

The State of English Cricket

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Graeme Wright, *Betrayal: The Struggle for Cricket's Soul*. Witherby, London, 1994. Illus. pp. 224. \$19.95 paper.

Alastair McLellan, *The Enemy Within: The Impact of Overseas Players on English Cricket*. Blandford, London, 1994. Illus. pp. 223, \$29.95.

Only a relatively small number of nations compete in Test match cricket. They are England, Australia, West Indies, India, Pakistan, New Zealand and South Africa (recently readmitted to the inner sanctum following the collapse of apartheid), Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe. One might expect that the various fortunes of teams would fall foul to the tyranny of the law of averages—over time competing teams would have similar performance records against each other. The major exception to this law might be that established cricket countries would tend to outperform newly developed cricketing nations, as it takes the latter time to come to terms with the rigours of sustained international competition. However, with the passage of time and greater experience newly developed cricket nations (or past poor performers) would have their moments (even decades!) of glory and even up the scorecard of success.

During the 1980s the English cricket team, by anyone's standards, has experienced an extraordinary sequence of failure. In the period 1983/84 to 1989 England won only eight, lost twenty-eight and drew twenty-seven (of sixty-three) Tests. A possible explanation for this decline could be the tyranny of the law of averages—it was simply England's turn to provide glory for other nations and their supporters! Or, to misquote George Orwell the problem with competitions is that someone has to lose. An alternative explanation for England's misfortunes during the 1980s is that the game was substantially damaged by rebel tours to South Africa which robbed the national team of many outstanding players in the prime of their careers. English cricket may have been destabilised in much the same way as occurred to the Australian game

in the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s due to the twin impact of Kerry Packer and South African rebel tours.

These two books are concerned with explaining the reasons for the recent decline in English cricket. While both pay lip service to the problems associated with South African rebel tours, neither confronts issues associated with the tyranny of the law of averages. Graeme Wright's *Betrayal* is the slighter of the two. A former New Zealander Wright is a former editor of *Wisden Cricketers' Almanac*. His book is a lament for things past. Wright wants a return to the good old days when the part-time amateur player caught in the purgatory of being between 'digs' at university and a life in 'The City' turned out for his county, every now and again, and hit a swashbuckling 50 or 100 in an hour or two or trundled over his arm and took a five wicket haul in an inspired spell with the ball. *Betrayal* is full of denunciations of players and officials who have put themselves before cricket; or, more correctly of persons who do not seem to share Wright's hankering for a return to the 1950s when county cricket apparently played an important role in the social life of the leisured classes during the long days of the English summer. For Wright, the beginning of the end came with the ending of the amateur versus professional distinction in 1962.

Wright bemoans attempts by cricketing authorities to modernise their sport. While he acknowledges there is a need to initiate policies to aid the national team, he is fearful of doing anything that will weaken county sides and their attractiveness to members and spectators who, with the exception of one day games, stay away in droves. Wright is fearful of the role of commercial sponsors, but applauds patrons of privilege and breeding. Old money is so much better than new money! *Betrayal* is really only the work of a capital 'C' conservative, a person desperately trying to replicate the past and criticising those seeking to adjust to tougher and uncertain times as being motivated by folly.

The most disturbing aspect of *Betrayal*, however, is its lack of planning and organisation. The book is repetitious in the extreme and is devoid of an internal logic and structure, thematic or otherwise. Rather, Wright seems overly concerned with providing readers with literary and political allusions and comments profound on the personality and character traits of players and administrators. Successful books, like cricket teams require careful planning and organisation.

Alistair McLellan's *The Enemy Within* is a more interesting and innovative analysis of developments within English cricket. As the book's sub-title informs McLellan is concerned with examining the impact of overseas players on English cricket. Despite the recent doldrums of its Test side (until 1995!) McLellan contends that England possesses the strongest domestic competition, in terms of teams and players employed, in the world. Because of the strength of its domestic competition county clubs have always employed a number of players from other cricketing nations. McLellan assembles a treasure trove of information concerning the involvement of overseas players in English cricket. His presentation of data stretches as far back as the nineteenth century. McLellan's major focus is on developments which have occurred in the last quarter century. For the 1968 season qualification rules were relaxed enabling county sides to employ up to three or four overseas players. In 1979 the rules were again changed so that from 1982 clubs could only employ two such players; and in the mid-1980s, to one overseas player per club (pp. 48-9).

McLellan's overall conclusion is that the presence of overseas players has retarded the performance of England as a test match force. In saying this he acknowledges that the presence of overseas players has enhanced the quality of the English domestic competition, attracting both spectators and sponsors, and that in the period when there was less restrictions on their employment the degree of sporting equality was enhanced (another victory for the advocates of freeing-up sporting labour markets!). His major concern, however, for the fortunes of the English Test side is that county cricket provides a vehicle for training and enhancing the skills of young overseas players in helping them to learn how to cope with English conditions, and developing strategies to master their English counterparts. McLellan notes that the major component of England's failures in the 1980s was its inability to win at home, particularly against the West Indies (but then again that team would have beaten anyone!). With respect to overseas players being able to detect the weakness of England's leading players one wonders why the 'hard heads' of English cricket have been unable to return the compliment to the overseas upstarts.

In trying to arrest what he regards as negative influences McLellan offers a number of policy suggestions concerning regulating the employment of overseas players. They range from restricting their

employment to one-day games and as coaches for younger players, to only employ players who have played in twenty Tests or more—thereby restricting the ‘training’ possibilities for overseas youngsters—and the selection of an under 25 Cavaliers’ team to compete in the regular domestic county competition (would this create sponsorship and other problems for national touring teams?).

Both books, in different ways, provide information concerning developments in English cricket over the last two or three decades. Neither Wright nor McLellan address the problems associated with producing top class international cricketers—problems of attracting athletes away from other sports, coaching, and issues associated with levels of pay and remuneration. In a sense both books reveal the need for a comprehensive work which documents the business history of the game and various aspects associated with the development of a skilled labour force. Both Wright and McLellan write from the perspective of cricket insiders; persons who are impervious or disinterested in developments within other sports. In a very real sense all professional sports confront similar problems—the struggle to acquire star players who participate in exciting close competitions which entice both spectators and sponsors to open up their wallets to ensure the continual survival of the game. The quality of research, analysis and ideas in both *Betrayal* and *The Enemy Within* could have been enhanced by reference to a more broadly based sports literature.