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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-armer 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 passsed 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

pit-closure plan had pushed the Murdoch press into backing the miners. Amid recession, unemployment, homelessness, rising crime, cynicism towards virtually everyone in authority flourished. Politicians were distrusted and disliked almost as much as journalists, and even more than High Court judges and police. Yet this was an electorate that had returned a Tory government for the fourth time in succession only a year before.

Failure in the Ashes became even more resonant because the nation's leader was a certain type of English cricket lover: a little in awe of the game and the players, 'considerably' impressed by its ruling personnel and traditions, acknowledging with arch self-deprecation the frivolity of his eccentric but 'very English' passion. The lodestar of John Major's cricket memory was the golden summer of 1953, Coronation Year, when as a small boy he watched England regain the Ashes at the Oval under Len Hutton's leadership. When he became Prime Minister in 1990, the MCC allowed him to jump the membership queue.

On St George's Day in April 1993, Major gave what was intended to be a patriotic speech to a group of disgruntled Tory Euro-MPs. Echoing George Orwell, with radically different intent, he invoked 'the long shadows falling across the county ground, the warm beer, the invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pool fillers ... old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist'. As the British economy wrestled with the demands of a global market, Major offered the governing party shelter in the cosy old England of county cricket. But this was an England that did not exist, except, powerfully, in people's heads. Major's real audience was in the suburbs, among voters no longer convinced that they were 'invincible'. Here 'the county ground' and the traditions of country life, including cricket, were ideological mantras to ward off the demons encroaching ever more menacingly from the crime-ridden, multi-racial, dispossessed inner cities.

It was not, however, an opportune moment to ask Tory voters to take comfort in the continuity of English cricket. During the previous twelve months, the Test side had been defeated at home by Pakistan and abroad by India and Sri Lanka. Now they were being humiliated by the Australians.

It was not just that England were losing but the way they were losing. The sheer scale of the defeats – by 179 runs at Old Trafford, by an innings and 48 runs at Headingley, by 8 wickets at Edgbaston – told only part of the story. England's bowlers – fourteen were employed during the series – were drubbed. The Australian batsmen knocked up one huge total after another – 632 at Lord's and 653 for 4 declared at Headingley (where the pitch was supposed to favour English bowlers). Altogether, they struck ten centuries, including four that surpassed 150 and one from wicket-keeper Ian Healy. The top seven in the order all averaged over 40 for the series. England could boast three centuries, two by Gooch, and only four averages over 40. In light of the absence for most of the series of Australia's principal strike bowler, Craig McDermott, the failure of the England batsmen seemed abject.

As a deracinated Marxist of American Jewish background, success for 'England' means little to me. But this abysmal humiliation, though carrying a perverse frisson, undermined the theatrical and creative aspects of the game. No one will look back on England's neurotic and joyless performance of 1993, as John Arlott looked back on the Ashes defeat of 1920, and sigh with satisfaction: 'That was a great year. England were murdered by Australia.' In the *Observer*, Scyld Berry described the Test side as 'resigned, exuding non-commitment, misfielding, hoping not expecting, a group of individuals each wanting to do well without common purpose'. The England cricketers seemed bowed down not just by the burden of losing, but even more by the burden of representing their country.

The responses to the Ashes failure of 1993 were bewilderingly contradictory. What gripped me during that summer was the way the innumerable claims and counter-claims, often vehement and extreme, echoed larger arguments over the plight of the nation. English cricket plunged into one of its periodic frenzied mass hunts for scapegoats and saviours. The media, of course, were at the head of the pack. Soon after his arrival in May, Allan Border had declared, 'The English media are pricks.' Unlike the Pakistanis the year before, his Australians were spared the full treatment as the 'pricks' trained their sights on the home side.

As always, the first targets were the biggest and most visible: chairman of selectors Ted Dexter, team manager Keith Fletcher and captain Graham Gooch. The *Mirror* dubbed them 'the three stooges' and *The Sunday Times* 'the Board of Misdirectors'. After the Lord's defeat the *Sun* implored: 'Drop the Ted Donkey'. The Mirror replied with a Cromwellian, 'Go, in the name of God, Go'. There was more to this than the familiar tabloid exercise of 'building them up to knock them down'. It reflected a deeper quest for heroes, for individual solutions to collective problems.

Selection policy was pilloried. As so often in recent English Test history, it had been inconsistent, panic-driven, at times defying any intelligible logic. Announcing his squad for the first Test at Old Trafford, Dexter proclaimed, 'We don't envisage chopping and changing.' By the end of the series, he had called up twenty-four players to represent the country, only just short of the record-breaking twenty-nine he had employed in 1989, his first year at the helm.

The selection of Foster at Lord's and Emburey at Edgbaston (retrograde moves which betrayed a lack of confidence in younger players), the suspicion of spin and reliance on medium pace, the use of Alec Stewart as a-batsman-wicket-keeper, all came in for sharp criticism. However, the selectors, as ever, did respond to the pressure of public opinion, as orchestrated by the media. Lathwell and Caddick were chosen after glowing early-season notices, then dropped. Later, Malcolm, Watkin and Maynard came in after sustained media promotion. But the selectors were not prepared to give in to popular demands for a recall of David Gower, whose omission throughout the summer seemed motivated mainly by a desire on their part to save face. Spurned by England, at the end of the season Gower announced a premature retirement.

Gower became a martyr in a popular crusade against the Dexter Gooch-Fletcher triumvirate. What drove the press wild was not merely the failure of the England side, but the refusal of any of the triumvirate to acknowledge or take responsibility for mistakes – an uncanny reflection of the Major government's attitude to the country's economic woes. Dexter's supercilious remark after the Lord's defeat was the final straw: 'We may be in the wrong sign or

something. Venus may be in the wrong juxtaposition to somewhere else.' In other circumstances the media might have found in Dexter's unflappable complacency the stuff of a typically English national hero. Instead, 'Lord Ted' became a symbol of the unaccountability of the English cricket establishment, sleepwalking, like the government, to oblivion. When his resignation from the £40,000-a-year part-time post was announced during the final day of the fifth Test, the Edgbaston crowd cheered. 'GOOD RIDDANCE,' whooped the *Mirror*, catching the mood. During his regime, England had won nine Tests, lost twenty-one and drawn four.

Gooch, England captain during most of that time, had resigned two weeks earlier. His route to the top had been halting and circuitous. When he finally seized the prize in 1990, after the failure of all the other leading cricketers of his generation, he surprised many by raising his own game and leading England to respectable performances against the West Indies, India and New Zealand as well as the final of the 1992 World Cup. But this was a false dawn, one of many in English cricket since the Packer revolt. After a poor series in India, Gooch was initially appointed captain only for the first three Ashes Tests. After the loss of the first, he insisted to the press, 'I haven't considered resigning and I don't think this is the right time to do so.' The England Committee then extended his appointment to all six Tests. 'It is now up to the rest of the team to learn from his example,' explained Dexter. After defeat in the second Test Gooch spoke of resigning 'if things don't improve'. However, he remained in post, ever more lugubrious, until defeat in the fourth Test, which ensured that the Ashes would stay with Australia. Asked why England kept losing, he replied, 'We are not playing very good cricket.' It was neither stupid nor evasive. It was simply that Gooch, like Dexter, was baffled by failure.

This applied even more to Keith Fletcher, on a five-year contract worth £250,000. Fletcher spent much of the Ashes series (his first summer in charge) complaining about pitches, balls going soft, net conditions and injuries. He seemed bereft of strategy, falling back, in the absence of any other ideas, on the routines which had served him well in county cricket. He had been the chosen successor of Micky Stewart, the first-ever England team manager, who had also

schemed to ensure Gooch's succession to the captaincy. For many commentators, Dexter's greatest crime was to have betrayed his own amateur, cavalier heritage by giving free rein to Stewart's hard-nosed professionalism. Obsessed with 'preparation', Stewart had assembled an apparatus of coaches, scouts and fitness trainers never before seen in English cricket. The lax, dilettante days of the old amateurism were declared at an end. On taking up his newly-created post in 1988, Stewart declared: 'Life is competitive. We talk too much about learning to be good losers.' By the end of his tenure in 1992, his main accomplishment, many thought, was to have taught England's cricketers to be bad losers.

The scientific claims of the Stewart regime had been made to look hollow by the technical deficiencies exposed at the highest level of English cricket. Above all, the English bowlers appeared to have forgotten how to swing the ball. Swing, after all, was a great English tradition, as much the hallmark of English cricket as pace was for the West Indies or spin for India. EW Swanton, the conservative doyen of the cricket media, argued that there had been 'too much fitness training and not enough practice in the nets'. Ray Illingworth wanted more and better coaches. Against the leg-spin of Australia's Shane Warne (who took 34 wickets at 25.79 runs apiece in the course of the series), the English batsmen were at sea, as they had been against the spinners in India earlier in the year.

Warne's success only rubbed in the mystery of England's technical inadequacies. The demise of the arcane craft of leg-spin had been lamented for years by pundits who blamed it on flat pitches, the LBW law, the one-day game or lower seams. Here it was being practised, with relentless exuberance, by an overweight, bleach-blond Aussie beach boy. Warne had been kicked out of the much-admired Adelaide Cricket Academy and had spent the previous English summer playing League cricket in the North of England, drinking the Accrington club bar dry. He listed his favourite cricketers as Rod Marsh, Ian Botham and Ian Chappell, his favourite TV shows as 'Get Smart' and 'Gilligan's Island' (both of which he could know only from daytime reruns), his favourite films as *Rocky III, Caddyshack* and *Rambo* and admitted to having no favourite books because 'I've never read anything but sports books'. Warne

showed that leg-spinners could flourish in all types of cricket and on all types of pitches. The ever-frustrated left-arm spinner Tufnell, who took 5 wickets for 63.80 in two Test appearances that summer, made a telling contrast to the easy-going Warne, a sublimely uncomplicated maestro of an infinitely complicated art.

Clearly, this crisis required more radical remedies than mere changes in personnel or a technical fix. But there was little agreement about what these should be. The 'England Committee' system associated with Stewart and his retinue came under fierce attack. It was seen as the malformed offspring of the out-of-control monster which the Test and County Cricket Board (TCCB) had become. Tony Greig declared himself 'speechless' after watching England lose the Ashes. 'Who are these people running English cricket?' he demanded. 'The chairmen of the counties should demand that people are made accountable for their actions ... the counties are merely rubber stamping decisions taken by some TCCB committee ... The trouble is the real villains don't show their faces.' They could rail at Dexter and Fletcher all they liked, but Dexter and Fletcher were accountable only to the inner circle of the England Committee. The new-model TCCB had proved as insular and unresponsive as the old-fashioned MCC.

But was the problem with the TCCB that it was too professional or not professional enough? Was it too autocratic or too bureaucratic? For Tony Lewis, the centralized TCCB concentrated too much power in too few hands. 'The county teams are the focus of local inspiration,' he insisted, calling on cricket supporters to 'blow the bureaucratic centre out of the water'. In contrast, the medium-pace bowler and journalist, Simon Hughes, denounced 'cumbersome selection committees ... assemblies of fuddy-duddies mulling over trivialities'. His alternative to the fuddy-duddies was clear-cut central leadership. Not for the first time, national sporting failure had brought out the authoritarian in the English soul. What English cricket needed, it was argued, was 'a supremo'. The current crop of weaklings had to be replaced with a single, strong man enjoying unfettered powers. Geoff Boycott, of course, was an advocate. Make Stewart captain ('he's a no-nonsense type') and get a 'hands-on, full-time supremo' – provided he wasn't Keith Fletcher. The problem for

the supporters of the supremo strategy was that none of them could agree on who the supremo should be. Robin Marlar, the former Sussex amateur and *Sunday Times* cricket columnist, went so far as to propose that Trevor Bailey, at the age of sixty-nine, 'should have been called up and charged with recovering national pride'.[2]

Marlar, a right-wing Tory, saw the crisis in English cricket – 'more serious than any of us can remember' – as a replay of the dark days of the last Labour government. 'The TCCB reminds me of Jaguar in the mid-'70s.' He proposed that Norman Tebbit or Iain MacLaurin, Chairman of Tesco plc, should take over as TCCB chairman, with Ian Botham, of all people, as team manager. The new leadership would then be given *carte blanche* to refashion cricket on a corporate model, as Marlar's party had tried to refashion the country in the 1980s.

Marlar's contempt for the public sector was shared by many of his foes in the TCCB. The decline of cricket in state schools became another of the summer's recurring themes. Left-wing Labour local authorities, it was alleged, discouraged competitive sports and were hostile to individual excellence. Better-informed observers attributed the decline to other factors, not least among them Tory education policies – under-investment, the national curriculum, the steady alienation of the teaching profession and the selling off of local sports grounds.

But for others, the problem was that the money-maddened TCCB had cursed the English game with crass commercialism. Symbolising the sale of English cricket's soul to the highest bidder were the sponsor's logos painted on the outfield grass. 'These logos remain a damn eyesore,' complained Scyld Berry. 'I do wish English tolerance would not extend to letting them get away with it.' Yes, he recognized the financial argument, but cricket's 'whole *raison d'être* is violated by reality's intrusion into the escape world of the play'. He called for a boycott of the sponsors' products.

Along with the critique of commercialism and in reaction against the mechanistic hyper-professionalism of the Stewart regime, there emerged a call for a return to amateurism. Bill Deedes reminded *Telegraph* readers: 'It was the amateur in cricket who showed the young how to play the game for enjoyment and he has gone.' Like

Harold Macmillan decrying privatization as ‘selling off the family silver’, Deedes lamented schools selling off playing fields. But the hankering after amateurism was not confined to the old Tory grandees. Even Brian Close, who had been a victim of the hypocrisies of the amateur brigade twenty-five years earlier, joined the chorus. As ever in England, escape from the dilemmas of the present is sought in the past.

But what precisely was meant by amateurism? It was argued that county cricket, like so many other British institutions, was in need of rationalization and modernization. Former Australian wicket-keeper Rod Marsh poured scorn on the English domestic game, which, he announced, was full of ‘bowlers who are really no more than pie throwers’. Rubbing it in, he suggested that in future Australia should grant England only three Tests – which was more than England have so far granted Sri Lanka.

Neil Foster, who made his last appearance for England that summer, maintained that the county competition bred ‘mediocrity’. There were too many county sides and too many professional cricketers. Echoing the Tory myth about comprehensive schools, he complained that the best players were ‘pulled down’ by the rest. Over-manned and over burdened with bureaucracy, county cricket, like nationalized industry, could not sustain itself within the free market. Recipes for its reform were abundant. Many favoured introducing a divisional system, with promotion and relegation. At the same time the number of full-time professionals on each side would be reduced and the numbers made up by non-contracted players paid on a match-fee basis. With the new part-time professionals, a kind of amateurism would return to the game, providing a competitive spur to the small elite of full-time players. A casualized workforce would certainly make life easier for the cricket authorities, but it is no more likely to solve the problems of English cricket than it has the problems of the British economy.

At Headingley, Australian spectators were taunted, racist remarks were hurled at the smattering of black people in the stands, there was at least one case of sexual assault and, finally, an attack on reserve wicket-keeper Tim Zoehrer as he entered the team bus. The Yorkshire Committee was compelled to acknowledge what others

had observed for years: that a Leeds Test could be a nasty experience if you came from the wrong country, were the wrong sex or colour. Fred Trueman was, as ever, disgusted. ‘I’ve never seen or heard anything like it in my life,’ he claimed. This oft-repeated Truemanism was, as usual, a load of bull. What went on at Headingley in 1993 had been seen and heard there many times before. The difference was that this time it was at an Ashes Test, the highest of the many high holy days of English cricket.

At Edgbaston, a packed Eric Hollies Stand pelted Australian off spinner Tim May with bananas and apples – a form of abuse which English commentators had previously insisted was confined to the ‘excitable’ masses of the Indian subcontinent. Twelve spectators were ejected. At the Oval, Surrey introduced ‘noise police’ empowered to remove without warning ‘any spectators involved in excessive or inappropriate singing or chanting’.

‘Test Match Special’ producer Peter Baxter complained that he had to turn down the microphones to keep out obscene chanting. ‘The atmosphere is becoming more like football matches and that is not what cricket should be,’ he said mournfully. ‘Abuse and violence have plagued this year’s Test series,’ *The Sunday Times* reported. ‘England’s cricket authorities have been dismayed by the scale of drunkenness and disruption this season.’

Closed-circuit television, life bans for offenders and restrictions on alcohol were among the remedies proposed, as well as crowd segregation – a nightmare prospect at Test matches, raising the spectre of passport checks at the gate and, if West Indies, India or Pakistan are playing, black people herded into special enclosures.

The mild hysteria over crowd misconduct during the 1993 Ashes series was in keeping with the concurrent Tory clamour over standards of behaviour. For some letter-writers to the *Telegraph*, it seemed the end of civilization as Britain had known it. The many-headed hydra, the mob, was invading the stately world of English cricket. All sense of proportion vanished. After all, even the most boisterous elements in a Test crowd would be drowned by a casual groan from the terraces of any Premiership football match. Worse yet, no distinction was drawn between a Mexican wave and a riot, between witty barracking and sexist and racist abuse. The chant of

‘Sumo!’ that greeted Merv Hughes was good-natured. And ‘Waugh! What is he good for ... absolutely nothing!’ was sheer delight – though the reference to Edwin Starr’s soul classic was lost on the ‘Test Match Special’ team. On the other hand, ‘Sheepshagger, la, la, la’ and ‘You’re just a bunch of convicts’ were witless. There is not one, but many cricket publics, and among them an endless tussle takes place over the meaning and ownership of the game.

Contrary to impressions given by most of the commentators, the disorderly elements were not to be found only among the ‘football supporters’ in the less expensive seats (there are no truly ‘cheap seats’ any more) but also among the booze-sodden Hooray Henrys and corporate philistines in the pavilions and the hospitality boxes. Nor was it true that unruly behaviour was somehow extraneous to English cricket or its management. Like the Tory government, the cricket authorities blamed everyone but themselves for the collapse of ‘law and order’, but brewers’ logos were plastered on each player on both sides and booze sales at the grounds provided vital profit margins. In Australia in 1992, Ian Botham had described his hosts as ‘descendants of convicts’ and the England side taunted the baying home crowds by holding up their wrists as if pointing to invisible manacles. No disciplinary action was taken.

Perhaps the most telling reaction to failure on the cricket pitch was the summer-long obsession with the question of qualification for England. Just who was an Englishman – and, more critically, who was not? Chris Cowdrey, one-time ‘rebel’ tourist in South Africa, protested that the Test side was ‘not English enough’. Neil Foster, also a South African ‘rebel’, noted that ‘when you play Australia or the West Indies ... you are battling against their national pride ... we don’t have a truly English side. We have lost some of our identity ... At least Lewis and De Freitas grew up here.’ Note the damning ‘at least’ with which Foster brands the two black players as second-class Englishmen.

According to David Frith, cricket historian and editor of *Wisden Cricket Monthly*,[3] English cricket was suffering ‘a crisis of credibility’ because the side included players born in the West Indies and Africa. An Anglo-Australian, Frith disapproved of the recent rise of Australian republicanism and the alleged disrespect shown to the

Queen by Australian prime minister Paul Keating. England and Australia, he said, were ‘of the same blood’. In his case, the ‘at least’ was applied to white South Africans Lamb and Smith, whose parents were English. In contrast, Devon Malcolm ‘acts, thinks, sounds and looks like a Jamaican. This hits the English cricket lover where it hurts.’

Being born in England has never been a required qualification for playing for England. ‘Plum’ Warner was born in Trinidad, Freddie Brown in Peru, ‘Gubby’ Allen in Australia, Douglas Jardine and Colin Cowdrey in India. Mike Denness was Scottish, Tony Lewis was Welsh and Tony Greig was South African. Kevin Curran is a Zimbabwean who has taken out an Irish passport which enables him to play English county cricket. The last time an England Test side were all born in England was the third Test against Australia in 1989. As Mike Brearley observed, ‘In an era of mobility, place of birth, as a criterion of belonging, seems to be a throwback to the nineteenth century and before.’ But when a national side is losing, mere reason flies out the door.

There was heated debate over the presence in the England side during the summer of a New Zealander – Andrew Caddick – and an Australian – Martin McCague, who, just to make things really complicated for those seeking authentic ‘Englishness’, was born in the North of Ireland. Caddick had toured England with a New Zealand under-nineteen squad in 1989. He had signed up for Somerset, where he was nicknamed ‘Kiwi’, and qualified for England. McCague, known as ‘Oz’ by his Kent county colleagues, had received most of his cricket education in Australia, but insisted, ‘I feel English’. Border disagreed: ‘To me, he’s Australian.’ With Caddick at the other end, he said, ‘it takes the gloss off an Ashes Test’.

Scyld Berry suggested ‘let us ask the man in the street whether McCague is English or Australian’ – confident ordinary English people would recognize an impostor when they saw one. Berry wanted the authorities to draw the line between ‘genuine immigrants to Britain’ and ‘adventurers ... who have come to England specifically to play cricket’. It was a worthy attempt to avoid racism by distinguishing between a Devon Malcolm and an Allan Lamb, but it

could never be put into practice. How are the cricket authorities to measure motives? Why is the desire to play cricket a less legitimate reason for immigration than the desire to find any other form of work?

There has never been any correspondence between the definitions of nationality held by the Home Office and those held by the English cricket authorities. The TCCB itself demonstrated a cynical attitude when it reduced the residential qualification from ten to seven years in 1987 in order, it was said, to facilitate Graeme Hick's entry into the Test side. Likewise, the British government slapped a British passport on the South African runner Zola Budd so that she could compete in the Olympics under the Union Jack. Those who pose as the guardians of national identity, who stand at the gates keeping the exotic hordes at bay, define that identity at their convenience.

In cricket, all the components of the United Kingdom are supposed to be represented by 'England'. But the excellent form of Glamorgan in the county championship led to protests at the apparent exclusion of Welsh players from the Test squad. Neath's MP Peter Hain introduced an Early Day Motion 'noting the obstinate refusal of the selectors to choose any Welsh players' and calling on the International Cricket Council to designate the Glamorgan v. Australia match at Neath as an extra Test.

Resentment of Dexter, the archetypal Southerner, and his 'Essex men' also festered in the North. At Derby, the public-address system described the announcement of the squad for the third Test as 'news from the South' (Malcolm had been left out again). At Headingley it was noted that Atherton was the only player from 'north of Watford Gap'. When Nasser Hussain became the sixth Essex player selected that summer, the Glamorgan announcer sneered, 'It is to be assumed that Mr Trevor Bailey was unavailable for selection.'

Clearly, there was little consensus not only over the question of just who was and was not entitled to represent 'England' but over what this 'England' was and to whom it belonged. Amateur or professional, North or South, streamlined or decentralized, modern or traditional ... only who were the modernizers and who were the

traditionalists? Keep the good and throw out the bad, people said, but no one could agree which was which.

What made the arguments sharp was the sense of national decline underlying them. Indeed, the only belief that seemed to bind English people together was that the country was going to the dogs. A survey revealed that two-thirds of the population would emigrate if given the chance. In that respect, the English Test side of 1993 was a faithful reflection of the nation. The English looked at this reflection, recognized it as a true one, and despised it. Out of that loathing the media made an industry. The failure of the national sporting sides gave the legendary masochism of the English a new twist. By the end of the summer, the only thing that was certain was that everything that had been tried up till now had failed. The real significance of the victory at the Oval in the sixth Test, against a tired and unmotivated Australia, was that it followed the departure of Dexter. It came under a new captain – the first Oxbridge man to captain England in twelve years – and it owed much to the recall after long injury of Angus Fraser, a classically English seamer.

The 'England Committee' was abolished by the TCCB in December 1993. The triumph of cricket's self-made 'Essex men', like their counterparts in English politics, had proved ephemeral. One after another, the cricket messiahs of the eighties had failed, along with the miracle cures of 'professionalism' and mass marketing. The old gods departed from the international scene – Gower, Botham, Gooch, Gatting, the cricketers of my generation. I was glad to see them go, even Gower. But what would come in their place?

Lord's on a Sunday with the sun shining for a cup final. England had just given up the Ashes at Headingley. Gooch had resigned and Atherton had been appointed. As the crowd trickled in, an MCC member selling score-cards at the Nursery End explained, 'Australia won the toss and elected to field.'

This was rather strange, as Australia were not playing today.

I knew the MCC member in question. For two decades he had been the virtual dictator of an inner-London Labour council. When he abandoned Labour in the early eighties, he lost his seat on the council and his power-base on the local council estates, but he

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 Izard, 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?'