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## The Empire Plays Back

In 1899, a young Englishman arrived to study philosophy at the University of Jena. Charles Tennyson was the scion of a high English family who — in the spirit of academic exchange — brought with him a football. In the evenings, his classes done, he tried to interest his fellow students in what was for them a novel game. Alas, the young Germans were not properly equipped for the sport, lacking both short pants and soccer shoes. They knew nothing of the game; in fact, their "ball sense was practically undeveloped".

Sixty years later, the Englishman was to reflect with satisfaction on the remarkable strides that soccer had since taken on the Continent. In 1954, Germany won the World Cup in an epic final against Hungary, a victory that knowledgeable Germans reckon to be the moment when their country re-entered the community of nations. (Two further triumphs were to follow, in 1974 and 1990). By the time of the Second World War, soccer had emerged as the most popular sport all over Europe, including the Socialist Bloc. Having also acquired a devoted following across Asia, Africa and Latin America, this creation of Victorian England is now truly the world sport. Where baseball's World Series puts on display players from provincial North American teams, some one hundred and fifty sovereign nations compete for what is indisputably the most coveted prize in sport, soccer's World Cup.

But soccer is only one of numerous games that England "taught the world to play"<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, basketball (patented in Springfield, Massachusetts) is unique among international sports in *not* being of British origin. The major team games — soccer, rugby, field hockey — were all invented in nineteenth century England. So were individual sports such as tennis and table tennis, while golf, another hugely popular sport world-wide, is a Scottish contribution. Primitive forms of boxing, swimming and athletics have existed since the Greeks but once again, it was Englishmen who first synthesised their rules in the nineteenth century, giving these games their recognisably modern forms. Victorian England has verily been the "games-master" of the world. The world-wide social revolution brought about by these sports has probably been more dramatic than the impact

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Tennyson, "They Taught the World to Play", *Victorian Studies*, volume 2, number 3, March 1959.

of all other British inventions taken together (inventions which, lest we forget, include electricity, the theory of evolution, and the railroad).

Of all the sports that they gave birth to, it is cricket which the British themselves recognise and uphold as their national game<sup>2</sup>. The rules of cricket, and still more its ethos, most fully embodied the self-image of the Victorian elite, its aspirations (and pretension) to set a moral standard for the rest of the world. For one thing, cricket lacked the element of physical contact and occasional brutality that marked soccer or rugby. It was, and to a good extent still is, a game of finesse and skill, pitting the art of the bowler against the art of the batsman. It is also an intellectually oriented sport which accords great importance to the captain of the playing team.

Unlike in soccer or rugby, for example, the captain of a cricket eleven can materially alter the outcome of a game by the tactics he employs on the field of play. Cricket thus provides a simultaneous training in leadership and team-work, in playing together and collectively carrying out the captain's behest. In this it served as a microcosm of the social world of the British, especially the British army, with its neat division between the commanding officer and the "other ranks". The cricket captain, like the army captain, exemplified the Victorian virtues of decency and fair-mindedness. The English gentleman always "played with a straight bat"; and the phrase "it's not cricket" became synonymous with sharp practice.

The Cambridge historian G.M. Trevelyan is said to have remarked that if the French nobles had been in the habit of playing cricket with their peasants, their chateaux would not have been burnt in 1789. Trevelyan was here trumpeting a belief that has been widespread among the ideologists of English cricket, namely, that the game has served historically as a cementing institution, bringing together all social classes, patrician and plebeian, in the pursuit of pleasure.

But while cricket is closely identified with the British spirit, its spread has been rather less extensive than soccer or tennis. One reason for this is that the game is extraordinarily time consuming. A typical match takes up to three full days, while Test matches (played between two countries) carry on for five days: time, precious time, which the industrialising societies of Europe and North America could hardly afford.

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<sup>2</sup> The subsequent discussion presumes no knowledge of cricket. All that the reader need know is that cricket follows the same basic principle as baseball, with a hitter (here called the "batsman") trying to hit as hard and as far as he possibly can a ball hurled at him by a pitcher (here called the "bowler"). However, in terms of its rules, techniques, variations and possible outcomes, cricket is a much more complex sport.

Interestingly, it is only in the countries of the former British Empire that cricket has dug deep root. Thus the International Cricket Council recognises nine "Test" playing teams: England, of course, and a clutch of former colonies — Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the West Indies<sup>3</sup>.

As in the Mother Country, so too in the colonies was cricket expected to serve as a bulwark against social tension, smoothening out relations between ruler and ruled. The links between cricket and the colonising mission are made most explicit in a fascinating account of a cricket tour of India, in the winter of 1902-03, by a side travelling under the name of "Oxford Authentics", but liberal enough to accommodate a few Cambridge men. The team travelled ten thousand miles through India and Burma, shooting tigers in Rajasthan, fishing trout in Kashmir, and playing cricket wherever they went. The tour had been timed to coincide with the Coronation Durbar, a splendid ceremony in New Delhi organised by Lord Curzon to honour the new monarch, King Edward the VII, a ceremony that was also intended to signal, to the sceptic, the British will to rule. The cricket they played and the ceremonies they witnessed are described in a book by one of the Oxford Authentics, Cecil Headlam. Headlam was himself a historian (of medieval European towns) and placed cricket in its proper historical context, as among the last and most benign influences of imperial rule. I quote:

First the hunter, the missionary, and the merchant, next the soldier and the politician, and then the cricketer — that is the history of British colonisation. And of these civilising influences the last may, perhaps, be said to do least harm.

The hunter may exterminate deserving species, the missionary may cause quarrels, the soldier may hector, the politician blunder — but cricket unites, as in India, the rulers and the ruled. It also provides a moral training, an education in pluck, and nerve, and self-restraint, far more valuable to the character of the ordinary native than the mere learning by heart of a play by Shakespeare or an essay of Macaulay...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The "West Indies" is an entity bringing together a dozen or more Caribbean nations, such as Barbados, Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, and Antigua, which fly separate flags at the United Nations but come together to form one cricket team for international matches. Unlike in soccer, for example, cricket teams rarely play "one-off" internationals. Rather, they alternately play, at home and away, series of three or five Test matches.

<sup>4</sup> Cecil Headlam, *Ten Thousand Miles Through England and Burma* (London: J.M. Dent, 1903).

## II

Given the links between Cricket and Empire, it might have been expected that decolonisation would have signalled the game's swift demise in countries like India, marked as they were by vigorous anti-colonial movements. After the end of the War, as the British reluctantly prepared to leave India, some intellectuals called stridently for the abolition of cricket. In July 1946, a prominent thinker and politician called publicly for cricket to "Quit India" with the British. Cricket, wrote Dr. Balkrishna Keskar, was a game "purely English in culture and spirit", which could "only thrive in the atmosphere of English culture, English language and English rule". He was confident that cricket "will never be able to survive the shock of [the] disappearance of British rule from our country", and would rapidly yield in popularity to more cosmopolitan and working-class sports such as soccer and athletics<sup>5</sup>.

Dr. Keskar dismissed cricket as a "game patronised mostly by the Maharaja, the rich and the snobs". His feelings were seconded by partisans of other sports, who felt marginalised by the overwhelming hold of cricket on the Indian imagination. Thus in November 1946, the Indian delegate to the World Cycling Championships in Zurich returned with an array of messages urging India to abandon cricket forthwith. The Irish representative reminded his colleague that cricket was "infested with all the elements of Imperialism"; it was "invented by the British to carry on pro-British propaganda in the British-occupied slave countries like India, Australia and South Africa [whose] subjects are taught to look to London for inspiration". The French representative added that cricket was "entirely unknown to the freedom-loving countries, like the democratic America, the mighty Russia, the vast Continent [of Europe], the whole of Western and Eastern Asia, Japan and China, and even Africa (except South Africa)."

Reporting these conversations, the Indian cyclist urged that this "black-spot stamped by British Imperialism on the face of India be wiped out", to be replaced by games "which build health and character and cost little", such as athletics, cycling, and the ancient Indian form of team wrestling, kabaddi<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> B.V. Keskar, "Will Cricket Quit India with the British", *Blitz* (Bombay), 13th July 1946. Dr. Keskar, who went on to serve as Minister for Information and Broadcasting in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet, obtained his PhD from the University of Heidelberg, a fact not entirely unconnected with his hostility towards cricket.

<sup>6</sup> Janaki Dass, "Nationalize India Through Sports", *Bombay Chronicle*, 6th November 1946.

The public evidently thought otherwise. In the years since India became independent in August 1947, cricket has grown spectacularly in mass appeal. During big matches normal life comes to a standstill: Offices and roads are empty, with hundreds of millions of Indians glued to their televisions or radio sets. This game is now patronised as much by the Maharaja as by the milkman, by the snob as well as by the socialist. The spread of satellite television has greatly expanded the game's reach. In this respect, television has effectively bridged the divide between city and country and between man and woman, with both peasant men and upper-class women numbered among the fanatical followers of India's Test side. India's most successful cricketers have been elevated to iconic status, worshipped as only film stars and Hindu deities have been. Cricket is not so much India's national game as its national obsession. The only opponents of cricket still around are the economists, who call it the opium of the people and do calculations of its negative impact on GNP.

It is easier to document (and celebrate) the Indian love for cricket than to analyse or explain it. A follower of Edward Said might dismiss it as yet another manifestation of the "persistence of the hegemony of colonial discourse in post-colonial conjunctures". That view is, in my humble and untheorised opinion, incorrect. Rather, cricket has been successfully indigenised, made part of the fabric of Indian culture. It seems to fit in easily with the rhythms of what is still essentially an agrarian civilisation. A Test match extends over five full days, with six hours play each day. What would be an unconscionably long time for an industrial (and industrious) German is a bare wink of the eye to the Indian, accustomed to thinking in cosmic and calendric rather than clock time.

The structure of the game also resonates well with the Indian ethos. For cricket is both slow and slow moving, with the action spread out and interrupted instead of (as in tennis and soccer) fast paced and concentrated. This means that the crowd has more time to appreciate the individual idiosyncrasies of character and to participate more actively, through barracking and actual conversations with players on the boundary edge, than in virtually any other sport. Cricket watching is a collective and participatory exercise, indulging the Indian taste for chatter and disputation, gossip and debate. Add to this the gripping uncertainty of cricket, with spectators and players having to wait almost a week to arrive at a conclusion. And at the end of it, the result is often inconclusive, a "draw" rather than a win for either side, an outcome that has a curious appeal to the Hindu, many of whose myths stress negotiation and compromise rather than unequivocal victory or defeat.

To these "culturalist" interpretations of why Indians love cricket one must add a strictly modern and instrumentalist one — the motive of national pride. For cricket is also the only sport in which India can compete on something like equal terms in the international arena. In the cricketing world India is by no means topdog; that honour has, in recent decades, alternated between Australia and the West Indies. However, the Indian cricket team has achieved some spectacular results, including a wholly unexpected win in the World Cup of 1983.

Above all, cricket provides a perfect vehicle for the once colonised to settle accounts with the erstwhile coloniser, by beating him at his own game. Indians celebrate handsomely on the rare occasion when their national eleven defeats West Indies, but are positively exultant when it defeats England. No one understood this deeply patriotic love of cricket better than the late and long-serving Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. A woman of pride and hauteur, she was known to keep Chief Ministers of important states waiting weeks for an appointment. However, she always took time out to be photographed with a victorious cricket team — especially if it was returning from England.

### III

The above, necessarily schematic account of cricket's place in Indian culture might stand in, with appropriate modifications, for other of Britain's former colonies too. In countries (and cultures) otherwise as dissimilar as Australia and Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the West Indies, cricket is unquestionably the number one sport, with victory over England always counting as the number one national achievement. In recent years there has been ample opportunity to celebrate, as England has lost Test matches not just to the mighty West Indies but to lowly Sri Lanka and New Zealand as well.

Table I captures this tale of post-imperial decline, by showing through cold statistics how swiftly England's stock has fallen in the Commonwealth of nations. The table summarises England's encounters with its three coloured opponents — India, Pakistan, and the West Indies — since the Second World War<sup>7</sup>. In the first quarter of the century, England massively dominated matches against India and Pakistan, and held its own against the West Indies. However, in the second period (1970-1995), England has been routed by the West Indies, while the countries

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<sup>7</sup> I have omitted Sri Lanka, which was granted full international status only in 1982, and has as yet played only five Test matches against England.

of the subcontinent have made swift strides in "catching up" with their former masters. One should also add, to this summary table, that Pakistan have won their last two series in England (1986 and 1992), while India, after waiting forty years to win a Test match in England, have since won two out of six series played away and three out of four played at home. More damagingly, England have won only one out of the last fifteen series against the West Indies, while in both 1984 and 1985-86, they suffered a total "blackwash", losing all five Tests of the series.

## TABLE

## Cricket and Decolonisation, 1945-1995

## (a) 1945-1970

| England     | Wins | Losses | Draws |
|-------------|------|--------|-------|
| vs.         |      |        |       |
| West Indies | 12   | 13     | 16    |
| India       | 13   | 3      | 14    |
| Pakistan    | 8    | 1      | 9     |

## (b) 1970-1995

| England     | Wins | Losses | Draws |
|-------------|------|--------|-------|
| vs.         |      |        |       |
| West Indies | 7    | 32     | 18    |
| India       | 13   | 11     | 20    |
| Pakistan    | 6    | 6      | 22    |

They taught the world to play, but have they yet learnt to lose? The answer, it seems, is that some losses are easier to bear than others. After all, the last Englishman to win a Wimbledon singles title was Fred Perry, in 1936. And England has won the soccer World Cup only once, in 1966 — playing at home and helped in the final by eccentric umpiring. However, it is possible — just — for the English to accept defeat in soccer to the Germans, at tennis to the Swedes, and in golf to the Japanese. What they cannot stomach is losing to one of their former colonies at cricket, the game which more than any other of their wonderfully varied inventions is identified so closely with their sense of self, of what and whom they think they are.

Over the years, as the England cricket team has suffered a succession of embarrassing defeats, the British press has trotted out a variety of

alibis, excuses and accusations. When England loses overseas, the explanations are relatively straightforward: to wit, that the umpires (in cricket appointed by the country playing at home) are biased or incompetent, or that the food is unfit for the cultivated English palate and delicate English stomach. Thus in 1993, as a touring England side lost all three Test matches playing in India, the team's management and the accompanying British journalists were ready with their excuses. At Calcutta, the correspondents blamed the smog, while the astrologically minded chief selector, Ted Dexter, claimed that Venus was in the wrong position that week. In Madras, the ignominy of an innings defeat was explained by the fact that half-a-dozen English cricketers had eaten prawns at a five-star restaurant the night before the match. (The chef lost his job as a consequence, but the result of the Test had by then already entered the record books). In Bombay, the finger pointed finally at the umpire, who happened also to be a professor of English, leading journalists to wonder gloomily about the fate of his students if "Professor Rathore's grasp of the English language did not exceed his knowledge of the Laws of Cricket".

Without doubt, the least favourite place for English cricketers and journalists is Pakistan, with its strange food and devilishly crooked umpires. In the winter of 1988, when a touring England captain got into an unseemly fracas with a Pakistani umpire, a famous retired player, Tom Graveney, claimed that the Pakistanis "had been cheating us for thirty seven years" (almost from the time they became an independent nation, that is). To this a serving England cricketer, Ian Botham, added that "Pakistan is a place to which I would not even send my mother-in-law" — a remark that came back to haunt him when England were thrashed by Pakistan in the final of the 1992 World Cup. "Why don't you send your mother-in-law," Botham was told by an opponent, "she can hardly play worse than you".

When England are defeated at home — eating fish-and-chips and playing under their own umpires — the interpretations turn more richly fanciful. If the opponents are Australian, they are said to upset English players by their abusive language; if they are the West Indies, of physical intimidation, their bowlers aiming at the batsman's body rather than at his wicket. In the summer of 1992, when England were defeated at home by Pakistan, the Pakistani bowlers were charged with improving their performance by tampering with the cricket ball, an accusation stoutly denied. The chief accuser, the leading English batsman Alan Lamb, was given wide and sympathetic coverage by the British press. I particularly remember a tabloid story which carried Lamb's accusations alongside a photograph of the cricketer outside his suburban home,



surrounded by wife, kids and sheep dog — a picture that spoke louder than a thousand words.

The ball-tampering controversy of 1992 helped reinforce stereotypical English images of the Pakistani, a man singled out by his colour (brown), his religion (Islam), his language (incomprehensible), and most of all, by his coming dangerously close, through mass migration, to the very citadel of British civilisation. (As our ubiquitous disciple of Edward Said would say — correctly this time — the Pakistani is the free-born Englishman's ever-present and ever-threatening Other.) However, encounters with Pakistan only capture in exaggerated form the quintessentially English belief that when they lose at cricket, the quality of the opposition has little to do with it.

The hypocrisy that has long lain at the heart of English cricket has been exposed in a recent book by the writer Mike Marqusee. Marqusee is a Trotskyist of Jewish extraction, raised in New York but now resident in England. This is at first sight an unlikely vita for a cricket historian. But Marqusee is a skilled historian who knows and loves the game, and knows, but does not always love, the British.

"Double standards, the mismatch of words and deeds", writes Marqusee, "have been seen abroad as characteristically English for two centuries, cricket's lifetime, and have always outraged the victims of colonialism". Its ideologues liked to think of English cricket as a single stately home. But in point of fact, the aristocratic elite who ran the game, and controlled its finances, were sharply separated from the workaday professionals who played cricket for a living. This was a mansion in which the "upstairs" of the amateur and the "downstairs" of the professional were strictly segregated (the captaincy of the England side and of all county teams was the preserve of the aristocratic amateur). This hierarchy was reproduced in England's cricketing relations with the colonies, expected like the professional to act with deference and to take their orders from the game's ruling body, the Marylebone Cricket Club. The M.C.C. was "overwhelmingly Conservative, dedicated to the Tory truisms of constitutional royalism, the supremacy of private property and the expansion of empire"<sup>8</sup>.

Marqusee is here writing of the turn of the last century, but as we approach another *fin de siècle*, English cricket is struggling to come to terms with the final, irrevocable decline of its empire. Shifting political equations have also undermined the once challenged preeminence of

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Marqusee, *Anyone But England: Cricket and the National Malaise* (London: Verso, 1994).

the M. C. C. No longer does it lay down the law or decide the annual calendar. Over the last decade, other cricket playing countries have fought hard to have their voice heard. They have counterposed, to the views of the British establishment, their own, sometimes quite different views on how international cricket should be run.

Nowhere is this clash more intense than with regard to the vexed question of neutral umpires. Cricket is alone in international sports in having its matches officiated by umpires belonging to the home country. Other countries (led, as it happens, by Pakistan) have called for third country umpires to be appointed for all international matches. This proposal has been doggedly resisted by England, apparently on the grounds that English umpires never cheat (only Pakistani, Indian and West Indian ones do) — thus they cannot accept neutral umpires on their soil. This is an outrageous claim, for visiting cricketers have long complained of the partiality of English umpires. One of the most notorious of these is a man called David Constant, who has single-handedly denied victory to several visiting teams, leading the Indian cricketer Sunil Gavaskar to describe him as "Constant — in his support for England".

After years of resistance, England has finally agreed to a bizarre compromise, neither fish nor fowl, in which Test matches will henceforth be umpired by one neutral person and one native. Britannia no longer rules the waves, but in matters cricketing at least, it can still waive the rules.

#### IV

In contemporary Britain, it is generally acknowledged that Prime Ministers are less than honest about balanced budgets and defence deals, and that Bishops of the Church of England, not to speak of the Prince and Princess of Wales, have gone back on their matrimonial vows. But it is still an article of faith among the British that two of their national institutions cannot cheat or tell a lie. One is the British Broadcasting Corporation, which reports with a magisterial air of detachment on news from around the world. The other is the cricket captain of England, especially if (like the present incumbent) he is a graduate of one of the ancient universities of Oxford or Cambridge.

In June 1994, England were playing a Test match against South Africa at Lord's Cricket Ground in North London. At one point in the play, the BBC's cameraman focused on Michael Atherton, the English captain. At that very moment, Atherton took out an unidentified substance and applied it on the ball. The evidence was incontrovertible — for the BBC could not lie — an Englishman was tampering with the cricket ball.

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The script was perfect: a Cambridge-educated captain of the England was caught cheating at Lord's, which is the Home of Cricket and of the British establishment. From Islamabad and from Antigua, from Colombo and from Bombay, black cricketers issued statements of condemnation in a spirit of revenge and self-vindication. The last surviving myth of Victorian England had finally been put to rest. No longer could the British claim to understand the game's ethos better than anybody else. Playing with a bat more crooked than straight, their cricketers seemed to be guided by an ethical standard roughly on par with their performances on the field. It was time to recognise the deep wisdom of an apparently throwaway remark of the Indian sociologist, Ashis Nandy - "Cricket, like chilli, is an Asian and Caribbean tradition accidentally invented by the West".