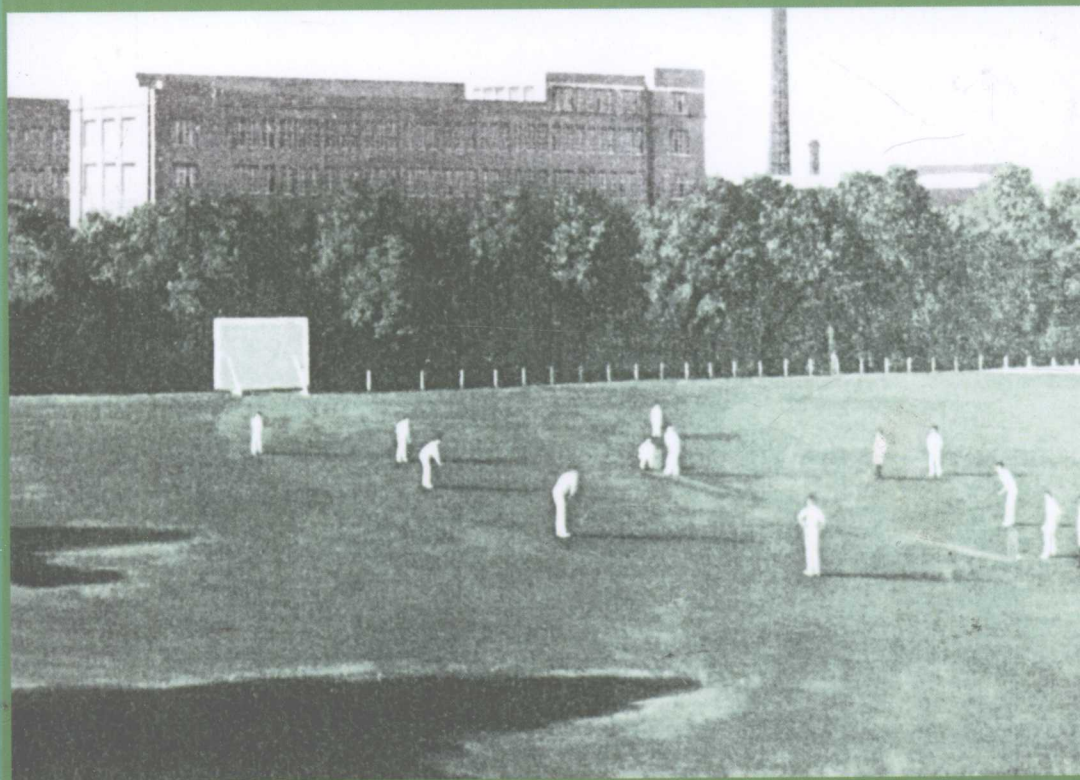


Cricket and England

**A Cultural and Social History
of the Inter-war Years**



Jack Williams

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A Cultural and Social History of
the Inter-war Years

JACK WILLIAMS

John Moores University



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*Cover illustration: A Cricket Match at
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CRICKET AND ENGLAND

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Jack Williams
September 1998

Series Editor's Foreword

Lord Mancroft, the politician, who came to manhood in the 1930s, described cricket in his biography *Bees in Some Bonnets* (1979) as 'a game which the English, not being a spiritual people, have invented in order to give themselves some conception of eternity' (p.185). Americans, of course, whether spiritual or otherwise, frequently claim that watching cricket seems like an eternity. In this analysis of English cricket in the inter-war years Jack Williams may help Americans to understand both the game and the 'Anglo-Saxon' better. It is more likely, however, that the book will serve to reinforce their claim that they know us rather well.

Some little time ago, William Arens, an American sociologist, wrote a short article to the effect that if you want to know the Americans watch their football: through football they reveal themselves. Williams would make a similar claim for cricket and the English in the 1920s and 1930s. He demonstrates that those in power invested the game with a unique moral worth which, fortunately for them, was inculcated in both them and their sons by means of frequent exposure to cricket in their privileged schools, thus providing them with a precious 'cultural capital' which allowed them to lay claim to political, cultural and social leadership. This fact underlines the logic of the game's class and gender privileges, prejudices and parameters. 'Few other cultural institutions', in his words, 'made the social inequalities surrounding gender and class so obvious' (p.xi).

The attraction of this book is its chosen time-scale – the inter-war years – when, Williams would assert, the image of cricket, as a fused symbol of Englishness and Stability created by the Victorians, saw its 'Golden Age', was diffused successfully through all layers of English society, and helped to sustain a relatively placid and acquiescent social order. Derek Birley, in his elegantly readable *Playing the Game: Sport and British Society, 1910–45* (1995), may well have gone to the heart of the matter: 'the idea of cricket probably appealed to the average Englishman more than the actual game' (p.184). This appeal, it would seem, was as much a feature of the English working class as any other class, and goes some way to explain E.A. Nordlinger's observation in his *The Working Class Tories: Authority, Deference and Stable Democracy* (1967) that 'the characteristic dimension of the English working class culture is the diffusion of acquiescent attitudes towards authority' (p.210).

No less an academic heavyweight than Asa Briggs is clearly on the side of Williams. In his *A Social History of England* (1983) he remarked: 'There were so many forces making for collaboration rather than confrontation that the General Strike has been seen in retrospect not as the high watermark of class warfare, but as the moment when the class war ceased to shape the pattern of British industrial relations at least for several decades' (p.266). It would be interesting to know what significance, as a consolidating force, Lord Briggs would give to cricket.

Williams' challenging assertion that 'cricket made social distinctions and economic inequalities so obvious [that] responses to the forms of social privilege and exclusion found in cricket, provide an unusual yet highly illuminating perspective upon class mentalities between the wars' (p.xiii) should stimulate lively discussion in the Groves of Academe. The statement certainly makes the point with force that sport is integral, not marginal, to culture. Williams goes further, linking, perhaps daringly, cricket specifically to the debate about British cultural attitudes and associated economic decline – another opportunity for strenuous reflection in academia. In fact, Williams could now well become one of a provocative quartet. With Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (1972), Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980* (1972) and David Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain* (1993) he has committed views on Englishness, economic survival and cultural tradition. It is surely not contentious for Williams to suggest that a consideration of English cricket as part of English culture offers the possibility of a deeper understanding of the cultural assumptions and values that fashioned social and economic relations.

In fact, Williams raises a number of fascinating points for discussion – not least, incidentally, that in the light of the pending break-up of the United Kingdom cricket could come to represent uniquely English qualities since in the past it has been a vital part of those 'narratives' through which the English have told themselves what Englishness is, and just what it means to them. Village cricket may yet become a symbol for a new Nationalism arising out of an old Nationalism.

And what of his suggestion that the support of women for men's cricket in this period provides an explanation for the absence of challenge to male social power on the part of the post-Great War 'new feminism'? He also has fascinating points to make about the role of church cricket in delaying secularisation, distracting the militant socialists and promoting social cooperation, and about the morality attributed to cricket which kept commercialism, which might undermine sportsmanship and fair play, at arm's length.

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Bertrand Russell, who certainly should have known, claimed in *Sceptical Essays* in 1928 that 'Every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day.' Williams is a writer of strong convictions and firm conclusions. He is in no doubt that cricket between the wars was as much the social cement of Britain as it was of the Empire. Between the wars, in his words, 'the belief that cricket was a distillation of English morality was related to the association of cricket with the Christian churches, assumptions about the Empire being a moral trust, the English pastoral idyll, the limited degree of commercialisation within cricket, reverence for tradition and respect for accepted forms and manners' (p.183).

Throughout the book Williams delivers his firmly held views in a continuous series of fluid assertions. England, of course, was not without its troubles in the 1920s and 1930s – militant industrial action in the 1920s, severe economic depression in both the 1920s and the 1930s and the first successful challenges to the Empire in the period – yet England eschewed extremism and embraced moderation. It was an unequal nation largely at ease with itself. And cricket played its part in this. *In nuce*, cricket held up a mirror to society; it reflected its essential inequalities, snobberies and its essential harmony: but it did more, it successfully sustained all three. This is a book full of marvellous debating points. Let the debate begin in class, seminar, tutorial and bar rooms. There is much to discuss.

Jack Williams expresses the hope that he has filled a gap. He has.

J. A. Mangan
International Research Centre for Sport, Socialisation, Society,
Strathclyde University
November 1998

Introduction

This book explores the cultural and social significance of cricket in England between the wars. It reflects a conviction that explaining the status accorded to cricket is essential for an understanding of English society in the 1920s and 1930s. Cricket was celebrated as far more than a game. The social groups with economic and political power esteemed cricket as an expression of a distinctively English sense of moral worth and cricket had a key role in how they imagined themselves and their fitness to exercise authority. They believed that cricket encouraged and reflected a sense of social harmony which extended beyond the world of cricket. Yet many levels of cricket in the 1920s and 1930s were riddled with privilege and social distinction. Few other cultural institutions made the social inequalities surrounding gender and class so obvious. Accounting for the importance attached to cricket and assessing the responses among the English to the social distinctions of cricket provide crucial insights into how the English perceived themselves and their social world.

Culture has been an area of growing interest among historians in the 1980s and 1990s, but differing meanings have been attached to the term 'culture'. For some 'culture' and the 'high arts' are used interchangeably. 'Popular culture' may mean those forms of artistic expression which are not considered high-brow or elitist but it is also used as catch-all description for the various forms of mass entertainment. For the purposes of this book, 'culture' is used in its more anthropological sense of being those assumptions and values which shape how groups define themselves and imagine the social order. Such an approach to culture is very much influenced by the writings of Raymond Williams who did so much to stimulate the study of culture. Williams defined culture as 'a whole body of practices and expectations, the whole of living; ... our shaping perceptions of ourselves and of our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values'.¹ Culture in this sense is very much concerned with what has been called 'collective subjectivity', which has been designated as a rejection of the notion that 'culture' refers to 'the best and most glorious achievements of a people or civilization',² though cricket writers have often stressed the aesthetic appeal of cricket and have described playing cricket, and especially batting with style, as a form of artistic expression. As cricket was a sport with which males from all classes were involved and as those with

political and economic power placed such emphasis upon the moral value of cricket, the approach to culture adopted in this book has also been informed by the contentions of Pierre Bourdieu that the differing values which different social groups ascribe to the same cultural practices act as forms of social distinction and can provide elite groups with cultural capital which reinforces their social prestige.³ Regarding culture as those processes which govern how groups perceive the social world and their place within it is very much involved with notions of identity and the narratives through which these are expressed and constructed. It is through narratives, and narratives taken as more than the written and spoken word, that people make sense of the world and shape their perception of themselves. Cricket can be seen as narrative through which the English expressed their cultural values and their sense of who they were. In order to analyse the narrative power of cricket it is necessary to examine cricket discourses. Some advocates of the 'linguistic turn' in historical study such as Patrick Joyce appear to use the words 'culture' and 'language' as synonyms and maintain that the social order or, rather, perceptions of the social order are determined by language.⁴ Whilst this book is concerned with culture and with cricket discourses, it does not reflect acceptance of an extreme linguistic determinism and a rejection of economic factors as causes of social change. Material circumstances do seem to have had an impact on cricket. Economics, for instance, did much to determine who was able to play or watch cricket in its more socially exclusive settings.

In order to appraise what can be inferred from cricket about culture and social relations, this book considers the values underlying the representations of cricket and the extent to which such representations of cricket were a myth. It discusses how and why cricket had come to be regarded as such a powerful symbol of England and of English moral worth and goes on to examine what cricket reveals about attitudes in England to gender identities, class distinction, the exercise of authority, the social role of the churches and the acceptance of commercialism. Assumptions about cricket being an expression of English morality were not restricted to the inter-war period, though they were probably no stronger at any other time. The image of cricket as a symbol of England was very much a creation of the Victorians yet even at the close of the twentieth century, when the social milieu and ethos of cricket are very different from the 1920s and 1930s, cricket is still used to create an immediately recognisable vision of England. The main reason why this book concentrates on the inter-war decades is that an appraisal of what cricket reveals about culture and social relations has to consider all forms and levels of cricket. Much can be learned from first-class cricket about snobbery and privilege within cricket,

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but village cricket was very often portrayed as representing the true heart of cricket. The support provided by women for men's cricket was often most apparent in recreational cricket. Playing cricket at whatever level was often seen as the most effective means of encouraging the moral lessons of cricket. With a longer time span it would not have been possible to consider all levels and forms of cricket. It is not being suggested that cricket between the wars did not change. The playing of cricket among women became more widespread and more organised. More people watched county cricket in the early 1920s than in the late 1930s. England started to play test matches against the West Indies, New Zealand and India. But the changes within cricket were gradual and moderate rather than radical. Perceptions of cricket in 1939 remained very much what they had been in 1918.

The importance accorded to cricket means that an exploration of cricket can make a crucial contribution to debates among historians about the nature of English society and cultural values between the wars. The growth in recent years in the political expression of Scottish and Welsh nationalism has led to more consideration of English identity and the nature of Englishness. Because cricket was played and watched to a far greater extent in England rather than in Scotland or Wales, but more particularly because cricket discourses emphasised that cricket expressed uniquely English qualities, cricket can be seen as a vital part of those narratives through which the English told themselves what being English meant to them. Yet at the same time, as Jeffrey Richards has pointed out, many in England used the terms England and English as synonyms for Britain and British.⁵ The rise of post-modernist and post-structuralist forms of social analysis has led to a questioning of how far social class, and class identities based on convictions that the interests of different classes were in conflict, were the dominant form of social identity in England between the wars. Establishing how far perceptions of the social order were characterised by a sense of animosity and conflict is related to the question of why support for Labour was not sufficient for it to have won a clear majority at any inter-war general election and to the issue of why support for political extremism was so limited in England in the 1920s and 1930s.⁶ Because cricket made social distinctions and economic inequalities so obvious, responses to the forms of social privilege and exclusion found in cricket provide an unusual yet highly illuminating perspective upon class mentalities between the wars. The role of women in cricket deepens understanding of gender relations in inter-war England, and in particular why there were not more demands from women for greater equality with men. The expansion of cricket playing among women can be seen as a form of emancipation for women, but the degree of support from women for men's cricket does much to

explain why what has been called the 'new feminism' of the period from 1918 until the 1960s did not so much challenge male social power as call for greater recognition of those areas of social activity which were thought to be forms of feminine expertise.⁷

There has been debate among historians and social analysts about how far English cultural values, and especially those cultivated by the public schools, have contributed to Britain's relative decline as one of the world's major economic powers. This debate was originally concerned with how far English culture had discouraged industrial growth, but it has been broadened into a discussion of how far cultural assumptions in England inhibited respect for commercialism and discouraged a spirit of unbridled acquisitivism which has been seen as a prerequisite for economic expansion.⁸ Because of the enormous significance accorded to cricket, especially among those with inherited wealth, and because county cricket was so often financially ailing and characterised by respect for the amateur, cricket can help to determine how far English culture reflected a sympathy for aggressive commercialisation. It has often been asserted that English society was becoming more secularised between the wars, but as secularisation is very much involved with attitudes and assumptions, tracing with precision any decline in the influence of religious teachings over everyday life and conduct is difficult.⁹ The frequent claims that cricket expressed Christian morality, the involvement of clerics with cricket and the high number of cricket teams based on churches and Sunday schools in some regions all suggest that cricket can help to register how the social role of the churches was perceived between the wars. It cannot be claimed, of course, that the study of cricket in itself can resolve all debate about the nature of English society between the wars, but it does deepen understanding of those cultural assumptions and values which fashioned social relations.

Interest in sport among academics has grown rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of this concern with sport has stemmed from Tony Mason's *Association Football and English Society, 1863–1915*,¹⁰ which appeared in 1980, and from Tony Mangan's *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*,¹¹ published a year later. Mason examined the social and economic factors which had attracted a mass following to football before the First World War, whilst Mangan analysed the rise of the games cult at the public schools and the part that this played in the mind-set of the Victorian and Edwardian elite. These seminal works were followed by a steady stream of books and articles on the history of sport in Britain. At the same time, sport has also been a site of increasing concern for sociologists. In 1979 *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* by Dunning and Sheard¹² provided a

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figurationist explanation for the development of rugby union football in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. In the 1980s concern over football hooliganism stimulated a burgeoning sociological literature into its nature and causes. Perhaps because of its recent growth, many gaps remain in historical and sociological writing on sport. Far more has been written about football than other sports, which possibly reflects the vast following for football in contemporary society. The chronological range of historical studies on sport is also uneven. Much has now been written about the development of sport in the Victorian period and in the last three decades of the present century, but less attention has been devoted to the period from the end of the First World War until the 1960s.

Given the importance attached to cricket as symbol of England, surprisingly few academic studies of cricket in England between the wars have been published. *The Willow Wand* by Sir Derek Birley, though concerned with a time-span much longer than the inter-war period, has examined many of the myths surrounding cricket and reveals that cricket practice often failed to match the ideals of its apologists.¹³ *Cricket and Empire: The 1932–33 Bodyline Tour of Australia* by Ric Sissons and Brian Stoddart has shown that the significance accorded to cricket as an expression of the morality assumed to underlie British imperialism meant that England's employment of bodyline bowling had ramifications in the world of high politics.¹⁴ Eric Midwinter has related the rise of W.G. Grace as the first English 'super-star' of team ball sports to the social and cultural climate of Victorian England, whilst Jeffrey Hill and Richard Holt have discussed the cultural connotations of cricket stars in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ The biographies of Lord Harris by J.D. Coldham and of Sir Pelham Warner by Gerald Howat¹⁶ have uncovered much about how power was exercised at the highest levels of first-class cricket. Ric Sissons' *The Players: A Social History of the Professional Cricketer* has looked at the pay and employment conditions of county cricketers.¹⁷ Michael Marshall's *Gentlemen & Players*¹⁸ and David Lemmon's *The Crisis of Captaincy: Servant and Master in English Cricket* and *For the Love of the Game*¹⁹ were probably not intended primarily for an academic readership but their interviews with retired county cricketers contain a wealth of fascinating detail about the social gulfs between amateurs and professionals. The vast number of autobiographies, mainly ghosted, and biographies of first-class cricketers are primarily concerned with the playing exploits of their subjects, but David Foot's studies of Charlie Parker, Cecil Parkin, Jack MacBryan and Walter Hammond indicate much about the personal and social tensions of first-class cricket.²⁰ Mike Marqusee's *Anyone but England* is written with great polemical verve and demonstrates how throughout the twentieth century, cricket, but especially

first-class cricket, can provide penetrating insights into the outlook of those from privileged backgrounds.²¹

More has been written about cricket before 1914 and after 1945 than in the inter-war period. Many key areas of the inter-war cricket scene have been largely ignored. No study equivalent to Keith Sandiford's appraisal of the social and economic factors which shaped cricket in the Victorian period has been published.²² The relations between professional and amateur cricketers in first-class cricket are discussed in Christopher Brookes' *English Cricket: The Game and Its Players through the Ages*,²³ but the years 1873 to 1962 are covered in only one chapter. Little has been published about social backgrounds and numbers of those who played or watched cricket between the wars. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*,²⁴ the admirable examination of sport and female identity in twentieth-century Britain by Jennifer Hargreaves, shows how little is known about the growth of cricket playing among women between the wars or about the support from women for men's cricket. Wray Vamplew's detailed comparison of the financial structure of county cricket with that of association football, horse racing and rugby league does not extend beyond 1914.²⁵ A number of studies have discussed aspects of sport and working-class identity between the wars,²⁶ though little has been written about sports often thought to have a strong working-class ambience such as rugby league, whippet racing or speedway, and there is no examination of middle-class involvement with sport in the twentieth century which approaches the breadth of John Lowerson's *Sport and the English Middle Classes, 1878-1914*.²⁷ Jeffrey Hill and Jack Williams have made exploratory forays, but no more than these, into the social history of league cricket between the wars.²⁸ *Beyond a Boundary* by C.L.R. James has acquired the status of a classic study into the history and sociology of cricket. It was one of the first works to show how cricket had been invested with a cultural significance which had close links with imperialism and race, but its discussion of cricket in England between the wars concentrates on the reactions in the town of Nelson to the West Indian cricketer Learie Constantine. In many ways James' book is more a personal memoir than an analysis of empirical data. Club cricket and village cricket, especially in the south of England, have been very largely neglected in academic studies of cricket. Christopher Brookes' biography of Neville Cardus,²⁹ the journalist whose writings on cricket helped to bolster the belief that cricket stimulated 'great literature', in itself helps to draw attention to the surprising fact that few studies have concentrated on cricket writing. There is no published history of the development of cricket between the wars in any region which has the thoroughness of Andrew

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Hignell's study of the rise of cricket in South Wales before 1914³⁰ though two doctoral theses have considered the inter-war social history of cricket in different parts of Lancashire.³¹ Hopefully this book will help to remedy the omissions from the historiography of cricket between the wars.

NOTES

1. R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), p. 110.
2. P. Alasuutari, *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 25.
3. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984).
4. See, for instance, P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), and *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).
5. *Guardian*, 15 Aug. 1997.
6. For conflicting views of whether class was the dominant form of social identity see P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* and *Democratic Subjects*, and M. Savage and A. Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class 1840–1940* (London: Routledge, 1994). N. Kirk, ed., *Social Class and Marxism: Defences and Challenges* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1996), discusses whether class should be seen as the dominant form of social consciousness in modern Britain. P. Joyce, *Class* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), reviews how the responses of historians and social analysts to the concept of social class have changed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
7. For an overview of feminism in Britain since 1918, see M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1992).
8. B. Collins and K. Robbins, eds., *British Culture and Economic Decline* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), chapter one reviews the course of the debate over culture and industrialisation. J. Raven, 'Viewpoint; British History and the Enterprise Culture', *Past & Present*, 129 (Nov., 1989), shows how the debate became broadened into a discussion of whether British culture had inhibited enterprise in general.
9. For a discussion of the nature of secularisation and of the possible connections between secularisation and theories of modernisation, see R. Wallis and S. Bruce, 'Secularization: The Orthodox Model' in S. Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992). J. Stevenson, *British Society 1914–45* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) considers the growth of secularisation in Britain between the wars.
10. T. Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863–1915* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).
11. J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).
12. E. Dunning and K. Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979).
13. D. Birley, *The Willow Wand: Some Cricket Myths Explored* (London: Queen Anne, 1979).
14. R. Sissons and B. Stoddart, *Cricket and Empire: The 1932–33 Bodyline Tour of Australia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984).
15. E. Midwinter, *W.G. Grace: His Life and Times* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981);