

Book Reviews

Channa Gunasekera, *The Willow Quartette*. The Samathi Publishers, Colombo, 1997. Illus. pp. 88. Available from Channa Gunasekara (ph: 02 9419 3232).

Sri Lanka is now amongst the foremost cricket-playing nations in the world. For my part, I should rate it within the top three, and in terms of attractiveness, the premier. I would rather watch Sri Lanka play than any other national cricket team. The Sri Lankan approach embodies the best traditions of this beautiful game. Its rise to prominence in the 1990s has been one of the miracles in the history of cricket. And yet, the literature on Sri Lankan cricket is very sparse. This is unfortunate. For its present eminence is explicable only by an understanding of its history.

Essentially, the strength of Sri Lankan cricket has lain in the importance attached to it in the private schools. Even today, a match between Royal College and St Thomas' College is a social event likely to attract more spectators than a Test match. To that extent, Sri Lankan cricket has a rather elitist pedigree. It is significant, however, that this is changing in the 1990s as international success has captivated the imagination of the whole land. Now, following the example of the likes of Jayasuriya and Wickremesinghe, both humbly born in the Matara area, cricket has swept through the country. It is to be seen in paddy fields, in children's homes and orphanages, in shanty-towns and even on the part of the Galle Road sealed off for security reasons.

Another contributing factor to its popularity even after Independence, has been the good fortune that Colombo was a regular stopping place for ships to and from the Antipodes. Matches against touring teams were for many years regular features of the gracious era of ocean liners. And, thirdly, international competitiveness was sharpened by regular tours of India and, indeed, by an annual contest known as the Gopalan Trophy between Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Madras (now Tamil Nadu).

The *Willow Quartette* is claimed in the preface to be the first book ever written on Sri Lankan cricket. This is perhaps an exaggeration, but certainly it is the first to present vignettes of distinguished Sri Lankans who laid the foundations of the present pre-eminence of their country long before it achieved Test status. The names are unlikely to be known by the generality of cricket lovers: S S Jayawickrama, F C De Saram, M Sathasivan and C I Gunasekara. The author of this book is the nephew of the last-named and a distinguished writer in his own right.

Of the four, three were Singalese, but Sathasivan was a Tamil. They

were all products of the private school system and all led their country. But, in other respects, they were different in personality and style. The author cleverly categorises the four in the terminology of musical tempi: Allegro, Allegretto, Minuetto and Presto.

Channa Gunasekara's charming style of description produces some memorable euphemisms. He writes of Jayawickrama's 'marginal rotundity in the mid-regions' and designates him as a 'typical Sinhala gentleman — self-effacing and reticent'. Of De Saram he is less coy. He was 'not of athletic proportions' and apparently lost favour because of his liability in the field: 'due to his heavy feet, fielding was a sore point'. And yet Gunasekara analyses De Saram's batting technique in a dispassionate compliment. De Saram had a 'watertight technique, a sharpness of eye and strength of wrist, which suggested early judgment to get his feet to the optimum position well in advance, allied to a facile brain'. This is manifestly the assessment of a seasoned observer. De Saram could not have been too handicapped by ponderous footwork, for he managed to score a century against the travelling Australians in 1934, and perhaps even more meritoriously, 43 against the mighty Tyson and Statham 20 years later. But Gunasekara's typically Sri Lankan *politesse* leaves the reader tantalisingly intrigued to learn the details of why De Saram was remanded in prison for 'allegedly master-minding a coup', and for a more precise delineation of the 'somewhat intemperate ways' that caused him to succumb to a heart attack.

Sathasivan is rather wickedly allotted the epithets, 'pigeon-toed' and 'knock-kneed'. Unlike the other three masters, 'power was never his forte' — his style was not 'in the sculpturing of stroke but in the fragile economy of movement and effort'. But stylist or not he managed to spend two years in gaol on a capital charge! Again, Gunasekara spares the reader further details and, no doubt, spares the heirs of the hero further embarrassment.

C I Gunasekara was a late developer. Unlike the other three, he did not shine at school cricket. But he must have been the most spectacular of the four, for his nephew, the author, labels him the 'Jessop' of Sri Lankan cricket. On one occasion, he was batting with Keith Miller for a Commonwealth XI against the MCC. They were both chasing centuries. The author tells how Miller, ever the 'magnanimous showman', permitted the local hero to get there first. Gunasekara became the oldest captain of Sri Lanka at the age of 40, and scored his final century at the age of 51 when he was roped into playing for Thurston College as he was spotted

driving past the ground in a vintage car!

This delightful, literate book is far more than a catalogue of the achievements of four heroes. It tells the perceptive reader much about the ethos of cricket in the beautiful country of Sri Lanka. In its modesty, its generosity, its grace and precision of prose, it bespeaks the values prized by the archetypal Sri Lankan cricketer and gentleman. They are those to which cricketers throughout the world would do well to aspire.

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