

Ric Sissons, *The Players: A Social History of the Professional Cricketer*. Pluto Press, Sydney, 1988. Bib., illus., index, pp.xiv+336, \$19.95.

Few scores, even less batting averages and bowling analyses, and scarcely a mention of rain stopping play: yet what an enthralling cricket history this is. Who won what, when, where and by how much has been left to the pedants and antiquarians: instead we are given a model sports history set in economic,

political, and especially social context. For example, the eroding effects of postwar inflation on cricketers' earnings is documented and indeed a price index is used to demonstrate that some of the apparently massive benefits of recent years were not significantly higher than those of yesteryear when gamemoney and subscription lists were the only source of funds. It is shown that in the nineteenth century Lord Harris was Chancellor of the Primrose League, a Tory interest group, whose aim was "to unite all classes in a common crusade against the forces of Atheism and Revolution", a role not unlike the one which this doyen of the Kent C.C.C. and influential member of the M.C.C. saw for cricket. Despite such claims of the unifying nature of the game Sissons also shows that the British class system was reflected within cricket for much of its history.

The main theme of the book is life as a professional cricketer and how wider social and economic changes have influenced earnings (here Sissons presents some sound statistical material), social mobility, educational attainment and, in an interesting chapter, post-playing days. Two major sub-themes cover the amateur/professional issue and the master/servant relationship which affected the paid player both on and off the field for most of the period dealt with in the book. Sissons argues that only at the time of the peripatetic professional elevens were cricketers who played for money ever in control of their own destinies and this independence was taken away with the development of county cricket and the emergence of the M.C.C. as the dominant authority in the game. Such a reduction in player power allowed social snobbery an undue influence, as witnessed by the strong (but often petty) restrictions and the shamateurism which prevailed until 1962 when the distinction between gentlemen and players was formally abolished. For Australian readers there is mention of English tours to the antipodes, of short and long term migration of coaches and players, and, of course, the Packer affair, which, although Australian in origin, had ramifications for cricketers worldwide. Essentially, however, the book is concerned with the *English* professional cricket player and perhaps this should have been indicated in the title.

It is clear that the ideas developed in this book are the product of thorough preparatory work. Although there are no footnotes, it is apparent from textual references that Sissons has done extensive primary research, particularly in the archives of the Lancashire and Surrey County Cricket Clubs and, as the bibliography indicates, this has been supplemented by substantial reading of secondary sources.

Perhaps because he is managing director of the publishing house Sissons has been able to adopt some useful literary devices. He partly eschews the traditional essay-style chapter and instead uses many sub-headings within each chapter, some covering only a paragraph. This has allowed digression to occur without disruption to the general argument. On occasions too, as in his brief biographies of Nottinghamshire cricketers who played in the Lancashire League or his listing of reasons for the absence of unionism among cricketers, the material is presented virtually in lecture note format. Although this may detract from the style, it assists in the conveying of information. And the reader is certainly informed. One has to agree with John Arlott's foreword that "even those well-read in cricket literature will find fresh facts on virtually every page". Among such items of interest to the reviewer is a new interpretation of the 1852 split among the peripatetic professions. The accepted version has been that the cause was poor payment, but Sissons points out that none of the regular All England players joined the new venture and argues that it was simply recognition by those who could not secure a regular place that there was an unfulfilled demand for quality cricket from which they could benefit if they formed another touring side. Two other production points deserve a mention. First, there is a separate index for cricket players and officials and, second, and most unusual these days, the illustrations appear in the appropriate place in the text.

The book is not perfect. Given his economic principles and cricketing morality, one can question the validity of citing W.G. Grace as a cricket historian; nor have G.D.H. Cole's standard of living estimates fully withstood the test of time and historical research. There are also some untested issues

which ought to have been followed up. To what extent were amateur captains passengers in the professionally dominated teams? How exactly were the wandering professionals paid, especially when playing in benefit matches? How has the South African issue affected the paid player? Yet these are quibbles which should not be allowed to detract from what is an outstanding contribution to cricket history. It should be on the shelves of all sports historians who take their subject seriously.

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[Since this review was written it has been announced that *The Players* has won the prestigious British Cricket Society's Silver Jubilee Literary Award.]