

Marcus Williams (ed.), *Double Century, 200 Years of Cricket in the Times*. Collins/Willow, London, 1985. Illus. pp.621. \$35.

'London without Lord's could hardly be considered London' asserted a *Times* leader in 1929. Much the same might be said of *The Times* and the British ruling class.

This magnificent collection, culled from 200 years of cricket writing in *The Times*, makes heady reading. In effect, it provides the reader with a history of cricket, albeit occasionally whimsical, and a survey of the ideological and social changes that have overtaken the game.

The first 50 years (1785-1834) warrant only 20 pages, but there powerful pecuniary interests are encountered - for example, in 1790 four Gentlemen of the Mary le Bone Club, with seven of Hants, met All England for the very considerable prize of 1,000 guineas. At this time there was no question of cricket being a place where, to quote Lord Hawke in 1924, 'High and low, rich and poor, greet one another practically on an equality.' In 1788, via

the columns of *The Times* 'a certain young gentleman' was reprimanded for 'making of his own lamplighter a partner at a game of cricket.'

The major criticism that can be levelled against Marcus Williams' editorial selections is the unfortunate emphasis on the contemporary. The second 50 years (1835-1884), the formative period for cricket as we know it today, is hurried through in only 69 pages while the last 50 years (1935 to the present) occupy more than half the 600-plus pages.

However, the decision to lay the emphasis on features, leaders, quirky news items (one legged versus one-armed matches occur twice) and obituaries is to be commended. Endless match reports would have been tiresome, especially given that *The Times* has never boasted a journalist to rival Neville Cardus, John Arlott or even Jim Swanton. Instead there is an array of literary talent masquerading behind the byline 'From Our Special Correspondent'. Williams identifies the anonymous authors revealing such notables as R.C. Robertson-Glasgow, and C.L.R. James, as well as Plum Warner, who uses one occasion to immodestly describe one of his own innings as 'faultless'.

The numerous obituaries make marvellous, if slightly morbid, reading. Among the Australian inclusions is the enigmatic Albert Trott, who left Australia to play for Middlesex. In his 1907 benefit match, he achieved the hat-trick twice in half-an-hour, while eight years earlier he had become the only player ever to hit a ball over the Lord's pavilion. Sadly, Albert Trott took his own life in 1914. Ten years earlier Arthur Shrewsbury, the finest professional batsman of the pre-war period, had set Trott a suicidal example. However, the most famous *Times* cricket obituary was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's appreciation of 'The Greatest of Cricketers', W.G. Grace. Conan Doyle maintained a passionate interest in the game, apparently naming Holmes' brother after Mycroft, the Derbyshire professional. The obituary eulogistically concludes that W.G. was 'the very impersonation of cricket, redolent of fresh air, of good humour, of conflict without malice, of chivalrous strife, of keenness for victory by fair means, and utter detestation of all that was foul.' While these comments gloss over some of the Doctor's more dubious on-field tactics, it does befit a man who bestrode the game for 50 years.

In the latter years of *Double Century* Don Bradman is accorded the same status as Grace. A 1930 *Times* leader stated and predicted that 'He does not merely break records; he smashes them.' Cricket had become a subject for leaders in 1914 when a fourth editorial was added. Some of them are classics. In January 1933 *The Times* stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Douglas Jardine and the M.C.C. Committee. They pronounced that 'It is inconceivable that a cricketer of JARDINE'S standing, chosen by the M.C.C. to captain an English side, would ever dream of allowing or ordering the bowlers under his command to practise any system of attack that, in the time-honoured English phrase, is not cricket.'

However, the current Australian selectors can draw succour from a 1926 editorial which commented that a 'stream of disapproval always pours down on the devoted heads of the Selectors. It is the delightful part of this form of criticism that we can be never proved in the wrong.'

In terms of content and cents per page *Double Century* was one of the very best cricket books published in 1985.

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