Street owned by Trumper and his wicket-keeping team mate Hanson Carter. Statisticians will be impressed by the appendix which includes, among other things, a list of bowlers who most frequently dismissed Trumper, and his first class, club cricket and team averages. The table showing his Sydney club cricket averages is an especially impressive product of many hours searching through Sydney newspapers.

Sharpham has indeed written the definitive biography of Victor Trumper's cricketing achievements. However, with a title as grand as *The Definitive Biography* one can be excused for expecting a little more. Sports history has come a long way in the last twenty years, from antiquarian chronicles of 'on the field' achievements and events to scholarly studies of the role and place of sport in modern industrial society. It appears though that sports biography has not kept pace with the general advances in sports history. This is not meant as a criticism of Sharpham's work. He set out to write the biography of Trumper the cricketer and has done an admirable job, but there was much more to Trumper's life than his cricketing exploits, and so to label the study a definitive one necessarily leaves the author open to criticism.

Trumper's cricket career, 1892 to 1914, spanned the most eventful and arguably the most important era of cricket and rugby in Sydney, and he had a significant role in the development of both. Between 1892 and 1914 cricket and rugby became mass spectacles in Sydney and, from 1900 onwards, Trumper played a major part in maintaining the popularity of the former. The money generated from cricket and rugby created severe tensions between players and officials and in both sports the period was characterised by a battle for control between the two groups. Cricket officials tried to wrest control of international cricket from the players, the Melbourne Cricket Club and the trustees of the Sydney Cricket Ground because they believed that these groups were spoiling the game through their too evident pecuniary interests in it. Rugby officials maintained tight control of their sport until 1907 when some players, demanding a share in the profits that their efforts had created, turned to professional rugby league. Trumper played

a role in the battle for control of both cricket and rugby but this is an aspect of his life that Sharpham has not investigated. The struggle for control of cricket which culminated in the refusal of six leading players, including Trumper, to tour England in 1912 warrants its own separate study and I can understand Sharpham's decision not to deal with it (p.198). Failure to investigate Trumper's role as a founding entrepreneur of rugby league in Sydney (Sharpham devotes a single paragraph on page 171) can also be excused in a cricketing biography, especially when the evidence of his involvement, though irrefutable, is often sketchy. Sharp-ham has painstakingly chronicled the achievements of Trumper's cricketing career, but the definitive account of Trumper's place in the development of cricket and rugby in Sydney in the first decade of the twentieth century has still to be written.