

C. Harte, *The History of the Sheffield Shield*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987. Bibliog., illus., match summaries, records, pp.ix+365. \$34.95.

At a time when there are sometimes fewer spectators than players at Sheffield Shield matches, the appearance of this handsome work is a most timely reminder of the excellent pedigree of this competition.

The title is a misnomer, as Harte actually covers every interstate cricket match that has taken place in Australia, thus including the earliest matches between the colonies. He gives a fascinating vignette of Lord Sheffield himself, showing him to be an effete aristocrat, with a prodigal liberality towards cricket and cricketers. It is rather fortuitous that the Sheffield Shield bears his name, as there was considerable doubt that his original, open-ended gift to the Australian Cricket Board would be used to promote the inter-state competition. Good sense prevailed, however, and the Shield matches began in December 1892.

Harte divides his history of the Shield competition proper into the following, intriguingly (if slightly misleadingly) titled chapters: The Early Years (1892-1915); A Glittering Phase (1919-1940); Benaud the Revivalist (1945-62); Status Quo (1962-77); Declining Standards (1977-86). His scheme is to give an account of the home games of each participating State in these periods. To some extent, this results in confusion, for an appraisal of a team's performance over a season is not possible until the reader has also read the accounts of its away matches. But Harte encapsulates most skillfully the highlights of each match in his necessarily brief summaries.

My own 'career' as a spectator straddles two of Harte's chapters, and covers the years 1965-71, when I attended every single day's play at the Adelaide Oval, and 1973-86, when I have almost, but not quite, achieved the same consistency in Melbourne. It is a delight to recall the games that one has watched. I am entirely in agreement with Harte that the standards, both of performance and sportsmanship, have declined since the wonderful match that I saw at Adelaide Oval between South Australia and New South Wales in December 1965, when 1568 runs were scored and a great spirit of comradeship prevailed. But nevertheless the cricket is played today as keenly as ever, and a close match, such as that between Victoria

and New South Wales at the Junction Oval last season, produced much more real tension than half-a-dozen one-day shows of contrived excitement.

It is, however, the pre-World War II period that will enrapture the reader. There was some breathtaking scoring. Until 1927, matches were timeless. Thus the first draw in the competition did not result until after 34 years! One might have supposed that a timeless match would inevitably produce funereal scoring. But this was hardly ever so. Most matches finished in four or five days. In 1926-27, Victoria scored its record 1107 runs in only 630 minutes - at more than 110 runs an hour. But uncovered wickets occasionally produced a spectacular bowling haul. That very season in the return match in Sydney, Victoria was dismissed for 35 runs.

There is a great deal to be said for requiring the present administrators of the game to read this work, and consider very carefully the successful formulae of the past. Then, one hopes, they will scrap the incredible points system operative in 1986-87, whereby a team scoring a first innings win was retrospectively stripped of the points already earned if it lost outright. Perhaps timeless matches might be regarded as impractical, but certainly five or even six days could realistically be allotted, in these days of air travel. Certainly, batting and bonus points added considerably to spectator interest, until they were ill-advisedly abrogated in 1981. And the re-introduction of uncovered wickets would give the game the variety it so much needs.

This is an attractive book, containing many fascinating photographs and pen-pictures of players. It is capped by statistical appendices, including the scores of all matches, the final ladders and the batting and bowling average of every player who has played Shield Cricket.

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[This book was awarded the Jack Pollard Trophy, the Literary Award of the Australian Cricket Society, for the best cricket book published in Australia for season 1986-87 - Ed.]