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Cricket and Community in England: 1800 to the Present Day

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Dominic Malcolm

Cricket and Community in England: 1800 to the Present Day is an ambitious text. Its six substantive chapters cover cricket's emergence in a context of 'early' or 'pre-modern' sports forms, the origins of clubs, changes to organised competitions, the impact of two world wars on cricket clubs, post-war 'decline and renewal', and the current state of the grassroots game. It therefore aims to examine the history of 'local', 'grassroots' or club cricket over a period of 200 plus years. While growing out of a Heritage Lottery Fund-sponsored project exploring the history of cricket in Calderdale and Kirklees, it aspires to speak of club cricket in England as a whole. The attempt to cover 21st-century developments offers interdisciplinarity as the book moves from historical to contemporary social analysis. The back cover notes suggest it offers a 'path-breaking inquiry'.

The book's strengths lie in its first three empirical chapters. The reader is provided with a discussion of the broader context of leisure in 18th-century England in which folk games and animal sports predominated, and out of which codified forms of cricket emerged. This illustrates the role of gambling, the prominence of the aristocracy, and the relative fluidity and commingling of different social classes in the game at this time (though it does not discuss historical sociological work which suggests that the control of violence was

significant in shaping the formation of cricket and indeed the emergence of modern sport more generally). It convincingly illustrates how paternalists, employers, religious groups, public houses, schools and social reform groups provided the initial structures around which cricket clubs were formed, and goes on to demonstrate how, once established, these clubs became a focal point for local identity. We also see how challenge matches for 'stakes' were superseded by the arrival of professional touring teams and the development of competitive cups and leagues.

The second half of the book is, however, somewhat weaker. The description of cricket during the First World War does usefully illustrate how clubs faced severe disruption and had their grounds requisitioned for alternative uses. But some of this analysis is quite simplistic, describing, for instance, the loss of many club cricketers during the war. The analysis of cricket during the Second World War is also uninspired. Essentially the argument is that things were pretty much the same again. The conclusions drawn illustrate the lack of penetration: 'negotiating the realities of war would have been a major challenge' (p. 100); 'many clubs were affected directly by the war; others indirectly or tangentially' (p. 103). Ultimately the chapter fails to provide the evaluation of 'the relationship between sport and war' (p. 97) which it promises and which would have been very interesting. Consequently Jack Williams' authoritative text on English cricket in the inter-war years continues to provide the benchmark.⁽¹⁾

Chapter five, on post-war decline and renewal, covers the growth of multiculturalism, the changing role of women, and the development of 'Equipment and facilities' in the game. Yet beneath this broad outline lurks confusion and incoherence. The first part of the 'Equipment and facilities' section sidesteps the largely chronological ordering of the book by charting developments dating back to the 1720s. It also focuses on changes evident in the elite rather than the community game. The final section of 'Equipment and facilities' describes the increasing prevalence of junior teams at local clubs. Compounding this mish-mash are the rather controversial claims that cricket-playing youngsters had few role models in the 1970s and 1980s (which for someone whose first cricketing memory was Ian Botham's 1981 Ashes is hard to accept) and that 'television was invented in the 1950s' (p. 117)!

The final empirical chapter is devoted to grassroots cricket in the 21st century. It covers the increasing role of the game's national governing body in structuring local cricket, the impact of globalisation on lower level leagues, and the changing economic environment which has put increased pressures on clubs to raise funds and attract commercial sponsorship. Again anomalies arise. There is a brief discussion of league cricket in Surrey in the early 20th century. We hear about the fundraising bazaars held by Ramsbotham in 1903 and 1936, that Evesham in Worcestershire opened a bar in 1940 to raise additional income, and that Caythorpe in Nottinghamshire held a fete in 1963 which raised the money required to purchase a new ground. But perhaps more problematically, this section contains claims which raise questions about some of the assumptions that were hitherto implicit in the book's narrative. The Surrey example, we are told, shows us that 'we should guard against making generalisations and assuming that the development of cricket was even across the country' (p. 142). Well if there were/are regional differences, it would be interesting to hear what form they took/take. Have the differences diminished (or expanded) over time? Can any particular pattern be detected?

The feeling that the sense of purpose to the book's argument peters out is underscored by the very brief conclusion. Here we are told that there are three 'major themes' in the game's history: division (geography and money); competition (variations in the format of); and class. I am prepared to believe that they were major themes - or at least to hear the case - but I do not understand why they are not addressed throughout the book. The shifting structure of cricket competitions is confined to chapter three. As noted above, the book tells us little about geographical variations in the game or indeed tensions between wealthier and poorer clubs. Class is so peripheral to the text that it does not merit a mention in the book's index.

Thus what starts out as a promising and potentially very interesting text - exploring the ways in which cricket was structured by and helped to structure local communities, how the game illuminates the changing ways individuals located themselves in the broader social context, and how the creation and expression of community identities changed over time - disappointingly fails to deliver. Fundamentally there is a mismatch between what the book offers and what it achieves. This is probably because the early promise to

draw on the work of half a dozen cricket historians who are specialists on local league cricket outside Yorkshire does not materialise. Can a book that is empirically reliant on club cricket in Yorkshire claim to be a study of grassroots cricket in England as a whole? Additionally the focus on 'community' is problematic. The concept is never defined or explored. For large sections of the book it isn't discussed at all, and when it is (i.e. in chapter four) it is largely used as a synonym for grassroots. Indeed the conclusion makes no reference at all to community, while 'grassroots cricket' is mentioned six times. This is particularly disappointing given recent advances in the theoretical, methodological and empirical dimensions of community.(2)

In order to achieve the ambitions of this project the authors really needed to augment empirical diversity with a judicious engagement with the literature. Instead the introduction reads like an annotated bibliography with a series of paragraphs devoted to individual books or authors. There is no synthesis or analysis of their respective arguments and the relevance of these texts is also not always apparent. Within the section on British sports history they cite Mangan's edited collection, *Pleasure, Profit and Proselytism* but not his seminal *Athleticism in Victorian and Edwardian Public Schools*.(3) Similarly there is a paragraph devoted to Barrie Houlihan's *Sport and Society: A Student Introduction*, which as the title implies is an undergraduate sports studies textbook (and indeed, just one of many).(4) While we are told at the outset that Dave Russell's work 'is very relevant for us' (p. 4), it is not cited again in the book. This ill-advised selection is compounded by the absence of a single reference to any journal article throughout the piece. Occasionally when literature is 'alluded' to in the text, we find references to websites such as sportsbusinessjournal.com and findarticles.com (footnotes seven & 93 in chapter five, neither of which I could access). Sports history has a rich and vibrant literature and this book suffers from a failure to engage with it.

As *Cricket and Community in England* ventures into more contemporary analysis its dislocation from the extant literature becomes more pronounced. The analysis of globalisation relies more on an article in the *Guardian* that it does on Rumford and Wagg's *Cricket and Globalization* cited in the introduction.(5) The text makes no mention of a number of sociological accounts which have examined the importance of cricket in minority ethnic communities in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Oxfordshire and Essex. These would have added to the breadth and depth of the empirical analysis. When the authors comment on the efficacy of policies designed to develop grassroots cricket there is little reference to the extensive body of sports policy literature available, or indeed existing works evaluating policy implementation in English cricket. The authors' seem to endorse the view that ECB directives on matters of child protection 'have gone too far' (p. 157) but one gets little sense that this judgement is based on a familiarity of the extensive research which has identified the abuse which has arisen when such policies were largely absent.(6) A central consequence of the failure to embrace the extant literature is that the book lacks a clear statement about what has already been established in the field and thus is unable to give a sense of what is achieved by its production.

I find all this rather sad. There is some very interesting detail in the book. There are some empirical snippets which begin to illuminate for us the degree to which these sports clubs were at the very heart of their communities. One begins to get a sense of innovation and indomitable adaptation in the face of social disruption and marked change. But too often these dots are just not joined up.

Consequently we are still waiting for a comprehensive analysis of the changing relationship between cricket and community in England. Indeed, in many ways it is amazing that it has not yet been done for, as Davies and Light note, 'in the early years of the twentieth century [sic] ... the notion of village cricket 'conjuring up, as it does, images of genteel competition, church bells and cucumber sandwiches' seems to have passed its sell-by date' (p. 140). Yes it does, and yet it endures in popular perceptions of England and Englishness. Moreover, we have yet to properly establish whether or not there was ever a time when this notion was relevant and, if so, whether this applied to all or just parts of the country. My own research argues that cricket was born nostalgically, that the imagery of village cricket 'alongside that of cricket's quintessential Englishness' was a tradition invented in response to society-wide and game-specific developments in the mid 19th century.(7) A detailed analysis of cricket and community in England would test that interpretation, as well as improving our understanding of the social significance of sport throughout English modern

history. It sounds like both an ambitious and an interesting project, but it is a project that remains on the 'to do' list.

Notes

1. Jack Williams, *Cricket and England: a Cultural and Social History of the Inter-War Years* (London, 1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Graham Crow and Alice Mah, *Connected Communities* (AHRC Connected Communities project output, 2011).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism: British Culture and Sport at Home and Abroad 1700-1914*, ed. J. Anthony Mangan (London, 1988); *Athleticism in Victorian and Edwardian Public Schools* (Cambridge, 1981).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Barrie Houlihan, *Sport and Society: A Student Introduction* (London, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Chris Rumford and Stephen Wagg, *Cricket and Globalization* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, for example, Celia Brackenridge, *Spoilsports* (London, 2001).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Dominic Malcolm, *Globalizing Cricket: Englishness, Empire and Identity* (London, 2013).[Back to \(7\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/49513>