

THE 'FASCIST' CRICKET TOUR OF 1924-25*

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In the inter-war period Australian political life was influenced by various ideologies imported from Europe. Bolshevism added clarity and rigour to Australian radicalism; class conscious Australian workers found much to celebrate in the successful October 1917 Revolution in Russia.

At the other end of the political spectrum many members of the comfortable classes were inspired by Benito Mussolini and subsequent fascist movements in Europe. Fascism came to be widely perceived as an antidote to Red Revolution. In the elite clubs of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide fascist panaceas were applauded over cigars and port, while conservative journals canvassed the prospects of an antipodean Mussolini emerging to teach sections of the militant Australian working class a lesson or two in industrial relations.¹ By 1931 a mature form of Australian fascism had emerged in the form of an organisation known as the New Guard.

The history of Australian fascist and potentially fascist movements is now increasingly well documented.² Nevertheless, many issues remain unclear. One of these concerns the genesis of fascist sentiment and organisation in Australia. How soon after Mussolini's march on Rome in October 1922 did Australians come to be interested in the doctrines of fascism? How was the incubus of fascism sewn in the antipodes? Here there are many possibilities; among them is a sporting connection - the tour to Australia conducted by the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) in 1924-25.

The MCC tour had been keenly anticipated by Australia's cricketing officianos. It was the first tour of any kind since 1920-21.

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After some years of holding the Ashes with relative ease the Australians looked forward to some exciting cricket. The makeup of the MCC team, comprising old hands like Hobbs, Hearne, Woolley and Hendren, coupled with newcomers like Tate, Gilligan and Sutcliffe, promised vigorous competition for H L Collins' Australian team.

In addition there were those who saw the cricket tour in a wider cultural and political context. Specifically it was hoped that the tour might ameliorate some of the social tensions that had become all too apparent in post-war Australia. As M A Noble wrote, these were 'days of national unsettlement and disruptive influences generally'.³

Indeed most everything in Australian society seemed on the verge of being turned upside down. The certainties of the Victorian and Edwardian eras had vanished. Cubism, jazz and the 'black bottom' were all affronts to the Australian ruling class's cultural hegemony while in political terms 'the rising tide of Labor', militants within the newly-formed Communist Party of Australia and radicals committed to the socialisation objective of the Australian Labor Party, all seemed hell-bent on following in the footsteps of Lenin's Bolsheviks. Just twelve months before the MCC cricket team arrived on Australian shores unprecedented scenes of rioting and looting had taken place in the streets of Melbourne in the wake of a police strike.⁴ The reverberations of this 'Bolshevik Orgy' were still being felt. Like the royal tour by the Prince of Wales in 1920 which sought to counter 'pernicious' influences in the far reaches of the Empire,⁵ a cricket tour exemplifying 'the Englishman at his best, dignified, cautious, charming and optimistic in face of all kinds of difficulties'⁶ might perform a stabilising function. In the minds of some it might provide some cement for an apparently faltering social fabric. At least it could serve as a temporary diversion for the militants within the working class.

Despite realising a profit of some £20,000 for the MCC, in sporting terms the tour proved unsuccessful. This was due to the fact that the Australians won four of the five tests, frequently by substantial margins. The Australians could not draw upon the services of 'the Governor-General', their famous batsman Charles Macartney, who had suffered a nervous breakdown and throughout the tour, Jack

Gregory, the veteran Australian fast bowler, carried a leg injury which meant he could not bowl at top speed. Yet the MCC team lacked the necessary consistency to capitalise on these advantages. Sutcliffe and Hobbs provided substantial opening stands only to be betrayed by poor fielding, especially in the slips.⁷

In social terms, however, the tour was far more productive. At glittering receptions at venues like Melbourne's Hotel Windsor the cricketers were feted visitors as Australia's self-proclaimed gentry lined up to be introduced. Especially popular was their elegant captain, A E R Gilligan.

Indeed much of the propaganda surrounding the tour focussed on Arthur Gilligan's personal characteristics. A competent fast bowler prior to suffering a serious injury in the 1924 season, what he now lacked in cricketing ability, Gilligan apparently compensated for in sportsmanlike behaviour. A graduate of London's Dulwich College and Cambridge University, in the MCC tradition a gentleman of independent means, Gilligan had served with the Lancashire Fuseliers during the Great War. *Cricket* recorded that he possessed 'one of the most jovial personalities imaginable'.⁸ M A Noble enthused that Gilligan was the 'type of man who, in the most unostentatious way, can do more than all the politicians and statesmen to cement the relations between the Homeland and the Dominions'. Despite the disappointment of losing the crucial Third Test at Adelaide, for instance, Gilligan quickly recovered his equanimity to acknowledge well-wishers cheerfully and sign autograph books. He was the epitome of the English gentleman, a good sport of 'debonair countenance' and a fine 'Empire builder'.⁹

There was, however, another side to Gilligan's make up that later came to the attention of the Australian secret service. Information received from London brought to light the intelligence that both Gilligan and MCC tour manager F C (later Sir Frederick) Toone, whom *Cricket* described as a 'hard-headed business-like son of good old Yorkshire',¹⁰ were members of an organisation known as the British Fascists.¹¹

The British Fascists should not be confused with the British Union of Fascists subsequently formed by Sir Oswald Mosley in October 1932. The latter group was certainly of greater consequence

than the former. Yet neither were the British Fascists amateurish buffoons. Under the leadership of the increasingly eccentric Rotha Lintorn Orman, the British Fascists acted as strike breakers, worked as stewards at political meetings addressed by Conservative speakers and even attempted to abduct the unionist Harry Pollitt.¹² Presenting themselves as empire loyalists prepared to save civilisation from Bolshevism, the British Fascists briefly enjoyed great popularity, though the membership statistics available to the Australian secret service (120,000) were greatly exaggerated.¹³ While the British Fascists were never as interested in overseas expansion as Mosley's group, the organisation was linked with the mysterious International Centre for Fascist Studies and, in a splendid example of exporting coal to Newcastle, the British Foreign Office was aware that a British resident in Italy was attempting to establish a legion of the British Fascists in that country.¹⁴ The question therefore emerges, to what extent were the MCC captain and tour manager prosletysing for the fascist cause in Australia during the summer of 1924-25?

M A Noble remarked that due to their tight schedule the MCC cricketers were kept very busy simply playing cricket. Thus they had little time to experience the 'real Australia', which Noble said was 'our great sheep and cattle stations, our big wheat farms, our rich agricultural areas'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it emerges that Gilligan and his men were not totally preoccupied with wielding the willow. They were able, for instance, to visit Ballarat where they were presented with some gold quartz. In addition there were many social occasions where conversation could easily have strayed into the area of politics.¹⁶

Gilligan certainly felt that cricket and fascism were inter-related. Shortly after returning to Britain he wrote an article on 'The Spirit of Fascism and Cricket Tours' for the bulletin of the British Fascists. In this article Gilligan argued that 'In...cricket tours it is essential to work solely on the lines of Fascism, i.e. the team must be good friends and out for one thing, and one thing only, namely the good of the side, and not for any self-glory'.¹⁷

Despite his Cambridge University background, Gilligan's polemical skills were as lack lustre as his cricketing abilities. An extensive article in *Cricket* expressed the tenets of fascism as they

existed in the 1920s with far greater articulacy than Gilligan could apparently muster. Written pseudonymously by an 'E.W.' the article argues that cricket was essential to building 'manliness', national vigour and a martial spirit. 'Vigorous manly games' bred 'red blooded clean living men and women' and a vibrant political culture where self-denial, obedience and discipline were valued. These could be translated from the playing fields of Eton to the battle fields of war. This, of course, was the standard account of the cultural role of cricket in propagating the values of the British empire.¹⁸ Yet 'E.W.' went a step further, arguing that:

A nations' sport forms an accurate index of its character. Cricket is the chosen sport of a great and freedom loving people, whose orderliness, determination, virility and law abiding qualities are reflected in the summer game. In contrariety Bolshevicks [sic] and revolutionaries generally probably [sic] loathe the game.¹⁹

Echoing Gilligan's sentiments about the significance of fascist cricket tours, 'E.W.' argued that the ethos of the British public school system was to ensure that 'the spirit of putting...(the) team as a whole before self was deeply instilled into..minds and hearts'.²⁰ In terms of understanding the history of fascism it is salient to note the proximity between the 'ordinary' value system associated with the British Empire and full-blown fascist ideology. As the career of Sir Oswald Mosley would later attest, for the likes of Arthur Gilligan it was but a short intellectual distance between propagating imperial cosmology and subverting liberal parliamentary democracy via fascism.

There is little reason to believe that this type of rhetoric struck a responsive chord among its target audience - the Australian working class. By the end of 1925 there was industrial turmoil in the maritime industry. On the other hand it seems likely that some members of the Australian bourgeoisie not only shared Gilligan's view that cricket enhanced the 'crimson ties of friendship...and the crimson bonds of kinship', but that they also followed the MCC captain's lead in terms of hitching their own wagon to fascism. Some of these people were perhaps among the 'heaps of good friends' Gilligan's team claimed to have made in Australia.²¹

Shortly after the departure of the MCC cricketers, officers of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch became aware that an Australian legion of the British Fascists had been established in several of the capital cities. In Sydney, for instance, enrolment forms, internal memoranda and propaganda were uncovered. These were all printed in London, the contact address on the enrolment form being altered in hand-writing to a GPO Box Number. It was deduced that a general headquarters had been established at 360 Kent Street in the city and that one G M Kenworthy was acting as zone commander in New South Wales.²² Captain J O Hatcher of the Mercantile Marine Office, Melbourne was identified as being the leader of the British Fascists in Australia.²³

Conservative journals like the *Bulletin* enthused over this news as a 'good sign'.²⁴ G A Maxwell, a conservative parliamentarian, spoke for many when he argued that the Australian chapter of the British Fascists would 'encourage self-sacrifice and brotherhood, regardless of class'.²⁵ Nothing was said about how the organisation had been established, and even the officers of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch were a trifle non-plussed. The Labor journalist Quentin Spedding had an excellent private espionage network, but he too uncovered little about the origins of the British Fascists in Australia.²⁶

Of course it may be totally coincidental that the Australian chapter of the British Fascists was established so soon after the MCC tour. But, on balance, it seems likely that Arthur Gilligan simply followed the advice issued by the Fascists' Recruiting and Propaganda Department. This was to 'Talk about the movement to everyone you meet' and 'Always carry at least one enrolment form and one of each of the other pamphlets with you wherever you go'.²⁷ The literature of the Fascists probably arrived in the luggage that Gilligan and Toone brought to Australia in 1924.

In the broad sweep of the history of Australian fascism Gilligan's efforts were of little consequence. Compared with both the indigenous Anglo-Australian sentiment expressed by organisations like the New Guard as well as that which flowered among some Italian migrants specifically emulating Mussolini²⁸, the British Fascists' Australian operations were small beer indeed. Nevertheless,

Gilligan did indirectly bequeath one minor fascist legacy in Australia. Six years later his disciple G A Kenworthy became a locality commander of the New Guard in Lindfield.²⁹

The details, if any, of Gilligan's ongoing career as a fascist are unknown. In 1926 the British Fascists experienced one of its periodic splits and retreated into insignificance. As a cricketer Gilligan retired to manage a county cricket team and in 1926 became a member of the English team's selection committee. After the publication of his conspicuously apolitical volume on the 1926 Australian cricket tour to Britain, *Collins's Men*, in which he proclaimed that he was an 'ardent admirer of everything Australian' and developed some eccentric ideas about the need to establish a 'value over' (a record of the number of overs a bowler takes to secure a wicket) rather than a maiden over,³⁰ Gilligan pursued a career as a cricket commentator. In 1932-33 his comments on the body-line controversy were broadcast over Radio 2UW in Sydney.³¹ He subsequently covered at least four MCC tours to Australia for the Australian Broadcasting Commission. In his 1955 book, *The Urn Returns*, Gilligan recorded that Sir Charles Moses, the ABC's general manager, had issued a personal invitation for him to deliver his 'expert opinion'.³² Given that Sir Charles has occasionally been linked with both the Irish Black and Tans and with the New Guard,³³ it might be said that their association reflected an affinity that was professional, sporting and political.

To students of the links between sport and politics in Australia, the 'fascist' cricket tour of 1924-25 should be seen as one illustration of the highly conservative role of most sport in general, and of some sporting administrators in particular. Since the advent of capitalism in Australia, social classes were divided in a number of ways. Ownership of the means of production was but the start of the matter. This fundamental division was underscored spatially in terms of areas of residence and through a number of cultural reference points. In these sport and sporting preferences loom large.

Yet the issue is not simply that particular sports appeal to differing class constituencies. Obviously Rugby League in both Northern England and sections of British Eastern Australia established a strong working-class following. Sir Oswald Mosley was probably overstating the case when he proclaimed that Rugby Union 'is a real

Fascist game'.³⁴ But there were 'many cloth-capped rugby league supporters who would not have disagreed. The more profound point is that there are some sports which offer some quite tangible and highly practical advantages to their devotees, and do so in class terms.

This is an area which deserves further research but there is one example which comes quickly to mind. It is golf. Murray Phillips' point that the game was instrumental in promoting some Victorian values such as fair play can be extended.³⁵ Despite its progressive democratisation since the Second World War, it is difficult to think of a game which more poignantly expresses the pretensions, rhythms of life and potential class needs of the bourgeoisie. In the first instance, in the period prior to federation colonial grandees like E P Simpson, the distinguished solicitor, were able to shape elite institutions like the Royal Sydney Golf Club. Restrictions on membership, coupled with high joining fees and annual membership dues ensured that there would never be any proletarian voices on the fairways at Rose Bay shouting 'Fore'. The club houses of such golf clubs became enclaves where bourgeois members could discuss politics, business and the imperfections of the labouring classes, who, even in working-class towns like Cessnock, did not play the game.³⁶ It should be remembered that the only Australian sport that had ever significantly reflected fascism's companion ideology, anti-Semitism, has been golf.

Yet the connection between golf and fascism is far more tangible than simple intellectual symbiosis. In 1931 the secretary of the Royal Sydney Golf Club was Major W R Bertram, a Boer War veteran. Bertram was also a senior figure in the secret proto-fascist organisation known as the Old Guard.³⁷ It is, therefore, little wonder that the fairways of the Royal Sydney Golf Club, affording both privacy and the physical space necessary for drilling and training manoeuvres, proved to be so popular with the New Guard and the Old Guard.³⁸

Similar motives may well have impelled the development of the Elanora Country Club on Sydney's northern peninsula. Formally opened on 29 May 1929, among its founding fathers was Australia's most notorious fascist, Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Campbell. A cluster of like-minded souls including Brigadier T A J Playfair, Richard Windeyer KC and a generally high proportion of ex-AIF officers

among its original members suggest that a round of golf was not the only reason that brought motorists, to the remote and exclusive Elanora Heights course.³⁹ Denied membership to such institutions, Sydney's Jewish community constructed the Monash Country Club nearby.

Arthur Gilligan's game - cricket - was more socially ambiguous than golf since it interested and involved a broader cross section of the community. Indeed Gilligan complained about the Australian national obsession with the game. The MCC gentlemen felt that the Australians would benefit if they introduced a more 'free-and-easy, jolly and boyish' outlook and cultivated more of the 'country-house spirit.'⁴⁰ This criticism of a lack of a British village green atmosphere in Australian cricket could be interpreted in a number of ways. Perhaps it was simply a lament that in Australia no institution like the MCC had been able to monopolise the game for the social elite. Ironically, A E R Gilligan, the British fascist, would have deplored the changes wrought to the game of cricket by the great grandson of a New Guardsman after 1977.⁴¹

NOTES

1. John Godsall, 'Mussolini at Canberra: a phantasy', *Australian Quarterly*, (5 March 1930).
2. Keith Amos, *The New Guard Movement 1931-1935* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976); Michael Cathcart, *Defending the national tuckshop* (Fitzroy McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988); Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989).
3. M.A. Noble, Gilligan's *Men* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1925) p. 7.
4. See Andrew Moore, 'Guns across the Yarra: secret armies and the 1923 Melbourne police strike', Sydney Labour History Group (eds), *What Rough Beast? The state and social order in Australian history* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982) pp. 220- 233.
5. Sir R. Munro Ferguson to Lord Milner, 29 May 1919; Sir R. Munro Ferguson to L. Amery, 20 June 1920, Novar papers, National Library of Australia MS 696/1160 and 1235; for a general account of the social context and purpose of the royal visit see Kevin Fewster, 'Politics, pageantry and purpose: the 1920 tour of Australia by the Prince of Wales', *Labour History*, 38, (May 1980) pp. 59-66.
6. Noble, *op.cit.* p. 7.

7. A summary of the test results is published in *ibid.*, p.267. This volume provides an overview of the test series. A.E.R. Gilligan, *Collins's Men*, (London: Arrowsmith, 1926) pp.32-33 refers to Gregory's leg injury.
8. *Cricket*, (15 November 1924).
9. Noble, *op.cit.*, pp.7-11.
10. *Cricket*, (15 November 1924).
11. Australian Archives (AA) (NSW), SP 1714 item no. N4673.
12. See Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: a history 1918-1985*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 54.
13. A.A., (ACT), A981/1 item 'Fascism 3'.
14. Thurlow, *op.cit.*, p.52.
15. Noble, *op.cit.*, p.11.
16. *Cricket*, (15 and 22 November 1924).
17. *The Bulletin*, (of the British Fascists) May 1925 in AA, (NSW), SP 1714 item no. N4673.
18. See Ric Sissons and Brian Stoddart, *Cricket and Empire. The 1932-33 Bodyline Tour of Australia*, (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984), ch. 2 and Brian Stoddart 'Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and the Colonial Response in the British Empire', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30.4 (October 1988). pp. 649-673.
19. *Cricket*, (16 January 1925).
20. *ibid.*
21. *The Bulletin* (of the British Fascists) *op. cit.*
22. AA, SP 1714 item N4673.
23. AA, AD 538 series file SA 19070.
24. *Bulletin*, (11 June 1925).
25. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, vol, 112, (17 February 1926). p. 972.
26. Q.S. Spedding papers, Mitchell Library MSS 2922/6.
27. AA, SP 1714 item N4673.
28. See G. Cresciani, *Fascism, anti-fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980).
29. See list of New Guard personnel reprinted in Amos, *op.cit.*, p. 118.
30. Gilligan, *op.cit.*, p. 92, ch. XIV.
31. Sissons and Stoddart, *op.cit.*, p.96.
32. A.E.R. Gilligan, *The Urn Returns. A diary of the 1954-55 MCC Tour of Australia*, (Adelaide: Rigby, 1955). p. 27.
33. In 1964 ABC Television began work on a major documentary on the New Guard. After a significant investment in time and resources the program was axed. Those associated with the program subsequently learned that the intervention came from the highest levels of the ABC management, Sir Charles Moses. The program's producer was told that the general manager was sensitive on this subject because of his own

- involvement with the New Guard. Moses's British army regiment served in the Irish 'troubles' shortly after the Great War.
34. *Action*, (24 September 1936).
 35. Murray G. Phillips, 'Golf and Victorian Sporting Values', *Sporting Traditions*, 6.2 (May 1990), pp. 120-134.
 36. Alan Walker, *Coaltown. A Social Survey of Cessnock N.S.W.*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1945), p. 112.
 37. See Eric Campbell, *The Rallying point: my story of the New Guard* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1965), pp. 32-3,36; AA, CRS A5954/ 1 box 973.
 38. Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, p. 118; the peninsula on the Eastern suburbs used for drilling by the Old Guard was almost certainly the Royal Sydney Golf Club. See J.R.H. James, 'Guardian of the Faith', *Nation*, (2 October 1965) for the New Guard's drilling activities.
 39. Hugh Barry, *Elanora*, (Narrabeen: Elanora Country Club, Narrabeen, 1977), p.46ff.
 40. Gilligan, *Collins's Men* p.92.
 41. Military Intelligence report S60, 26 October 1931, AA, SP 1141/1/13 claims that Clyde Packer was prominently involved with the New Guard.