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The MCC, Society and Empire: A Portrait of Cricket's Ruling Body, 1860–1914

James Bradley

In 1987 the Marylebone Cricket Club celebrated its bicentenary and to mark the occasion the ex-Glamorgan and England captain Tony Lewis published an official history of the club in a glossy table-top edition. On the back of the dust-jacket, underneath a slightly abstract painting of the famous weathervane Old Father Time taking the bails off the stumps, in bold black print is the simple motif **'THE STORY OF THE MCC IS THE HISTORY OF CRICKET'**. This is hyperbolic, and is akin to saying that the story of the English monarchy is the history of its people. Lewis' book is establishment history; it is cricket history from the top with the MCC as the elite.

To define what the MCC once was is a hard task. In the 1990s it seems to be a semi-mythical body, with its traditions and history concerning its power in the cricketing world shrouded in the mists of antiquity, having shed all its powers, save that of guardian of the laws, to the Test and County Cricket Board, the National Cricket Association, the Cricket Council and the International Cricket Conference.¹ Yet in the early years of this century it was perceived to be the Vatican of cricket, the very powerhouse of the game, controlling and arbitrating for Britain and its Empire. In the latter it had a symbolical value, and there must be some truth in the statement of the eminent Lord Harris that it was 'perhaps the most venerated institution in the British Empire'.² Similarly, Lord Hawke made the trite observation that the MCC 'had become the Parliament House of cricket, not only of Great Britain but of overseas Dominions'.³ Yet this makes even more remarkable the fact that the club steadfastly ignored imperial cricket until the 1890s

If the MCC was the Vatican of cricket, the committee was the conclave. It was this body, through the work of its meetings and various sub-committees, that sought to rule the world of cricket. This article begins by examining the structure of that committee and the way in which it attempted to enforce its rule, and then looks at the implication of this on imperial cricket. Using a detailed examination of all those who served on the committee of the MCC over the period 1860–1914, and evidence obtained from the archives of the club itself, I intend to challenge some of the assumptions that have been made by and for the MCC as regards its relationship with cricket in the mother country and the colonies. In doing so I hope to demonstrate that like any other formally constituted body of people the committee of the MCC was a product of its own time and thus was bound to the beliefs of the society in which it existed.

The structure of the committee

The committee was the apex of the club and its structure remained markedly similar for the whole of this period. However, there were two major changes. First, in 1865 new rules increased the numbers on the committee from 16 to 24 with the approval of the general meeting of the club.⁴ This meant that the committee now consisted of a president, secretary, treasurer, and up to five trustees (all of whom were ex-officio members of the committee), the general committee making up the rest of the numbers. The second major change occurred in 1898, with the appointment of F.E. Lacey as secretary. At this point the secretary ceased to have an executive role on the committee. However, his power remained relatively undiminished as he retained an influential advisory role.

The pinnacle of the MCC and its figurehead was the president, who held office for one year and one year only. By the rules of the club the president nominated his successor, and on only one occasion during this period did the committee make a recommendation, when in 1879 William Nicholson was nominated as a gesture of thanks for his generosity in lending the club £18,000 for the purchase of the ground. The importance to the club of the president is debatable. Lewis says 'the president was an originally aristocratic figurehead, a good name to have on the letterhead and in the chair at the anniversary dinner'.⁵ But in reality the presidency was what the incumbent made it. The fifth Earl of Cadogan described the position as the 'Woolsack of cricket',⁶ which suggests that considerable power could be wielded (although Cadogan himself was forced to miss many meetings owing to the illness and death of his father). Likewise, Lord Hawke, never one to underestimate a job, claimed that he turned down the offer of the presidency in 1900 because he 'had not the time to obey the calls such a post must make of its holder'.⁷ Some presidents were assiduous in their attention and actions, notably V.E. Walker (1891), W.E. Denison (1892), and Lord Harris (1895), while most fulfilled their role enthusiastically enough, but slightly more sporadically. On the whole, as the MCC became more organized so did the role of the president. He was expected to serve on the financial and other sub-committees, as well as fulfilling his role as figurehead and mouthpiece of the club. Thus, in 1890, the twenty-second Baron Willoughby de Eresby was nominated to sit on the Finance, Tennis and Building Committees. Others, like Lord Harris, were able to dominate all the actions of the club, but most notably the important Cricket and Selection sub-committee.

There are many reasons why the presidency should not be regarded as a mere figurehead job. First, by representing the club, presidents reflected and symbolized the whole tenor and atmosphere of the MCC. Thus, even if they did very little, they were still a flesh and blood symbol of the club. But more significantly many of the presidents were extremely active in the MCC before, during or after their term of office. If we take,

for example, the year 1880, we find that the president, Sir William Hart-Dyke, had previously served on the committee in 1868-71 and 1873-76. There were also three future presidents on that year's committee (Hon.R. Grimston; the fifth Baron Lyttelton; and V.E. Walker) and three past presidents (all three of whom were trustees of the club: the fourth Earl of Sefton; the first Earl of Dudley; and William Nicholson). This situation was ensured partially by the unwritten rule that the retiring president was automatically elected to the committee for at least the following year.

The secretary and treasurer were on the next rung down the ladder but either could dominate the club. There were only three secretaries of note during this period. The first, R.A. Fitzgerald, was responsible for transforming the fortunes of the club after its influence had been seriously weakened by several cricketing controversies, including the infamous debates over the question of whether the ball should be bowled round-arm, under-arm, or over-arm. His successor was Henry Perkins, an untidy, yet forceful character, who was capable but occasionally troublesome. During his term of office (1876-97), his position was eclipsed by that of the treasurer, Sir Spencer Ponsonby-Fane, who ruled the finances of the club from 1879 to 1916. Ponsonby-Fane was a born aristocrat and a long-standing member of the club. His presence at committee meetings, often in the chair, was a constant feature, and it is his signature which most frequently ratifies the minutes of each meeting. But by the late 1890s he was an old man, having been born in 1824, and when Perkins retired it was F.E. Lacey who organized and all but ran the club. When Lacey arrived as secretary in 1898 the club's internal workings were in drastic need of reform and overhaul. He remodelled the sub-committees, a feature of the club's organization that seems to have evolved along the same lines as English Common Law, and put the business of the club on a more formal basis. Lacey stamped his character on the post-Perkins MCC, and his influence on the wider sphere of cricket administration was not inconsiderable, demonstrating that even without serving on the committee, the secretary was a potentially powerful person.

The Trustees were also another important section of the committee as they fulfilled the role of club elder statesmen. Once made a Trustee that position was held until death. This was significant because the trustees represented a static core in a changing committee, so much so that William Nicholson and R.J.P. Broughton served for most of the 1860-1914 period. The trusteeship also enabled the Earl of Sefton to serve for 35 years and V.E. Walker for 39 years. This has implications for the way in which the club was run and the policies which it implemented. It certainly gave the committee a leavening of conservatism.

The rank and file of the committee also had their significance. Lord Hawke commented on the Ordinary Committee that:

[It consisted] of sixteen members, four of whom annually retire for re-election for one year. the retiring president always fills one of the four vacancies, and the candidates for the other three are proposed and seconded by members of the committee. It would be open to any member of the club to nominate a candidate for the committee, but this has never been done, and probably would be regarded as as tantamount to proposing a vote of censure.⁸

This reveals that the committee was, in a way, self-perpetuating. They chose whom they wanted and, like all autocratic bodies, they got whom they wanted. Usually the committee would put up four members for election, including the retiring president, who was elected as a matter of courtesy by the Annual Meeting, but sometimes they would give the members a slightly wider choice. The general committee member was free to initiate business and put forward his own particular concerns. But committee members were also important because they formed the hard core of the sub-committees, which effectively controlled the running of Lord's and cricket.

The committee had its own formal hierarchy, but it must be remembered that the MCC was a private club, and all clubs have their own cliques. The MCC was no exception, and on reading the minutes it becomes very clear that this was how the club was run. As we will see, the social background of this clique was extremely important to the MCC's involvement in imperial cricket. Not surprisingly, the ruling clique was centred on the permanent ex-officio officers of the club. Between 1860 and 1869 it constituted among its members Hon. F. Ponsonby (later the sixth Earl Bessborough), T. Burgoyne (treasurer) and William Nicholson. After Burgoyne's death in 1869, Sir Spencer Ponsonby-Fane was added to the ranks of the clique. It remained stable until the 1890s, gathering around it the members of the Walker family and the Hon. R. Grimston. In the mid-1890s Lord Harris became the dominant figure at Lord's and he gathered around himself the figures of Lord Hawke, P.F. Warner and others.

To summarize, the structure of the committee was hierarchical, with a backbone of ex-officio members. Its membership was self-perpetuating through the nomination of its own replacements, but it was dominated by a limited number of individuals who could and did determine the policy of the MCC.

The social composition of the committee⁹

This study comprises an examination of the 145 members of the committee who served between 1860 and 1914. Of the 145, insignificant information was found on only four people. It is attempted here to determine a composite picture of the committee: their place, as a body, within British society. To achieve this it was necessary to discover what schools they had attended, whether they went to university and what

they did professionally or otherwise. I was also interested in the political affiliations of the committee. Overall, the results were generally clear and interpretable, although there was a lack of information on the political beliefs of the majority of the committee.

The presidency had an aristocratic image and indeed the majority of them were, if not actual earls or lords, then the brothers or sons of peers, knights and baronets. There were obvious exceptions. In 1879, William Nicholson, whose money was made in gin-distilling and whose family were usually MPs, was president, while in 1891 V.E. Walker, was another non-aristocratic incumbent of the office. There were several others who were extremely high-ranking barristers but certainly not peers of the realm, including Sir Henry James, the Attorney General at the time that he was president (1889), and Sir A.L. Smith, Lord Justice of Appeal during his year of office (1899). But all those who were not aristocrats certainly moved with ease in that milieu.

The majority of presidents, not surprisingly, went to Eton (52 per cent), while a significant minority attended Harrow (30 per cent). It was more common for presidents after 1900 to have attended other schools, which reflects the growth of public school education after 1850. But it must be noted that in numerical terms only nine out of a total of 54 did not attend either Eton or Harrow, which demonstrates the extent to which the presidents were chosen from the elite section of British society. Indeed, if more emphasis is needed, generally those who were not titled had been at one of the two schools and had therefore been integrated into the upper echelons of society.

This pattern of education is reinforced by the numbers attending either Oxford or Cambridge (77 per cent), with Oxford being the more popular (44 per cent) and Cambridge a few points behind (33 per cent). The most likely college at which they would matriculate was Christ Church (67 per cent of total) if at Oxford, or Trinity (89 per cent of total) if at Cambridge. This, of course, did not mean that they all obtained degrees. Many followed the traditional pattern of 'going up' to university for a term or two, and then 'coming down' without taking finals. Others gained their higher education in the army, which they left after a while.

In adult life it is harder to gauge what some of them did because not a few, one must suspect, were gentlemen of leisure. However, some resorted to their land, doing little else save live a squirearchical life, and getting involved in cricket (V.E. Walker was a non-aristocratic example of this). Many had business connections in the form of directorships both of the active and passive kind (46 per cent), a factor that becomes increasingly more important after 1885. Other presidents were among the great landowners of Britain, including the sixth Duke of Buccleuch, who owned 460,000 acres worth about £217,000 per annum in 1883. Others still were among the great landed industrialists of their day, including the Earl of Dudley, who owned mines, and the sixth Earl of Dartmouth, whose estates included huge coal deposits. But the most

commonly identifiable profession among the presidents was the Law, and, in particular, the Bar (13 per cent), while colonial administration and politics were also recognizable areas of involvement. In administration we see the second Baron Wenlock (Governor of Madras 1891-95), Lord Harris (India Office and Governor of Bombay 1890-95), and the seventh Earl of Jersey (Governor-General of New South Wales 1890-93). In politics there were the significant figures of the Honourable Alfred Lyttelton, the famous Liberal Unionist and Colonial Secretary, and W.H. Long, the Conservative statesman.

The pattern of political beliefs is the most interesting and significant aspect of the presidency during this period. From 1860 to 1914 57 per cent were Conservative, while 37 per cent were Liberal or Liberal Unionist (after 1885 very few of those who were Liberal remained loyal to Gladstone). However, between 1860 and 1885 there were more Liberals than Conservatives. The Conservative majority only becomes apparent after the Home Rule crisis. This reflects the typical pattern of upper-class beliefs during this period, when political polarizations became more decided after 1885. This has significance for beliefs about Empire and will be discussed in due course.

The presidents of the MCC were members of an exclusive British elite and this is seen in their whole set of values: belief in the ideals of political service, the obligations of the land-owner, and the rightness of the hierarchical nature of society. Their wealth and prestige would lend credence to the figurehead theory of the presidency, if one did not realize that many of them were dedicated to the MCC and to the game of cricket.

The social and political background of the general committee reveals a slightly wider spectrum of schools attended and professions followed. Indeed, the whole feeling of the general committee was more upper-middle class than aristocratic. Eton was still the most popular of the public schools (34 per cent), with Harrow a long way behind in second place (15 per cent). But there was a much wider range of schools in evidence, including Uppingham, Lancing, Loretto, Edinburgh Academy, Rossall, Marlborough, Malvern and Wellington, as well as the more established Rugby, Winchester and Charterhouse. Equally, fewer of the general committee attended Oxford or Cambridge (34 per cent and 23 per cent respectively), and those who did went to a broader selection of colleges. Likewise, there was a wider range of professions, but like the presidents, the most overwhelmingly popular was Barrister-at-Law (28 per cent), while that of solicitor also proved a fairly common choice (9 per cent). The only other significant minority was the Armed Forces (13 per cent); otherwise we see a large variety of jobs, including those related to business (stockbrokers, merchants, company directors), while there were also schoolmasters, an artist, a surgeon, a priest, and at least one person who classified himself as having 'no profession'.

The bond which held these people together was cricket. At no time during this period did the number of first-class cricketers on the committee, playing and retired, drop below 45 per cent. At most

times it was considerably higher. Even those who could not be classified as first-class were keen players or spectators. On this basis the committee was at least qualified to discuss cricketing matters, if not actually to rule the game.

Unfortunately, it is considerably harder to gauge the political convictions of general committee members. For example, throughout this period at least half of every committee has unknown political affiliations. It is interesting to note, for example, that the figures for Conservative support in 1914 is at least 45 per cent of the whole committee, by far the highest figure of the whole period. But, these figures do tend to fluctuate, owing to the high proportion of unknowns, making any statement highly debatable. But given the fact that the presidency increasingly becomes a Conservative reversion during the later years of this period, it may not be unreasonable to assume that the committee was also becoming more Conservative politically.

Statistics, especially averages, can be extremely misleading, and it would be unfair and unrealistic just to take the aggregate of all those who served on the committee over this period. These 54 years were ones of considerable social, economic and political change. Some of those who are included in the statistics were merely on the committee in the early years of the 1860s, while others only appear at the very tail-end of this period. It was therefore necessary to reconstruct each committee year by year and to make a detailed breakdown, in social terms, of one committee every five years. On the whole there was little fixed pattern to be observed. However, there are three points that are worth considering.

First, the average age of the committee rises gradually but consistently from 36 to 56 years old. This is also reflected in the age of successive presidents (before 1885 the average age is 42 years, while afterwards it is nearly 51). Part of the reason for this is that several of the ex-officio members of the committee were getting extremely old in the post-1900 period. But this is not the whole reason. One has to assume that either older people were being elected to the committee, or that more members were serving more terms. It is, in reality, a combination of both these factors, added, perhaps, to the belief that age lends authority.

Secondly, and more importantly, those who attended schools other than Eton or Harrow show a marked increase after 1880, which demonstrates the growing strength of the more broadly based public school system, and at the same time the slightly wider social base of the club. As the club took in more members so it took in more from upper-middle-class society, and this inevitably percolated through to the committee, to the extent that in the years 1900, 1905, 1910 and 1914, the figures for those not attending either of these schools were respectively: 41 per cent, 45 per cent, 36 per cent and 59 per cent.

Thirdly, and in some ways running counter to the last point, during this period the titled and aristocratic element of the committee stays relatively static. In 1860, 44 per cent of the committee belonged to the immediate family of a peer, while 6 per cent were baronets. In

1905, the figures are 32 per cent and 5 per cent, while in 1914 50 per cent of the committee had aristocratic origins. Therefore, while the committee was becoming less socially exclusive, there was still a very strong aristocratic involvement. This must have undoubtedly defined the image and atmosphere of the club and might point to a way in which the upper-middle and professional classes were being assimilated into the highest ranks of society.

Of course, figures do not tell the whole story and tend to depersonalize. There are unseen ties that can never be revealed by statistics. However, this study of the committee has identified that it was drawn from those sections of society that tended to be socially and politically conservative.

Rule by clique

The first group which truly controlled the MCC during these years consisted of the aforementioned Sir Spencer Ponsonby-Fane, the Hon. F. Ponsonby (later the sixth Earl of Bessborough), the Hon. R. Grimston, W. Nicholson, R. J. P. Broughton, and those who surrounded them including the Walkers of Southgate and A. J. Webbe. It was rare that more than one of these was not present at committee meetings in the years between 1860 and 1895, and they inhabited Lord's on match days during the summer.

The major figures of this group had two things in common. First, they were all born in the pre-Victorian era (the oldest of them, Fred Ponsonby, was born in the same year as the battle of Waterloo). Secondly, they were all Harrovians, and often loyal to the point of obsession. Ponsonby and Grimston were remembered for many years with affection as the coaches of the Harrow School XI. Nicholson purchased playing fields for the school in the 1890s for the promotion of games. They were all friends whose major bond was their school. This was cemented by their love of cricket and its values, their membership of the MCC and the cricket club that they themselves founded, I Zingari. While they shared mixed political beliefs, they were definitely upholders of the establishment and absolute social conservatives.

Their satellites were generally younger but shared many similarities. The most famous of these were the Walkers, who lived as country squires at Southgate in Middlesex. They were cricket socialites, founders of Middlesex County Cricket club, and admired throughout the cricketing world. The two most famous of the seven brothers were V. E. and I. D. V. E. was one of the greatest all-rounders of his day while I. D. was yet another pillar of Harrow School. He succeeded Ponsonby and Grimston as coach of the eleven, and he ran, for many years, the prestigious old boys' club, the Harrow Wanderers. When he died in 1898 he was eulogized by the *Harrovian* and his tombstone was inscribed with an epitaph composed by the Harrow master E. E. Bowen.¹⁰

A friend of I. D. and constant companion was the Middlesex cricketer

A.J. Webbe, another Harrovian, who was described as having 'no profession' in the *Harrow School Register*. He too was part of the clique and he served on the MCC committee for twenty years all told during these years.

This group represented attitudes which were early Victorian and unconnected with the beliefs of the New Imperialists of the late nineteenth century. Although many of them were involved in a diverse range of activities, from law and government administration, to business and brewing, they all adhered to a central but parochial view of cricket which looked more to the green and insular fields of Lord's, rather than to the outside and the Empire.

There was a sharp sea-change in the 1890s. By this time Lords Harris and Hawke had matured and were the controlling voices of Lord's. They too were surrounded by a group of younger men including P.F. Warner, H.D.G. Leveson-Gower and the Hon. F.S. Jackson.

Lord Harris is now revered as one of the men who shaped the MCC. A Conservative and an imperialist, Harris saw cricket as having a wider significance than that of a mere game. He himself came from an imperial background, having been born in Trinidad, where his father was governor. His family had a remarkable record of service in the Indian Army and administration, and this was continued by Harris, who served as Under-Secretary for India (1885-86) and Governor of Bombay (1890-95).

Harris always believed firmly in the civilizing mission of cricket. He saw it as a game which had the power to unite classes and colonies and uplift the native races of India. Thus he said of games, but more in particular of cricket:

Pastimes serve good purpose in causing the young noblemen and gentlemen of England to rub shoulders with those who are lower than themselves in the social scale, but in the republic of the playground are, perhaps, their superiors, and so force upon the minds of the former a respect for industry, honesty, sobriety, and any other of the qualities that are necessary to produce an efficient athlete.¹¹

But Harris extended his ideas even beyond Britain and the white Empire. Before he left for his appointment in Bombay, he attended a number of celebrations given in his honour. At all these he echoed the sentiments shown above. But he also embraced the ideal of the improving mission of Empire:

England in her supreme confidence, in an admiration for her own free institutions, had undertaken to educate oriental people on western lines, to imbue them with western modes of thought, and to encourage them to admire and to strive at western systems of government.¹²

Undoubtedly part of Harris's 'systems of belief' was the inculcation of

cricket and its ethic. At a dinner attended by many members of the MCC he said that 'he had done his best to promote the interests of the noble game in this country, and he hoped not unsuccessfully, and that he intended to extend his patronage to the promotion of cricket in India so far as lay in his power'.¹³

In fact, promotion of cricket was one of the few noteworthy things that Harris achieved in office, although it did nothing to aid his popularity, which was particularly low with the nascent Congress Party, which vilified him for spending his time playing cricket to the detriment of more important issues.¹⁴ But despite this Harris continued to reiterate his belief in the power of cricket and its importance to the Empire throughout this period and beyond.

Harris was the regular chairman of the Cricket and Selection sub-committee, whose duty it was to decide upon the laws of cricket, to make selection of the MCC and other teams playing at Lord's (excepting those of Middlesex County Cricket Club which had a playing arrangement with the club), and other cricketing matters. He was regularly assisted in his duties by Lord Hawke, the bluff and abrasive Yorkshireman. Hawke shared a fairly similar background to that of Harris. He was an ardent cricketer and an old Etonian. But, like Harris, he was also a conservative of the new school believing, more or less, in the imperial dream. He firmly believed in the class system, but he also ascribed to the 'republic of the playground' ideal to the extent that he treated the Yorkshire professionals with a protective and patronizing cordiality, as if the pros were special children, and thus he displayed all the characteristics of the good squire. He would always fight for 'his boys,' as he called them, but woe betide any who misbehaved. As a result he was able to say 'I believe I have done more than anyone to raise the standard and self-respect of the splendid paid section of first-class cricketers.'¹⁵ And to a degree he was right, although modesty was not one of Hawke's characteristics. However, he was quite capable of being insufferably overbearing, and he prevented two of 'his boys' from touring Australia in 1901-02 with a private side, thus depriving them of a lucrative winter. His motive for this was that the side was not officially sanctioned, although it is equally possible that he wanted to keep the two men fresh for the county championship. In fairness to Hawke he was able to get Yorkshire to recompense them, and in so doing instituted the concept of winter pay.

Hawke also shared Harris's belief in the important role that cricket had to play in the Empire, although his methods of taking cricket's message overseas were somewhat less altruistic. Hawke was responsible for sending out touring teams across the Empire. He himself accompanied G. F. Vernon's teams to Australia (1887-88), and India and Ceylon (1888-89). This gave the noble lord a taste for travel, which he continued to indulge with the organization of his own touring teams to India (1892-93), South Africa (1895-96 and 1899-1900), the West Indies (1896-97), Australia and New Zealand (1902-3),

and with the captaincy of an MCC team to Argentina (1912–13).

It is hard to judge the extent to which these tours were designed to encourage cricket in the Empire and how much they were for the benefit of a group of amateur gentlemen, acting as intrepid adventurers abroad, who had nothing else to do in the winter save play cricket. Hawke was in no doubt that the former was a powerful motive. On his trip to South Africa in 1896 he commented that his 'object was to develop and meet South African cricketers',¹⁶ and it cannot be denied that this may have been true. His tours certainly had a beneficial effect for the cricket of the countries he visited. However, Hawke's main testament of faith was his memoirs written in the early 1920s, and it is possible that he was attributing too much to himself. Certainly a reading of this work does make one suspicious of Hawke because it is excessively egotistical.

Nevertheless Hawke was a man of the British Empire. Touring South Africa in 1896, he did his bit for the old country when he dutifully took the opportunity to visit Farrer, Rhodes, Fitzpatrick and Phillips in gaol after the disastrous Jameson Raid. He took great delight in dining with them and relieving them of large sums of money in a game of cards.¹⁷ He also refused to visit President Kruger on principle, although two of his team members went and vainly tried to persuade him to come and see Hawke's team play.¹⁸

Hawke was quite capable of waxing lyrical about India, which obviously moved him in the same way it did other imperialists. He even published in his memoirs a quite dreadful poem, which, one must suspect, he wrote in one of his weaker moments. It drips sentiment:

A land that we've conquered and have to hold
 Though it costs us millions of lives and gold,
 Shall we call her the jewel of England's fame?
 Or throw our curse at her vampire name?
 But whether we bless her, or damn her, or deride her,
 We are bound by our honour to stand fast beside her,
 The Empire's India.¹⁹

Around Hawke and Harris were ranged some slightly younger men who carried the same set of values. Notable among these were the Hon. F.S. Jackson, H.D.G. Leveson-Gower, and P.F. 'Plum' Warner. They were all of a similar background and were all Conservatives. They attended a variety of schools (Eton, Winchester and Rugby respectively) and were definitely more representative of the late nineteenth century than of an earlier date. Jackson was a brilliant cricketer and a Yorkshire compatriot of Hawke. He was also director of his own tanning business in Leeds. After 1914 he became involved in politics as a Conservative MP and then as an imperial administrator, when he was made Governor of Bengal in 1927. Leveson-Gower was a stockbroker, although he seemed to spend much more of his time playing cricket. He was a noted administrator of the game in his later life, a connection that dates back to this period. Warner, on the other hand, was a barrister, but he too

spent much of his time playing and administering the game. He was to become a cricket journalist, a stockbroker, and, eventually, as important a figure in the MCC as Lord Harris himself. All three were particular friends of Hawke. They all toured, at one time or another, with him and Jackson played alongside him during the summer. Hawke was best man at Warner's wedding, while Leveson-Gower was affectionately referred to as 'Shrimp' throughout Hawke's memoirs.

Of all three during this period Warner was by far the most imperially minded, and he donned the mantle of Hawke by taking several teams abroad. In other ways he was the natural successor to Harris, as he too was born in the West Indies where his father was Attorney-General of Trinidad. He was also the first to captain an MCC side in Australia (1903-4) and followed this with trips for the club to South Africa (1905-6) and Australia again (1911-12).

Warner was a travelling cricket diplomat and there is little doubt that he was genuinely inspired by the idea of cricket and Empire, and he used his oratorical skills whenever he was required to make a speech on the significance of cricket in some farflung outpost of Empire. On the 1905-6 MCC tour of South Africa he quoted himself, on his departure from that country, as saying:

The games which could produce such fine sporting spirit, and had done so much for British manhood should be encouraged. By encouraging the principle of fair play they would show to the loser as to the winner the same hearty good fellowship which has characterised the feeling which animated the great crowds at Newlands and Johannesburg.²⁰

His writing on this tour was dominated by the recent Boer War, and throughout Warner is at pains to demonstrate that reconciliation could come through cricket, as this anecdote demonstrates:

We had the pleasure of meeting Mr. P. de Villiers, a Boer Commandant in the early battles on the Natal side . . . and a courteous gentleman with the wildest enthusiasm for cricket. De Villiers was taken prisoner. At the time he happened to be wearing an old cricket sweater and trousers. A Tommy shouted, 'look here lads we've got a cricketer', to which de Villiers replied, 'yes you have . . .'. He made no secret of the fact that he liked Englishmen, and hinted that South Africa would settle down rapidly and that there would be no distinction between Briton and Boer, all would be South Africans – if only, he added, 'the newspapers would stop talking'.²¹

Warner wrote many books about his tours abroad and all of them have an underlying imperial purpose. In the preface to *Cricket In Many Climes* Warner wrote that cricket was:

extending its influence wherever the English Language is spoken, and it is even said by diplomats and politicians that its friendly

intercourse does much to strengthen the amity of nations, and to make for international understanding. . .Cricket, indeed knits together many interests, and the crown of its influence is the good-fellowship which accompanies it.²²

This is the feeling that he and many others brought to the cricket fields of the Empire and it was a feeling which would have been acknowledged by not a few of the inhabitants of the colonies and dominions.

Warner was just one of the lieutenants of Harris and Hawke, the two men who dominated MCC after 1895, and it was a reflection of their views when Warner wrote:

Cricket has become more than a game. It is an institution, a passion, one might say a religion. It has got into the blood of the nation, and wherever British men and women are gathered together there will the stumps be pitched. North, South, East and West throughout the British Empire, from Lord's to Sydney, from Hong Kong to the Spanish Main, cricket flourishes. It is the policy of the MCC to encourage the love of cricket in every possible way. . . And in these days when cricket has become the interest of the whole Empire, whither should the Empire turn for guidance but to the club which has grown up with the game, which has fostered it, and which has endeavoured to preserve its best traditions? And it is the wish of every true cricketer that the MCC should so continue to conduct its affairs that it may always remain not only the trustee but the mother of cricket.²³

The remainder of this article is devoted to demonstrating the development of the MCC as a body which claimed to be the spirit and guardian of Imperial cricket.

'The Parliament House of Cricket' and the 'Overseas Dominions': Recognition of the Empire by the MCC

The most important area of imperial cricket was believed, both by the British and by the inhabitants of its cricketing Empire, to be the sending of touring teams abroad. It served the twin purpose of giving an opportunity for the hosts to re-affirm their faith in Britain and the Empire, and also of stimulating the game in the colonies by setting an example and a standard to be followed. The private tours, which became another expanding and important part of cricket in the 1890s, were an important aspect of developing this bond, whether this was the intention of their organizers or not. Once the MCC started sending teams abroad this gave them more power than any edict promulgated in conclave at Lord's. Therefore it is not surprising that Lord Harris should draw our attention to some of these aspects in a piece written at the very end of this period:

In these latter days a fresh and important responsibility has been

undertaken by the MCC, not of its own seeking but in response to the solicitation of the cricket Associations of the great Dominions and other colonies. They have preferred that cricket elevens visiting their shores shall do so under the aegis of the MCC, and the club therefore has the anxious task of selecting teams in the case of Australia and South Africa, as nearly representative of the best of English cricket as is possible, and also of arranging the terms upon which the cost of these visits shall be defrayed. Teams of lighter calibre are also formed to visit other parts of the Empire. . . There has resulted a conference of great importance, from a cricket point of view, between the representatives of the club and of the great Dominions which have, perhaps strengthened the cricket associations of the latter, and have certainly served to introduce a spirit of harmony which cannot but be of advantage to the game.²⁴

The first English team to visit Australia went in 1862. Forty-one years later the MCC sent out a team under its own auspices. Conversely the Australian equivalent of the MCC, the Melbourne Cricket Club, had been sending teams to England since 1886 and had been acting as agents for English teams visiting Australia from an earlier date. This discrepancy was the cause of complaint of one indignant correspondent to *Cricket* magazine in 1882:

Now turn to our team. No such invitation has been extended to them. . . Now that the colonials have shown themselves worthy of the antagonists of the best English elevens. . . have given a very great impetus to the noble game throughout the length and breadth of England, why should not the MCC, the mother of cricket, invite a team of such antagonists over, as we have already done more than one English team?²⁵

This idea was not acceded to until 1893 when the MCC gave a limited amount of patronage to the 8th Australian touring team when 'it was resolved that . . . if the Australasian Cricket Council find it possible to send over a representative team, it will be welcomed by MCC'.²⁶ Given as we have already seen that luminaries like Lords Harris and Hawke were interested in Empire, and that Harris himself regarded the link between cricket and Empire as important enough to comment upon in 1885, why did it take MCC until this date to welcome officially a representative team from Australia and, more importantly, until 1899 to take tentatively the first steps in organizing an English team for Australia?²⁷ Indeed, up to that point the MCC's interest in any part of the Empire had been expressed simply by entertaining touring teams to dinner and handing out temporary honorary membership to various Indian princes who happened to be visiting Britain.

The conclusion must be that the MCC was not interested in the Empire and did not feel that it was its duty to send teams abroad or to establish

important contacts with the cricketing colonies. It preferred to leave that to private enterprise and to individuals with a sense of adventure.

This reluctance to get officially involved in imperial cricket led Hawke to say in 1937 that 'it has been possible to set aside a sum of money for the financing of tours in different parts of the Empire for the control of which the MCC at first accepted responsibility with some reluctance'.²⁸ The sudden change of heart in the MCC's attitudes towards Empire was a direct result of a change in the composition of the committee after 1890. As demonstrated above, it was after this date that the new Conservatives gained the upper hand. Consequently, it was from 1895 onwards that the major developments in international cricket occurred, culminating in the Imperial Cricket Conference of 1909 and the triangular tournament between England, Australia and South Africa in 1912.

It is now necessary to examine this change in detail against the background of the new Imperialism, which epitomized *La Belle Epoque*. It is impossible to understand the actions of the MCC if we do not comprehend the era in which they operated.

'A spirit of harmony': The MCC and social imperialism

In the minutes for 8 January 1894 there is this entry:

Re. Astley Cooper's proposed pan-Britannic festival. A letter was read from the Hon. Sec. to Australasian conference (B.J. Parkinson) asking whether the MCC committee had considered the scheme and generally what they proposed to do in the matter: resolved to reply that at present they had seen no scheme but would be prepared to consider the same when submitted.²⁹

The 1890s were the great age of social imperialism, which reached its zenith in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in 1897. The Diamond Jubilee was a pageant of imperial splendour and power, the psychological high-watermark of Empire. Since the 1870s a belief in Britain's imperial purpose had been growing, triggered for many people by the Queen's enthronement as Empress of India. The poetry, literature, art and popular culture of this period demonstrated the extent to which imperialism had fired and captured the imagination of the British people. The repercussions were felt in sport and even within the confines of Lord's.

In 1891, John Astley-Cooper proposed the establishment of a periodic festival demonstrating the industrial, cultural and athletic prowess of the British race, the purpose of which was to strengthen the bonds of Empire.³⁰ Very soon the athletic idea came to surpass the others. In the issue of *Greater Britain* dated 15 October 1892, there was a list of the great and the good of the land who were espousing the idea of an 'Anglo-Saxon Olympiad'.³¹ This refrain was repeated by a

range of daily newspapers and magazines, including *The Times* which commented:

The proposal for the periodic idea of holding a grand imperial festival may not be as ambitious as an all-embracing scheme of Imperial Federation. But it is superior in one respect, that instead of imposing irksome burdens and fetters, it would foster a taste which the Anglo-Saxon race in all corners of the world cultivates with enthusiasm.³²

Unfortunately it has proved impossible to discover any direct involvement in the scheme by the MCC, and this quote from the minutes suggests that leading lights of the committee were sceptical about committing themselves to any such grand imperial design. Certainly there is no mention again of Astley-Cooper in the minutes.

Astley-Cooper's plans only reached a limited fruition in 1930 with the establishment of the Empire Games, but the seed of an idea had been planted and germinated. The MCC itself was about to be dragged along by the overwhelming beliefs of the day, and the time when it could ignore the importance of cricket to the Empire was diminishing rapidly. Elsewhere it was being recognized, not least due to the private touring teams of Hawke *et al.*

Wherever these teams went in the Empire they met an imperial reception. Thus in 1896, Priestley's team in the West Indies was bade farewell by this speech made by the Solicitor-General of Barbados:

Mr. Priestley has referred to the sympathy which the West Indian colonies have shown to them, but it is something more than sympathy that we feel. We feel we are more brothers than friends. [Hear. Hear] This strong filial feeling is only the natural outcome of the relationship which exists between us and the Mother Country. We are sons of Old England.³³

These sentiments were reiterated Empire-wide and soon the MCC would not be able to ignore them. Equally, stimulus was being given to the game across the Empire by the influx of administrators who had been educated in the public schools, institutions which placed an intensely strong emphasis on the Games Ethic. Some of these men were members of the MCC, and were even past or present members of the committee. I have already discussed Lord Harris, but to his name must be added those of the third Baron Wenlock, who as Governor was keen to promote cricket in Madras; Sir A.W.L.Hemming, Governor of Demerara (1896-97) and of Jamaica (1898-1904); Hon.J.S.Udal, Attorney-General of Fiji from 1889; and the seventh Earl of Jersey, MCC president in 1894 and Governor-General of New South Wales between 1890 and 1893. All of these men encouraged imperial links through cricket and some of them, like Jersey, were prepared to represent the cricketing interests of the colonies in which they had served at Lord's itself. All

of them, bar Udal, were able to welcome touring teams from Britain during their terms of office.

Lord Harris returned from Bombay in 1895 and was immediately installed as president of MCC. From this time onwards Australia and South Africa are referred to in the same ways as the counties over law changes. Similarly when every first-class touring team from the Empire was welcomed to dinner at Lord's, as had long been the custom, special guests were now invited, often the Colonial Secretary or someone with imperial interests. Thus the Right Honourable Joseph Chamberlain was invited to meet and dine with the Australians on 6 July 1899.³⁴ He was also invited to the celebration of the return of the triumphant 1904 MCC side from Australia, along with the Colonial Secretary of the day, G.Hillyard. Unfortunately it has been impossible to discover the contents of many of these speeches made on these occasions, but it is reasonable to believe that they were not materially different from any of the cricket and Empire speeches quoted above.

It was inevitable that MCC should become caught up in the imperial mood. Once they had concentrated all domestic power at Lord's they were set to become the most powerful body in world cricket. Under their auspices they were able to inaugurate the Imperial Cricket Conference in 1909, although, like many things gone before, it was not originally their idea.

In late 1907 'a letter from Mr. Abe Bailey had been read in which he proposed a scheme for holding an Imperial cricket contest between England, Australia and South Africa, in 1909'.³⁵ This suggestion was referred to the Advisory County Cricket Committee which endorsed the idea. Abe Bailey was one of the staunchest supporters of cricket and Empire and had welcomed and entertained the MCC team which went to South Africa in 1905-6. It was probably the success of this tour and the return visit of a South African XI the following summer which led Bailey to make this suggestion, although it is also possible that he may have discussed his ideas with someone like Warner before writing to the MCC. However, the Australians were not overwhelmed by the proposal, perhaps because they jealously wanted to guard their position as the number one rivals of the Mother Country. Although the MCC believed the contest to be a good idea, they were not in a position to enforce the participation of the Australians. Finally, not wishing to lose a lucrative Australian tour, they realized that the only solution was to invite the Australians alone, an invitation which was accepted. But as a compromise the Conference was proposed 'to discuss arrangements under which matches between England, Australia and South Africa might be held'.³⁶ This was duly organized, and by holding it at Lord's, the MCC put its own seal on international cricket. Inevitably Lord Harris was one of the representatives in a series of meetings dominated by the MCC, with the secretary, Lacey, proving extremely important in an organisational capacity.

The result of the first Imperial Conference was the arrangement of a triangular tournament for 1912, and the establishment of the rules under which Test matches would be played in future by the three countries. When the tournament was held imperial cricket was established on a firm basis and the MCC, which had concentrated all power around the environs of St. John's Wood, now fulfilled the imperial function to which its prestige as the premier cricket club in the Empire seemed to entitle it. Since 1903 when it first sent a team abroad its indulgence in these activities had snowballed. Within the following years the MCC sent teams to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies and Argentina. It received requests and pleas from other areas to do the same. Thus Sir Ernest Birch vainly wondered 'if the MCC will some day send out a team of amateurs to play in Malaya'³⁷ and suggested that the MCC might consider, for its own good, conferring 'the privilege of wearing the red and yellow ribbon on those in all parts of the world who are aspiring to wear it . . . In British colonies the wearing of the red and yellow ribbon is, and always will be, a much coveted honour'.³⁸

The MCC was at last fulfilling some of its claim to being the headquarters of cricket and acknowledging an obligation towards the empire. In the annual report of 1911 it was stated:

An MCC team under Mr.A.F.Somerset as captain, has recently visited the West Indies at the invitation of cricketers in those islands. Your Committee have reason to think that such visits do much to encourage cricket and establish good fellowship.³⁹

The club had moved with the times after frequent goadings from outwith the club. It had been unable to resist the imperial tide or its own obligations to cricket.

The MCC's place in imperial cricket

The MCC has built itself a myth of such potency that few people question the facade of prestige and power. Yet when all is examined it took the MCC until the end of this era to exercise any real authority over the cricket world. There is a moral in this for all historians and cricket writers: if too much time is spent studying a central organization it might really appear that that body is the only important element. Therefore, it might really appear that the story of the MCC is the history of cricket and vice versa. To arrive at this diagnosis is not unlike staring at a mirage for a prolonged period and eventually believing that it is water. But like a mirage there is very little substance to the claim of MCC omnipotence unless we are looking at the highest echelons of the game. There is a large and marked difference between governing as above, and omnipotence. The MCC had gathered all power around it, but in reality this was of a very limited significance to most cricketers across the Empire.

The history of cricket is a convoluted affair which is inextricably linked to the social and economic history of Britain and its Empire. Indeed, the game served as a symbol of that Empire's ideology. The MCC has little place in these developments. Cricket was encouraged overseas by a disparate band of people. Government administrators, engineers, soldiers, sailors, missionaries and teachers all played their part. The spread of cricket was bound to the imperial movement as a whole. As the boundaries of the Empire pushed forward, so did the cricket frontier. It even played its own small part in informal Empire, being played in such diverse areas as Argentina (a country in which both Lord Hawke and the MCC invested) and China. The book *Imperial Cricket* is full of exotic locations and isolated games played with different motivations by different people. This description of cricket in West Africa by Major E.G. Guggisberg goes some way to capturing the essence and complexities of cricket in the Empire:

Three stumps are pitched in a small patch of ground, innocent of grass, rolled hard and fairly smooth by the roller . . . That roller . . . is worth examining – it is an extempore one, roughly cast of cement, with a rusty piece of waterpipe as an axle . . . A poor-looking thing as rollers go, but a fine witness to the keenness on cricket of the maker – that sunburned man in the dungaree breeches. . . who is standing at the wicket, padless and gloveless, and with a much scarred, much bound bat in his hand. He is a 'Sheffield Blade' . . . and learnt his cricket after his day's toil in the great engineering works where he was employed. One of the two individuals bowling to him – the short man clad in a similar kit – is an old soldier and the overseer of the mine gangs. The other – the possessor of real flannelled cricket trousers, you will notice – was once a by-no-means inconspicuous figure in a great public school eleven a few years ago. . . . A curious trio drawn together by the love of the game. . . they are cricket missionaries these three, propagating the game, for look at the half-dozen other players from the native clerk. . . to the brown, more or less clad, natives fielding with the greatest of keenness.⁴⁰

The spirit of imperial cricket was diverse in its extremes, but it was deliberately compacted into this piece of writing. In it, nowhere can one find the influence of the MCC. This is a game alien to Lord's and thousands of miles from the serenity of St. John's Wood. One institution cannot govern and cannot represent the actions and ideals of the whole Empire. By concentrating on the central body one ignores the myriad experiences outside it.

NOTES

- 1 A.Lewis, *Double Century. The Story of MCC and Cricket* (London, 1987), p.11.
- 2 G.R.C Harris and F.S. Ashley-Cooper, *Lord's And The MCC* (London, 1914), p.209.
- 3 M.B. Hawke, 7th Lord, *Recollections and Remniscences* (London, 1924), p.260.
- 4 *Minutes of MCC*, 3 May 1865, p.478.
- 5 Lewis, *Double Century*, p.15.
- 6 Harris and Ashley-Cooper, *Lord's and the MCC*, p.229.
- 7 Hawke, *Recollections and Remniscences*, p.260.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 This section was written with the aid of a multitude of secondary printed sources and reference works. These ranged from *Who Was Who* to *The Dictionary Of National Biography* and beyond. I also had recourse to use old school registers and the Alumni lists of those who attended Oxford or Cambridge.
- 10 W.A.Bettesworth, *The Walkers of Southgate* (London, 1900), pp.89-92.
- 11 *Cricket*, Vol.4 (1885), p.454.
- 12 A. Haygarth, *Scores and Biographies* (London, 1908), Vol.14, p.1xxiii.
- 13 Ibid., p.1xxii.
- 14 R. Cashman, *Patrons, Players and the Crowd. The Phenomenon of Indian Cricket* (India, 1980) pp.4-13.
- 15 Hawke, *Recollections and Remniscences*, p.82.
- 16 Ibid., p.155.
- 17 Ibid., p.151. 'I never partook of a merrier meal', said the noble Lord of his visit, high praise from one who was a member of the gluttonous and uproarious gentleman's dining club, the Beefsteak.
- 18 Ibid., p.158.
- 19 Ibid., pp.274-5. I suppose that it is remotely possible that this is an unpublished Austin, but the reason I believe that this was penned by Hawke was his introduction to the poem: 'Here is an unpublished poem which all these years has been in my scrapbook and is too beautiful not to see the light of print. . .'
- 20 P.F.Warner, *The MCC in South Africa* (London, 1906), p.218.
- 21 Ibid., pp.29-30.
- 22 P.F.Warner, *Cricket In Many Climes* (London, 1900), p.vii.
- 23 P.F.Warner, *England v. Australia* (London, 1912), pp.17-19.
- 24 Harris and Ashley-Cooper, *Lord's and the MCC*, pp.209-11.
- 25 *Cricket*, Vol.1 (1882) p.142.
- 26 *Minutes of MCC*, 14 Nov 1892, p.1292.
- 27 Ibid., 26 June 1899, p.1564.
- 28 *The Times* (ed.), *MCC, 1787-1937* (London, 1937), p.13.
- 29 *Minutes of MCC*, 8 Jan. 1894, p.1320.
- 30 Katharine Moore, 'Sport, Politics and Imperialism. The Evolution of the Concept of the British Empire Games', in *The British Society of Sport History, Sport and Imperialism, The Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference of the BSSH*, pp.47-49.
- 31 J.A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic And Imperialism* (London, 1986), p.52.
- 32 Ibid., p.54.
- 33 C.P. Bowen, *English Cricketers in the West Indies* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1896), p.24.
- 34 *Minutes of MCC*, 15 May 1899, p.1551.
- 35 Ibid., 16 Dec. 1907, p.1938.
- 36 Ibid., 29 July 1908, p.1971.
- 37 P.F. Warner(ed.), *Imperial Cricket* (London, 1912), p.38.
- 38 Ibid., p.390.
- 39 *Minutes of MCC*, 3 May 1911, p.2039.
- 40 Warner(ed.), *Imperial Cricket*, pp.330-31.