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Book review

Cricket & conquest: The history of South African cricket retold, 1795-1914

**By André Odendaal, Krish
Reddy, Christopher Merrett
and Jonty Winch. Cape Town:
HSRC Press, 2017.**

This is not a book about a story retold; it is the bringing to life of a story buried under the pages of colonialism's long innings in this neck of the woods. The core of the book covers the game in the 19th Century, an age in which bloody colonial subjugation spread its tentacles. Resistance came in many forms but the Gatling gun was far superior to spears and assegais. Land dispossession followed military victory. It was a brutal unfolding of systematic terror accompanied by a myriad of taxes that were demanded in cash. When resistance flared, like the 1906 Bambatha Rebellion, it was put down with a casual brutality that shocked even the then British Under-Secretary of State, Winston Churchill, not one to shy away from a bit of blood-letting of black and brown colonial subjects, who was moved to admonish the settlers for their 'disgusting butchery'.

There were other rebellions, most notably the "Anglo-Boer War" that ended with the 1902 Treaty of Vereeniging. White power would then be

legitimated through the inauguration of the Union of South Africa in 1910. It is against this background of dispossession, racism and the consolidation of white power that Odendaal et al. set out to tell the story of South African cricket. The book's hallmark is the way in which it fuses black and white cricket into a single narrative. It makes for painful but fascinating reading. In three chapters (18, 19, 20) the authors take a knife to the 1888/89 English tour of South Africa. It is a remarkable analysis that moves between white and black cricket, as the narrative follows the team across South Africa:

All in all, it has been an epic journey of 15, 975 miles in 146 days...The return journey from England pushed the mileage by boat up to 13, 003 miles; train and coach or cart transport amounted to 2, 218 miles and 754 miles respectively (185). While the visit might have 'commenced and cemented imperial friendships' (196), it also highlighted the struggle of 'black players in the different regions, Christian and Muslim, drawing on liberal and "fair play" principles' who were 'seeking a role in colonial cricket' (202).

If most of the chapters highlight the English tour as it criss-crossed the country, Chapter 21 ends with the Native Inter-Town Tournament of 1892/93 held in King William's Town. It's a haunting story of the struggle of one man, Paul Xiniwe, and his persistence in trying to hold the tournament at the "white" Victoria Ground.

The book indicates at the outset its attempts to 'take out of a gender ghetto, and insert into the mainstream of cricket history, the hitherto invisible role by women in the socially constructed "gentlemen's game"' (1). Chapter 31, entitled 'Neither ladies nor cricketers', opens memorably with a discussion of an 1893 proposal put to the Western Province Cricket Club (WPCC) that women be admitted:

Occasion annual general meeting. Year, 1893. Attendance, twenty-six.

A timid voice: "Mr Chairman, before we close may I propose that-er-ladies

be admitted to -er-this club-er-as members? Er-of course-on payment

...of a small subscription. A stunned silence. Then growls of 'Heavens...Ladies...in a Cricket club...What's the man...?'

Chairman: "THE PROPOSAL IS OUT OF ORDER."

This period is also marked by a pivotal moment that centres on the fast bowler Krom Hendricks. In 1894, the South African Cricket Association prepared to send a national team to England for the first time. Hendricks was captain of the South African Malay team and an overwhelming favourite to be selected for the tour. However, once word of his nomination spread, there was intense opposition from cricketing circles. The *Cape Times* newspaper suggested that Hendricks go as the 'baggage man'. One of the country's leading batsman, AB Tancred, argued that if Hendricks wanted to go on the same footing as the others, I would not have him at any price. As baggage-man they might take him and play him in one or two of the matches when the conditions suited him. To take him as an equal would, from a South African point of view, be impolitic, not to say intolerable...¹

Hendricks said that if this were the case, he 'would not think of going in that capacity' (244). Fast-forward to 1971. In a frantic move to salvage the tour to Australia, apartheid cricket arbitrarily selected two "non-white" cricketers, Owen Williams and Dik Abed. Both rejected this offer, with Williams saying that he did not want to go 'as a glorified baggage master'. It was a deliberate link to Krom Hendricks. And herein lies the power of the book; histories are drawn upon to inspire new generations who have new challenges. The spine that ran through liberation cricket in South Africa was the idea of non-racialism. This was the antithesis of whiteness as superiority. Today the challenge is to revive the idea of a militant non-racialism that moves beyond race to focus on class.

Cricket and Conquest shows us that oppression and exploitation is not a one-way street. Just as they were conquering *us*, we were conquering *them*. The colonial captains might have had cannon balls under their white flannels, but those they sought to exclude had something more powerful; the cricketing language of "fair play" used to show the hypocrisy of colonialism and cricket batting together.

The authors bring to bear the rare craft of the historian to this incredible slice of cricketing history. It consists of painstaking archival work, a counter-reading of existing histories, and the meticulous attention to the local while not losing a sense of the overall narrative. In reading through the pages of this book one is reminded of Eduardo Gaelano's words: 'No history is mute. No matter how much they own it, break it, and lie about it, human history refuses to shut its mouth.'

1 In Odendaal, A. (2003). *The Story of an African Game: Black Cricketers and the Unmasking of One of Cricket's Greatest Myths, 1850-2003*. Cape Town: David Phillip, p. 74.