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Culture Clash

- An oxymoron • Baseball, cricket and the movies***
- Love and first sight • 1993:the Ashes***
- 1993: World Cup Final • Cricket, nation, market***

Neville Cardus, self-made snob and cricket sage, once opined: 'Where the English language is unspoken there can be no real cricket, which is to say that the Americans have never excelled at the game.'

Compared with Shaw's concise quip about the Americans and the English being two peoples separated by a common language, this is mere abuse. But what a world of prejudice is revealed in Cardus's smug aphorism. I've lived in Britain well over twenty years (most of my life), and it still astonishes me.

I shouldn't get irritated, but I can't help it. Every time I'm asked, 'How can an American understand cricket?' I do a bad job disguising my impatience. Why shouldn't an American understand cricket? It's a game like any other. Yet, on both sides of the Atlantic, the very juxtaposition of 'American' and 'cricket' has come to seem oxymoronic. Everything that English people take to be 'American' – brashness, impatience, informality, innovation, vulgarity, rapacious and unashamed commercialism – is antithetical to what they take to be 'cricket'. For the English, it is a point of pride that Americans cannot understand cricket. They may imbibe American movies, music, hamburgers and nuclear missiles, but their national sport remains their own. As for the Americans, everything they took, until

recently, to be 'English' – tradition, politeness, deference, gentle obscurantism – seems to be epitomised in 'cricket'. The attitude was neatly put by the affable, pizza-eating vigilante Raphael in one of the Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles movies. Assaulted by a mystery attacker with a cricket bat, Raphael protests, 'Nobody understands cricket. To understand cricket you gotta know what a crumpet is.'

Cricket was definitely not part of the New York suburban culture in which I grew up in the 1950s and '60s, but somehow I knew of its existence from my earliest years. It was, of course, always associated with England, along with bowler hats, bobbies and Big Ben. It was part of a national stereotype – a relatively benign one compared with those applied to Mexicans, Japanese or Italians, all of whom were, in one way or another, closer to home. The English were quaint, in the thrall of arcane traditions, absurdly polite and well-spoken, and cricket, in so far as I knew anything about it, was a ritual in which all these characteristics were displayed.

As a kid, I was a baseball nut. Later I became an all-round sports buff. Track and field, tennis, what I later came to know as 'American' football, ice hockey, basketball – at one time or another I had a romance with each. But it was baseball which got me started. In the sports pages of the otherwise impenetrable *New York Times*, I discovered the joy of batting averages, league standings and box scores. I was an abysmal player (not only of baseball), frustrated by my frequent failures and intimidated by the competitiveness of the fierce middle-aged men who coached our various teams. My parents' gentler, egalitarian approach had not prepared me for this.

Like many others, I took refuge in the facts and figures of sport. I became a dedicated spectator at the age of eight, and was spoiled for life. The first baseball season I followed was 1961, the year Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's single-season home-run record for the New York Yankees. The Yanks were my side and they had been the dominant team in baseball since the 1920s. I thought all baseball seasons would be as exciting and satisfying as this one. I soon learned they wouldn't be. Being a quondam Yankee fan gave me an insight into Liverpool and West Indian supporters in the 1990s, taking supremacy for granted, baffled by defeat.

I was ten when I first played cricket at a summer camp in the Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts. One day a camp counsellor, a young Australian, set up some stumps, produced a cricket bat and taught us the rudiments of a single-wicket game. It caught on and we played it for most of the summer. I remember liking the defensive aspect of batting. Unlike in baseball, you could stick around for a while even if you couldn't hit the ball very far or indeed at all. I was also intrigued by the sheer foreignness of the game. It seemed to go with the Australian's accent, which I took to be English. To me, as to most Americans then, Australia was merely a subdivision of England. When the summer came to an end, I forgot all about the curious English game.

After that, cricket entered my world through the movies. And the movies confirmed the impression I had already formed: that the game was something so intensely English as to be hopelessly at odds with the modern world. Hollywood historical epics set in sundry bizarre versions of England and the British Empire deployed references to cricket – along with cups of tea, 'chin up' and 'jolly good show' – to give the fantasy an English flavour. Here was my first visual contact with a real cricketer, though I didn't know it at the time. Sir C. Aubrey Smith, Hollywood's favourite English character actor, played upper crust gentlemen or officers in films like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Wee Willie Winkie* or *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. But Smith not only played the type, he was the type. CA Smith (Charterhouse, Cambridge, Sussex, Transvaal) had been a leading amateur right-arm fast bowler and lower-order batsman. He had captained what passed for 'England' in one Test in South Africa in 1888 and then settled there, working as a stockbroker for some years before making a new career on the English stage and ultimately departing for Hollywood. Smith, the living embodiment of cricket's Golden Age and the panoply of Empire, was in the end marketed as a second XI film star to a new mass audience in a foreign country that cared little either for cricket or the British Empire.

As a Hitchcock fan I had seen *The Lady Vanishes* many times before I came to England, where I learned there was a lot more to the film than I had suspected. This whimsical thriller is nothing less than an ironic paean to incipient national solidarity in the face of the

Nazi menace. Its two cricket-loving, overgrown public schoolboys (played by Naunton Wayne and Basil Radford) are phlegmatic, xenophobic, obsessive, asexual, and intransigently empirical to the point of stupidity. At first they resent the intrusion of such superfluous, foreign things as espionage and politics into their attempts to reconstruct a Test match over a dining table with the aid of sugar cubes. However, when they discover that despite appearances the suave Nazis are not true 'gentlemen', that their duplicitous behaviour is 'not cricket', they rally to the cause. Hitchcock satirized the infantile silliness of the cricket cult while using it as a metaphor for an England complacent under threat, but capable of being roused.

When war came, Hitchcock moved to Hollywood, where his first film was *Rebecca*, in which an austere, emotionally crippled Laurence Olivier chillingly suggests to his innocent new wife, Joan Fontaine, that she 'have a look at *The Times*. There's a thrilling article on what's the matter with English cricket.' Hitchcock already knew his American audience. He knew that they would find the juxtaposition of the words 'thrilling' and 'English cricket' paradoxical and even sinister.

The same idea appears, in comic form, twenty-five years later in Woody Allen's script for *What's New Pussycat?* Peter O'Toole, cricket mad in real life, plays the compulsive Don Juan confessing all to his psychiatrist (Peter Sellers with wig and Teutonic accent). When he mentions cricket, Sellers demands: 'Is there any sex in it?' The joke, of course, is not only that Sellers is himself sex-mad but he is so sex-mad (and so alien) that he does not know, as others do, that 'sex' and 'cricket' cannot be mentioned in the same breath. Cricket, in other words, is definitely pre-Freudian.¹

As a teenager I went to see *How I Won the War*, a chaotically avant garde anti-war satire directed by the expatriate American, Richard Lester, who had made the Beatles films. The film was a flop. I went out of my way to catch it because I was anti-war, because I was intrigued by avant-garde chaos, and because it featured John Lennon in a supporting role. Knowing nothing at the time about England, much of the movie's satire was over my head, notably the scene in which the martinet British officers order their troops to

construct a cricket pitch behind enemy lines. The film-makers clearly saw cricket as an apt symbol of the warped values of the British ruling class. That view lingers today. In recent years I have probably been asked, 'How can a socialist be keen on cricket?' as often as, 'How can an American ...?' As ever, the incompatibility is in the eye of the beholder.

After 1967, swallowed up in a culture of mass protest which rejected competitiveness and aggression, I lost interest in sport. Like the Pledge of Allegiance, television sit-coms, and short hair, sport (and baseball in particular) seemed part of the straight world we taught each other to despise.

In 1971 I came to England to study English at university. I had no idea I would spend the next two decades here. Indeed, I had no idea at all why I was here or what kind of society I was coming to. The sixties had left me shell-shocked. I was bewildered and jaded by the rapid succession of social and political events – especially as they were superimposed on the ordinary tumult of adolescence. For me, England was a place to run away to. The country of bowler hats, bobbies and Big Ben had become the country of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. It was also the land of the Welfare State and the National Health Service, of strong trade unions, of a Labour Party that called itself socialist. The policemen did not carry guns. Looking back, I can see that what drew me to England was the idea that it would be a place without violent conflict, a place where disputes were settled in a civilised manner. I had swallowed whole my own version of the old English myth, the myth (I was later to see) at the heart of English cricket.

At university I used to hang out with a group of friends who would listen to 'Test Match Special' on the Third Programme. Stoned, these ex-public-school hippies would don cricket flannels and clap straw boaters on top of mountains of long hair. They would stand there giggling with spaced-out grins at a joke I just didn't get. Cricket to them was an object of affectionate ridicule. It was one of those 'English' things, folk-like, druidic, pastoral, evoked by Pentangle, Jethro Tull, the Kinks, and (with irony) the Bonzo Dog Doodah Band. It was part of the world of English childhood, like Winnie the Pooh, a

world to which I was very much a latecomer. Like Tolkien's fantasies, which these counter-cultural youth also admired, cricket seemed a gentle drama played out on an eternal village green, a realm beyond history and politics.

As the years went by, I came to see these contemporaries in clearer focus. Many who in those days mocked their middle-class, home counties backgrounds (of which cricket was a part) later went into the City, voted Tory and sent their children to public schools. Some, no doubt, now occupy the elite hospitality boxes at Lord's on Test match days.

It was not long before my illusions about England were shattered. A series of monster industrial disputes, war in Ireland and a mean-minded street-corner racism did the trick. With the cultural revolution definitely on the wane, I returned to sport in the mid-seventies. It seemed a refuge from the grim reality of economic and political struggle. The irony was that in cricket I was to find the same conflicts from which I was seeking shelter. Cricket (along with the labour movement) was one of those things which drew me, against my will, ever deeper into English life.

Because I did not play or even watch much cricket while growing up, I was spared what George Orwell thought a 'good reason for the decline in cricket's popularity ... the extent to which it has been thrust down everybody's throat'. Cricket for me is not tainted by the personal experience of humiliation and failure. (Those painful associations are reserved for American sports). Instead, I made cricket's acquaintance as an adult, during turbulent years when the game was subject to ceaseless change, stress and controversy. This book is an attempt to make sense of those years. But to do so, I first want to try to put aside my later experiences and go back in time to my first encounter with English cricket, not the cricket of movies or undergraduate mockery, but the real thing (or at least, the televised thing).

I fell in love with the game during the hot summer of 1976, when Clive Lloyd's masterful West Indian side blew away Tony Greig's puny Englishmen. I was living in a village in Devon, doing nothing in particular, and I drifted into listening to and watching the Tests on radio and television. This was the first time I had seen an all-black

team play against an all-white one. In America, Jim Crow had kept black players in an entirely separate competitive structure until Jackie Robinson broke the colour bar in 1948. I was therefore riveted by the 1976 Test series, not least by the way the evident superiority of the black players caused such anguish among the English commentators.

From the first, I was enchanted by the sheer visual beauty of the game: the vast green fields adorned with immaculate white-clad figures moving in obscure, complex patterns as if in keeping with an ancient ritual. The change at the end of the over, when I first saw it, struck me as magical. It was so arbitrary, yet so precise, like a sorcerer's trick. At this stage, I saw cricket through the filter of baseball. It was a necessary point of comparison. You simply cannot understand one game (or one society) without referring to another. In cricket, I was startled to discover, there was no 'foul' territory. Batsmen could hit the ball anywhere, even paddle or deflect it behind, and then choose whether or not to run. This struck me as both sophisticated and primitive, wonderfully flexible and bizarrely intricate.

Amazingly, both teams wore the same outfit. And the spectators clapped good play on both sides. On occasion, even the players applauded opponents, an act inconceivable in baseball. Strangely, the fielders wore no gloves (and at that time the batsmen wore no helmets). Instead of flat, functional bases, there were stumps and bails, fragile, toylike castles which grown men used all their cunning to topple or protect. *And the ball was hard.* One American myth about cricket was instantly demolished: the idea that it was a 'soft' game, without physical danger. Watching Brian Close peppered by short, fast-pitched deliveries proved that it could be brutal in the extreme. Anyway, what kind of sport was it in which a forty-five year-old played for the national side?

Cricket seemed to me an extraordinarily unnatural game. The bowling motion with its straight elbow and tortuous body swing, the batsman's crouch, the whole 'side on' geometry of the game seemed to defy logic, not to mention human anatomy. Spin bowling intrigued me from the first simply because it was so slow. This was a sport in which speed and strength had their place but not to the exclusion of

guile and touch. There was more brain in it than there was in baseball and the delicacy of its arcane, specialized skills took my breath away. It amazed me that someone would be included in a side just because he could make a ball spin away from a right-handed batsman or that there could be such a profound distinction between opening and middle-order bats.

But in another sense, cricket was much less specialized than baseball. Field placings were fluid rather than fixed. A midwicket is definitely not a short stop, not least because while a short stop will stay at short stop throughout a game a midwicket may be reincarnated over after over as a square leg, slip catcher, gully, cover point or even a bowler! I was charmed by the very idea of the all-rounder. Players who could pitch as well as bat had become anachronistic in baseball in the 1920s, just when the game was becoming a truly national mass sport and very big business indeed. In cricket, it seemed everyone had to be a bit of an all-rounder. Unlike baseball, there were no pinch-hitters but as many bowlers as the captain pleased. Within the named XI, permutation seemed almost infinite, and with it, the dramatic possibilities of the game.

I recognized immediately in cricket the highly individualistic confrontation between bowler and batsman I knew from baseball. But in cricket the confrontation was so prolonged. It was not over in three strikes or four balls or a line drive to third base. It had no determinate end – but it could end at any moment. Like the game itself, it could go on and on, interrupted only for those civilized interludes dedicated to ‘lunch’, ‘tea’ and ‘drinks’.

As an American, I was fascinated by the idea that a single game could take three or five days to complete. The whole World Series took less time to play than a single Test match. Yet there were no substitutes. If someone was injured during the match, he could not be replaced, which seemed to me most unfair. Only later did I come to see unlimited substitution as a peculiarity of American sports. In the meantime, it just seemed another pointless rule, another one of those arbitrary difficulties out of which the English make a religion, like public-house opening hours.

The insistence on using a single ball throughout the course of an innings, or for at least the better part of a day, seemed bizarre. In

baseball and all the other sports I knew, fresh balls were provided on demand. I was startled to learn of 'the slope' at Lord's. Why hadn't they levelled it? Cricket was full of mysteries. I began exploring them, and twenty years later, I'm still at it.

In those days, 'Test Match Special' was broadcast on Radio Three, which implied that it was something for the cognoscenti, and I have always been keen to be one of them. The jargon the commentators used was sometimes obscure, but from the first I savoured the game's childlike, archaic Anglo-Saxon idiom. From radio and television, I learned the Laws of cricket and its technical basis. More important, the broadcasters supplied its dramatic context. I soon learned that in cricket even the simplest occurrences are what semiologists call polysemous – signifying many things at one and the same time.

As purveyed by the 'Test Match Special' team in the 1970s, English cricket was a world where the norms of an imagined nineteenth century still obtained. It was a world of deference and hierarchy, ruled by benevolent white men, proud of its traditions and resentful of any challenge to them.

Cricket, as they portrayed it, did not live in the same world as the Welfare State, feminism and giant trade unions, and certainly not the world of sex, drugs and rock and roll.

I remember Brian Johnston burbling over Ian Botham's 'nice, short haircut' and Fred Trueman pontificating about the 'natural' athleticism of West Indian bowlers. At first I found the reactionary nostalgia and English insularity amusing, if rather pathetic. As the years went by, and I saw more clearly what these attitudes meant in English society, I was less amused. I became one of the multitude who listen to 'Test Match Special' because of an addiction to the ball-by-ball drama of big cricket, and in spite of the prejudices of some of the commentators.

John Arlott, of course, was always an exception. He was the outsider who had somehow found his way into the heart of the English establishment, combining love of tradition with hatred of injustice. While I can no longer swallow his belief that the cricket world reflected his own idealism and generosity, I am grateful still that through his rigour and his sympathy, his mastery of light and

shade, he helped me to see and enjoy the epic nature of Test cricket. On first acquaintance, it is almost impossible for a newcomer to the game to get hold of the ever-shifting rhythms of a five-day struggle. Arlott's commentary helped me see the whole, not just the parts.

That summer I also discovered county cricket, the strangest of all of English cricket's strange institutions. Like everything else in my connection with cricket, becoming a Somerset supporter was fortuitous. From my village in Devon I could hitch-hike up the motorway to watch midweek matches in Taunton. In 1976, Somerset had yet to win any major honours in more than eighty years of first-class cricket. Taunton was still a tumble-down ground, all peeling paintwork, rickety benches and manual scoreboard, and the only edible items on the ground were the white-bread ham sandwiches served in the members' enclosure.

As it turned out, Somerset was the ideal introduction to the living anachronism that is county cricket. These shire-based membership clubs were a far cry from the big-city commercial franchises of baseball and other sports. For a start, several counties had more than one 'home' ground. The territorial entities they claimed to represent (depicted in the feudal iconography that bedecks the county game) did not, in many cases, even exist any more. Somerset played 'home' matches in Bath and Weston-super-Mare, both in Avon. Then there was the oddity of a professional sport being managed by earnest amateurs. I was always fascinated by the sight of clusters of county members, middle-aged men and women bundled in tweeds and corduroys, propped in their deck-chairs by the boundary, talking about the team as if they owned it, which, in a sense, they did.

I was also amazed at the casual interchange between the players and the spectators. I remember sitting cross-legged on the grass at Taunton just outside the boundary rope watching a match against the New Zealand tourists in 1978. Play was slow and between overs I tried to make sense of a Maoist tract on pre-Socratic philosophy. The slow left-armers Stephen Boock, fielding at third man, asked to see the book. I handed it to him and he flipped through the pages with a puzzled look, then passed it back to me just in time to pluck the ball from the grass and return it to the stumps. I hadn't even seen the ball

coming our way. Such easy interplay between spectator and player had been banished from American sports, indeed most sports, generations before.

Of course, the sparseness of the crowds has helped to maintain the casualness. One of the things I have always liked about county cricket is the fact that so few people go to see it. And back then, in the late seventies, the spectators seemed a particularly anomalous mix. There were the pensioners (male and female), the chronically unemployed or underemployed men, the social rejects and fanatical statisticians, the pre-pubescent kids, and not a few long-haired remnants of an era that was rapidly vanishing, some of whom had retreated to the West Country in despair of urban civilization. At least one of these sold quarter-ounces of cannabis resin behind the old Taunton scoreboard. I am sure the cricket authorities had no idea how many late-sixties-early-seventies burn-out cases they had ambling around the boundary ropes in those days.

~~I worked on this book through the Ashes series of 1993, when so many of its themes sprang to life. As England plummeted to a 4-1 defeat at the hands of an Australian side that had not been highly rated when it first arrived, the parallels between the malaise of English cricket and the economic and social malaise of the country itself were drawn by leader writers, stand-up comedians and the millions shadowing them in pubs, workplaces, bus queues and political meetings. At the same time, the England football team were failing to qualify for the World Cup finals. The tabloids encapsulated the national mood by portraying the England manager Graham Taylor as a turnip, soon followed by the transformation of cricket captain Graham Gooch into a potato. The nadir came when Taylor's squad lost to the USA. After all, everyone knew that the Americans had rejected soccer, which was, until the World Cup of 1994, one of the few areas of global popular culture on which the USA had no claim.~~

~~Comparing the hapless Taylor and Gooch with the helpless Tory Prime Minister became a commonplace. In the previous year, sterling had crashed out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, the Maastricht Treaty had split the ruling party and the~~

~~remained a JP, a prison visitor, a governor of schools and colleges, and a member of the local Police Consultative Committee. I hadn't known, until I saw his egg and tomato tie, that he was also a member of the MCC, though it came as no surprise. As a mayor, this man had shown an inordinate fondness for the regalia of office. Proud of his working class background, he none the less wanted above all else to be included among the 'gentlemen'. I had no doubt that as an MCC member he had cast his vote in 1991 against the admission of women – after all, it had been the incursion of feminism that had most appalled him during his last years in the Labour Party. Now, however, he was excited. So excited that he forgot that it was New Zealand, not Australia, whom England's women cricketers were playing in the World Cup Final that day. My former comrade clearly had the Ashes on the brain. But he was not the only man to draw strange comfort from the England women's performance in 1993.~~

For decades, women had struggled to find a place in English cricket. The Women's Cricket Association was formed in 1926 – a by-product of the suffrage movement. But it had never been granted a voice in the cricket hierarchy, even after the Cricket Council, TCCB and NCA had replaced the MCC in 1968. Women had invented the cricket World Cup before men. The first cup was held in England in 1973 (two years before the first men's cup), followed by India in 1978, New Zealand in 1982 and Australia in 1988. In Australia women's cricket enjoyed commercial sponsorship, but not in England, where appeals for support from Tetley Bitter, official sponsors of the men's Test side, had been rebuffed. Other potential sponsors told the WCA that women's cricket did not receive enough television coverage or that its image was not suitable for their products. At one point the English women were advised that they would get more television exposure if they played scantily clad. Norma Iazard, manager of the England women's side, complained, 'In England, women's cricket is regarded as a charity. In Australia, it's an entertainment.'

The 1993 World Cup nearly did not take place. The tournament's hosts, the WCA, were on the verge of cancelling it when, two days before the deadline, the government-sponsored Foundation for Sport and the Arts stepped in with a grant of £90,000, which was still only

half the required amount. The gap was plugged by smaller, mostly non-commercial sponsors (individuals, trade unions, voluntary groups and social clubs) and in the end the MCC agreed to meet the costs of staging the final at Lord's.

Australia had been heavy favourites but surprisingly lost to both New Zealand and England in the early rounds. The New Zealand women had recently been admitted to 'New Zealand Cricket', the male dominated governing council of the game; they were fit, enthusiastic, and well-organized. Though initially ignored by the media, the English women, as they made their way to the Lord's final, benefited from popular disillusionment with the sour, spiritless, unsuccessful England men's side. The women were playing with discipline, panache and team spirit. Unlike the men, they were winning. No wonder the erstwhile town-hall tyrant was excited. They might be women, but at least they were English.

The entrance (£4 adults; £2 juniors and pensioners) proved excellent value – something which could rarely be said of men's matches that summer – and the crowd was larger than any drawn to Lord's by the Sunday League all season. There were New Zealanders of both sexes, Dutch and Irish women (their teams had been eliminated in earlier rounds), middle-aged English couples, groups of young girls, lone male cricket lovers, pale and solemn, and sunburnt working-class women with cropped hair and baggy jeans. A handful of MCC members strolled amid women in 'Pride' t-shirts and multiple ear-studs. The hospitality units were mostly unoccupied and the pavilion, from which women are banned, was nearly deserted.

Back in 1989, Lancashire, the last hold-out among the counties, had admitted women to full membership and the right to use the old Trafford pavilion. Apparently, the vote at the AGM was turned when it was revealed that Mr Keith Hull, a long-time member, had had a sex change operation, but had continued to enjoy her full membership privileges.

The MCC was less convinced of the fluidity of gender roles. After it turned down a similar proposal in 1991, its secretary, John Stephenson, observed:

'I rather like the quaintness, the mystique of the place. I really can't see any great advantage in having women in the pavilion. In fact, I can see some disadvantages. This building wasn't built with the modern day in mind. It was built just for people to watch cricket.'

In England, men's cricket clubs outnumber women's by over 1,000 to one. England's women cricketers are therefore drawn from a limited pool of players. This is a small world with a sense of mission. Year in, year out, the top women cricketers play not for the TV or the press, not for the fans, not for the money or the fame – there is little of either – but for themselves and for each other. That Sunday at Lord's, their loyalty to each other and to their band of followers was palpable.

Without aid from the media, the England women had, it was clear, built up a genuine following. Many in the crowd had attended the earlier matches and knew the players well already. There was anger over television's failure to cover the competition and spectators were urged to write to the BBC. Both sides enjoyed good-natured partisan support and players on the pavilion balconies joined in the Mexican wave (from which, as always, the members abstained). The Union Jack, not the England flag, flew over the home side's dressing room.

The cricket itself displayed classical batting, sharp running, thoughtful bowling and tight fielding. England's victory owed much to the patience and precision of the veteran opener, Janette Brittin, to the flamboyant derring-do of the all-rounder, Jo Chamberlain, and the crafty bowling and captaincy of Karen Smithies. Less powerful than male cricketers, the women relied on deliberate stroke placement and tactical bowling to carefully-set fields. Spinners played a prominent role on both sides and, compared to the men's game, the bowlers raced through the overs. At the end, instead of grabbing the stumps and dashing for the pavilion, the victorious English women ran to embrace their supporters spilling on to the turf from the Nursery End.

At the presentations after the match, Dennis Silk, MCC President, told the women that the 'spirit' of their game was 'everything we like about cricket' and chivalrously declared, 'The lady cricketers have supplied us with a day we shall never forget.' But he did so on the

grass in front of the pavilion, not on the balcony as usual. Chamberlain's 38 in 33 balls, backed up by two wickets, a split-second run-out and a surreal catch made her the 'man of the match'. For the media, she became a kind of Botham-for-a-day.

Commentators who had ignored the women's competition through most of the summer now flocked to offer praise. It was, they insisted, not merely that England had won, but the way they had won. Frank Keating, who had criticized the male Test squad for 'lack of character', pronounced himself delighted with the women. This was 'what cricket ought to be'. Suddenly, English women, the invisible outcasts of world cricket, were being held up as champions of 'fair play' and the best traditions of English cricket. Christopher Martin-Jenkins praised the cup final as 'a model example of amateur sport, competitive but fun, bringing its own rewards of honour and camaraderie'.

In their obsession with drawing lessons for the male standard bearers of English cricket, these commentators missed the real, joyful message of the World Cup Final: that women are not an adjunct of the men's game or a throwback to a vanished amateurism, but an independent, dynamic source of renewal. The 'England' championed by the women cricketers at Lord's was not the nation represented by Gooch and his men in the Ashes series.

History made English cricket what it is: its joys and absurdities, its complacency and angst. But history is made by us, or rather, in the process of fighting among ourselves over the present, we make the future. After all, this is what happens every time cricketers take the field. The bowler studies the pitch and considers his options. The batsman observes the field and chooses his strokes. They then interact not in total freedom but compelled by everything that has happened to them – personally and collectively – until that moment. Each game is new; its end is shaped in the course of play. Cricket is tradition-bound and often politically gagged, but it is also, as CLR James insisted, supremely creative. He saw West Indians making their own history on the cricket field and he rejoiced. Looking at English cricket at the moment, it's hard to imagine anyone here feeling what James felt. But in the 1993 World Cup Final, you could catch a glimmer of the transforming power that inspired him.

On a British Airways flight from the USA I watched a promo video for tourist Britain. Swans on the Avon, country churches, sheep grazing on green fields, pub signs, Oxford quads, Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, Nelson's Column, the Palace of Westminster, Big Ben, the Albert Hall, West End theatres, St Paul's, the Post Office Tower, Les Miserables, red buses and black taxis, Canary Wharf and, inevitably, a village cricket match (in whites, of course). There was no football, no London Underground, no coal mines or steel works or ports, no M25. Like tourist industries everywhere, the BA promo-makers were marketing a myth, and within it cricket had a special place.

However, Americans, like other foreigners, no longer swallow the old imagery whole. The lager lout in Union Jack shorts, the millionaire pop star, the sleazy tabloid journo on the make, the City slicker and the fascist skinhead are replacing the stiff-upper-lips. When Americans come here and take a good look they find a country stripped of empire and world status, a land of low pay, skinflint benefits, social division, economic and political stagnation. A small country which had lost more than just the Ashes in the Test matches against Australia.

I wrote this book in 1993–94, when 'nation' and 'market', those querulous bedfellows, seemed ever-present in the news bulletins. In Eastern Europe, the reintroduction of the market had been accompanied by an explosion of nationalist sentiments. In India, economic 'liberalization' and the rise of Hindu nationalism were the twin topics of political debate. In Western Europe and North America, the tensions between the dictates of an international market and the old prerogatives of nation-states were revealed in the fraught passages of the Maastricht and NAFTA treaties. Inevitably, 'market' and 'nation' imposed themselves on the book, whose subject became the mysterious triangle they formed with cricket.

Back in 1970, a year before I first arrived on these shores, Rowland Bowen, the maverick cricket scholar, observed that 'one of the reasons for the popularity of sport in England' was 'to enable the people to bury their heads in the sand ostrich-wise'. As the seventies and eighties wore on, that became more and more impossible. As the world outside grew increasingly violent and insecure, as global

economic and political trends made English people feel punier and punier, cricket itself, washed along in a rip-tide of perpetual change, seemed to have lost its immunity, much to the anguish of traditionalists. These days, if you're looking for a refuge from reality, Test cricket is not for you. History has invaded the pitch, with a vengeance.

Over the last twenty years, as cricket has passed through a period of radical transformation, a new school of revisionist cricket historians has emerged. The scion of Bowen, CLR James and John Arlott have re-examined cricket history with a more critical eye than their predecessors, and less commitment to the *ancien régime*. Previous chroniclers – Warner, Altham, Swanton – were themselves leading cricket administrators, doyens of the MCC establishment, and their views of the sport's singular history were shaped accordingly. Spurred by the rapid changes and the sheer drama of cricket's latest encounter with the market and modernity, the revisionist historians have refused to see cricket history or cricket itself as a refuge from reality, as did so many of their predecessors. Without their researches, this book could not have been written.

Why does cricket generate such angst? In other sports, particularly US sports, rule changes or alterations in competitive structures, in equipment or uniforms or techniques are pushed through with little public dissent.

A team may even up stakes and move to another city. There may be protests but no one claims that the game as a whole, no less the national heritage, is being dismantled. It is widely accepted that every so often games must be modernized. Only in cricket is reform greeted with such popular anxiety – an anxiety which the media do their utmost to foment, for they have long ago appointed themselves the unofficial guardians of the national heritage. In cricket, there is always the fear that something will be lost. Something intrinsic to the appeal and the 'values' of cricket. Something precious and fragile, like childhood innocence.

Is there something 'English' about all this? Is there something English about cricket? Or is that just the old imperial propaganda? Why does English cricket seem such an acute expression of English

frustration and self-doubt? Why is cricket so often taken or promoted as a mirror of England – either its best or worst, its great traditions or, increasingly, its current malaise? What does it mean to call cricket the ‘national’ game? Is there something in cricket that links it to the destinies of English people? And which English people? Which England? Or rather, whose?

In trying to answer these questions it seemed to me that not being English might be an asset. Over the years I have come to take for granted many of the peculiarities of English cricket. Nowadays when I take Americans to a cricket match – or when I go with an English person who has never been before – I find myself taken aback by their inquiries. Why do the fielders change ends after six balls while the batsmen stay put? Why do the players ‘appeal’? Why does everyone wear white (except on Sunday)? Why can you polish the ball but not pick the seam? These and so many other products of cricket’s history have become invisible to me, a distressing sign that I may be becoming ‘English’.

Since my mid-seventies conversion to cricket my interest in the game has been sustained and deepened by a series of accidents. I keep bumping into cricket, blindly led by friendships, jobs, politics, or sheer wanderlust. And I never cease to marvel how a human activity can be so frivolous, so inconsequential, and at the same time so meditative, so complex, so charged with meaning. I do not believe this is an age of lead. I have heard throughout my cricket-watching life that the modern game is desolate, but that is not my experience. Certainly, it is beset with problems and riven by conflict – that is what makes it such an excellent mirror of the time and the place. The stresses and strains of transformation always bring out the essence of a game – or destroy it.

I have been lucky enough to watch and talk about cricket in India, New Zealand and South Africa, though I was never in any of those countries for that specific purpose. In India, especially, I became aware of the game’s paradoxical mix of the malleable and the durable. Watching cricket there, I savoured the blend of the familiar and the exotic – though cricket everywhere, even on a wet weekday afternoon at the Oval, is still to me exotic. I can retreat, quietly, into a

discrete foreignness and watch the proceedings close up – and from a great distance.

Now when I'm asked 'How can an American understand cricket?' I am tempted to answer, 'How can an English person?'