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FEW AND FAR BETWEEN: PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION AMONG ABORIGINES IN AUSTRALIAN FIRST CLASS CRICKET 1869-1988

B. Whimpress*

Introduction

Australians have often been described as sports-mad and winning has been seen as a national obsession.¹ Strong claims have been made for the value of sport in building character. It has been said that when the going gets tough, the tough get going and sportsmen have been seen to be at the forefront of defending the nation.² Australia has only one major sport that is home-grown - Australian football, but Australian football satisfies only some of the criteria of a national game. Plainly, it has never been powerful throughout the country.

Cricket is the oldest team game in Australia - the first match taking place in Sydney in 1803 - and it has been seen as a crucial force for national loyalties, loyalty to Britain and Empire, and regional loyalties. Cricket has been upheld as the most noble of games and the one which epitomises 'fair play', but it has also been seen as a game invented by and for white men.³

The relationship between white Australians and Aboriginal people has undergone several changes of meaning. The experience of Aboriginal cricketers has also undergone several changes of meaning. Initially cricket was used in the 19th century as an agent of civilization and in South Australia

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teams such as those from Poonindie and Point McLeay Missions showed ability against country and city opponents. When Aboriginal initiative was stifled, however, during 60 or so years of segregation this effect was also felt in cricket and other sports. It was not until the 1950s that Aborigines began to emerge in a number of areas under assimilation policies, and only in the last 20 years that sport has been seen as a positive force for social uplift among Aboriginal communities and received substantial funding. Aborigines, however, are yet to re-emerge in cricket.

Sometimes the treatment of Aborigines in cricket has been a reflection of wider societal values although at other times it is a reflection of the hypocrisy and cant evident within the cricket ethic. My aim is to show that Aboriginal cricketers have been victims of prejudice and discrimination to the extent that only seven out of several thousand players have reached the first-class game, and the careers of most of them have been marred by controversy. At this stage I should point out that my work to date is only exploratory but the direction I am taking may become clearer by referring to the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Race policy</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twopenny</td>
<td>1870</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Relative freedom</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullagh</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>Vic.</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Sheep station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsh</td>
<td>1900-2</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>1902-5</td>
<td>Qld.</td>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>1930-6</td>
<td>Qld</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Gov't Reserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>1948-9</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Protection/assimilation</td>
<td>Mission/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>1969-70</td>
<td>NSW, Qld, WA</td>
<td>Assimilation/identity</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainhardt</td>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Qld</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only have Aboriginal cricketers been 'few' they have also been 'far between' in that their appearances have been sporadic.
Figure 1. Aboriginal cricketer Harry Hewitt showing his batting style at Victor Harbor around 1905. Hewitt once made a score of 144 not out in an Adelaide grade game. The man behind the stumps was known as Wagner, a well-known Aborigine in the district.
When it comes to defining terms I have used 'prejudice' to mean an unfavourable feeling or attitude held towards Aboriginal cricketers as a group and as individuals, and 'discrimination' to mean unfavourable treatment of Aboriginal cricketers as a group and as individuals. The term 'Aborigine' itself provides problems for writing Aboriginal history because the meaning has changed. In modern Australia it is a matter of self definition:

A person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.  

It symbolizes an identity Aborigines can now give themselves, rather than having one thrust on them by others.

In this paper I am looking at first-class cricket because it enables me to restrict and control my focus. In my thesis I have examined Aboriginal involvement in the lower levels of cricket but I wish to make the point that first-class cricket is the pinnacle of Aboriginal achievement in the game, and I have made that my major focus.

The period I am covering begins in 1869 because that was the year of the return of the Aboriginal team which had toured England, and because some excellent scholarship has been carried out on the 1868 tour. It ends around 1988, coinciding with the Bicentennial re-enactment of that first tour. The 1988 tour was supported by the Commonwealth Government and there seemed to be a strong emphasis on performance and providing a training ground for the first Aboriginal Test cricketer. The stress would suggest that Aboriginal performance not only in sport, but cricket in particular, is still seen as a measure of progress.

Part of my task then is to examine where Aboriginal cricketers fit into Aboriginal history and where they fit into Australian cricket history. In this paper, however, I have concentrated chiefly on examining their experience as cricketers.
My initial approach has been to build profiles of the first-class cricketers and use them as the basis for case studies. The interesting thing about them is that not only do they conveniently represent different periods but different colonies and states, and different backgrounds.

**Different eras**

Only two of the 1868 tourists played first-class cricket and they were Twopenny and Johnny Mullagh. They appear to have lived in an era of relative freedom despite the fact that in 1869 the Victorian Parliament passed an Act to provide for the protection and management of the Aboriginal natives and this put paid to any more cricketing tours. 7

Jack Marsh was born at Yulgilbar on the Clarence River and later lived in Grafton, Bathurst and in Sydney. He seemed to have a great deal of freedom and moved around a lot initially as a talented professional sprinter in the early 1890s. He played district cricket with the Sydney Cricket Club for about eight years. Not much is known about his life after his cricket career ended about 1906 but he was kicked to death outside an Orange hotel in 1916 and his assailants were acquitted. 8

Queenslanders Albert Henry and Eddie Gilbert represented their state 30 years apart but lived most of their lives through the protection/segregation era. Faith Thomas was born in Quorn and grew up under assimilationist policies. Ian King started his cricket career as assimilationist policy was giving way to Aboriginal people's search for their own identity. Michael Mainhardt represents the period of Aboriginal self-definition.

**Different colonies/states**

The Aboriginal cricketers lived in different colonies and states: Mullagh in Victoria, Marsh and Twopenny in New South Wales, Henry, Gilbert and Mainhardt in Queensland, King in New South Wales, Queensland and
Western Australia and Thomas in South Australia. They were thus exposed to different government policies and settlement patterns.

In Victoria the 1869 Protection Act exerted a great deal of control over Aboriginal lives, for example, over where they could live and work, how their earnings could be spent and the care of their children. As Aborigines were confined to reserves, they were segregated prior to absorption. 9 The absorption/assimilation policy came about with the *Aborigines Protection Act* 1886 which redefined Aborigines and aimed to remove them as a distinct, observable group with their own culture and ways of life. New South Wales adopted the Victorian 1886 Act in 1909. 10

Queensland's *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* 1897 was more restrictive than the legislation operating in Victoria and New South Wales with its system of tight controls and closed reserves. It became the model for later legislation in Western Australia (1905), South Australia (1911) and the Northern Territory. From the 1940s the states began to espouse an assimilationist position. It was not until the 1960s that the states and the Commonwealth began to amend their Aboriginal legislation in the direction of self-determination.

**Different backgrounds**

The Aboriginal cricketers in this study offer a number of different perspectives because of their backgrounds; Mullagh, an Aborigine on a sheep station; Marsh, living his adult years as an urban Aborigine possibly among the La Perouse community and Henry, on a Presbyterian mission at Deebing Creek. Gilbert, famous for once dismissing Bradman for a duck, was separated from his parents at the age of four and brought up on a Government reserve at Barambah. 11 Faith Thomas was separated from her mother at birth and brought up in the United Aborigines Mission's Colebrook Home at Quorn. In 1957 she represented Australia in a match against the visiting English women's team. She became a nurse and, later, South Australia's first Aboriginal public
servant.12 Ian King was an urban Aborigine who played district cricket in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. He played Sheffield Shield cricket for Queensland and took 30 wickets in the 1969-70 season. He was considered to have a good chance of being selected in the Test team in 1970-71, but a back injury forced him to miss that entire season.

Aborigines and cricket

I have been testing the view that cricket's values remained essentially undisturbed from the 1870s to the Packer upheaval of 1977 and it is my belief that there were two distinct ethics present: a public school ethic which was more dominant and a second which might be loosely termed a 'larrikin' ethic.

Aboriginal cricketers in the 19th century were encouraged by two groups: the civilizers (often missionaries) who followed the public school ethic and the country cricketers on stations who got the local Aborigines to play to make up the numbers. The 1868 team would thus have been exposed more to the larrikin ethic even though those who wrote about them would have been more from the civilizing school. Furthermore, while those who encouraged Aborigines on the missions as cricketers were civilizers, many of their opponents were likely to have been gamesmen.

Aboriginal cricket in the 20th century became a casualty of protection/segmentation policies and many of the individualist values of cricket are out of keeping with the sharing values of Aboriginal communities, although in recent years the sport (along with others) has been seen as a force for social uplift among these communities.

In summary a major contention will be that cricket is a game for the white man. The larrikin ethic is based on a mixture of good fellowship and mischief and sitting around after the game enjoying a beer. The public school ethic is about high moral purpose and battle imagery, but above all 'fair play'.
Aborigines and the cricket ethic

My contention is that Aborigines have not been treated fairly and that the cricket ethic like white society in general has exercised control over Aborigines.

One can note prejudice towards Aboriginal cricketers in contemporary journalism and, in particular, the devaluing of their cricket intelligence. Even J. C. Davis, the long-time editor of the sporting paper the Referee and described by Nat Gould as the 'best reporter of a cricket match' he ever knew, provides evidence of it:

The fastest of all Australian bowlers for two overs was the sapling-like A. Henry, the Queensland aboriginal. He was so fast that Len Braund, the gifted English batsman, reckoned that no mortal, before or since, got such pace on the ball . . . But Henry like a dog trained to chase the ball, would take a long run and fire it in like a cannon shot, and then chase after it to square leg or anywhere else, for he had tremendous speed. But he did not last any time and passed away many years ago in the north . . .

and

Of all the dark-skinned bowlers seen in this country the most remarkable was Jack Marsh . . . He had such command over the ball that it was simply unbelievable what he could do with it in the matter of curving, dropping, and breaking, and in variations of speed. If he had been a white man with a head for the game, there would have been no room for discussion as to who was the greatest bowler the world ever saw - Spofforth and Charlie Turner, notwithstanding. 13

In order to find discrimination it is necessary to look at the actions relating to Aboriginal cricketers. This will mean concentrating on some key measures such as selection, accusations of 'throwing', where Aborigines batted in the batting order, and fielding.

As far as selection is concerned, the chief question to be asked is whether Aborigines have had to meet different performance criteria to other players.
The answer seems to be that they have been ignored. Let us look at the example of Jack Marsh.

In 1900-01 Marsh played four matches for NSW and was his state's leading wicket-taker, but one of the selectors, M. A. Noble, who later became Australian Test captain and selector, objected to his selection in the team. The following year Noble was appointed sole selector of the NSW team and ignored Marsh. In February 1902 Marsh was selected to play for his old district club Bathurst against the visiting English team captained by Archie MacLaren. MacLaren refused to play against Marsh on the grounds that he did not want his players to get hurt, and that Marsh's bowling action was suspect but such a stand was hypocritical. There is strong circumstantial evidence that Noble and MacLaren colluded against Marsh and he was left out of the Sydney Test Match against the English team despite support for his inclusion from the public and sections of the press.

In April 1902 Noble had departed on the Australian cricket tour of England when Marsh was selected to play for NSW against Qld. Marsh played his last first-class match, also against Qld, in November 1902 before the Australian side arrived home. In December 1902 Marsh was selected for a NSW Thirteen against the Australian Eleven and for the Sheffield Shield matches in Adelaide and Melbourne. Noble, however, was NSW captain and probably sole selector again for these three games, and Marsh was named twelfth man in each, and was never chosen for NSW again. In the years 1900 to 1905 Marsh was the leading wicket-taker in Sydney grade cricket each season. 14

'Throwing' may require a little explanation. According to the No-ball Law, the bowler only had to appear to be throwing to be no-balled. The benefit of the doubt went to the batsman not to the bowler. There was nothing 'fair' about it: cricket was a batsman's game. The No-ball Law was, and still is, contradictory to British concepts of justice and the presumption of innocence.
Only 15 players out of several thousand have been no-balled for throwing in Australian first-class cricket yet three out of the seven Aborigines were amongst them, and two of the remaining four were described as having 'suspect' actions. Other white players were not no-balled even if their actions were regarded as doubtful. If white players were no-balled their careers were not damaged as seriously. When Twopenny was selected for NSW in 1870 it was even said that it was because he was a thrower and could be used as a counter in intercolonial rivalry with the Victorian thrower Tom Wills.

Aboriginal bowlers were often no-balled for throwing at crucial times in their careers. Marsh was no-balled just prior to state selection, although he was still selected in 1900-01. Being no-balled for throwing, however, cast a slur over a player's career and Marsh seemed to suffer most in this respect, although the same thing happened to Albert Henry. In 1931 umpire Barlow no-balled Gilbert for throwing and put paid to his Test chance against South Africa.

The allocation of positions in the batting order was another area of discrimination. Twopenny, Marsh, Henry and Gilbert were invariably sent in to bat at number 11. Only Mullagh was recognized as a batsman. Twopenny had some notable batting successes in 1869 on his return from England, making two scores of 50, but he batted at number 11 in his only intercolonial match. Gilbert had made scores of 217 and 120 retired in country cricket before his first-class debut for Queensland but usually batted at number 11 for his state.

The rationale behind such actions rested on batting being at the top of the hierarchy of cricket skills, above bowling and fielding. The implication of such a hierarchy was that batting required the greatest intelligence. Thus as in England in the 19th century where the amateurs of the highest social class were usually batsmen and the lower class professionals were hired to bowl (or where batsmen were looked upon as officers and bowlers as foot-soldiers) so it seems likely that racial beliefs in Australia led to Aborigines filling the most undistinguished positions in the batting order.
Finally there was discrimination regarding fielding. In the late 19th century this facet of cricket was devalued although the Australian Test sides seemed to take it more seriously than the English. Aboriginal excellence in this facet of the game was often humoured; Henry was an outstanding fielder frequently mocked for his alertness. On the other hand, Marsh was criticized for his lack of fielding skills. While it was put forward as a reason for him being left out of the Test side, the question begs whether other white players were overlooked for the same reason or whether he was any worse than a lot of white players.

Gilbert was praised occasionally for his fielding but in his first season he was compared to Learie Constantine, the touring West Indian player, and came off second-best. The comparison was unfair, as Constantine was the most spectacular fielder of the time. It seems that the feeling was what one black man could do, another black man should be expected to do.

*An Aboriginal cricket ethic*

One idea which is not conclusive but seems to be emerging is that the Aborigines had their own cricket ethic. While Aborigines became adept at playing cricket by mimicking the whites, it may have been a form of humour or satire. It may also have been a ritual substitute, a means of adapting to white ways, and a form of resistance. For Aborigines victory over white teams in cricket could have been symbolic, similar to that white Australia would later achieve in Test matches against England, Davis Cup tennis matches against the USA and the America's Cup yacht races. Of course, Aboriginal victories over white teams were attributed to their white coaches or the benefits of the civilizing process.

The Aborigines' emphasis on winning and enjoying themselves was in keeping with the larrikin ethic. Their chattering while playing may have made them the game's first sledgers and been another example of their appreciation of gamesmanship. When batting they sometimes showed a disinclination to run
but rather to attempt to score all their runs in boundaries. This was viewed in some quarters as another attempt at symbolic superiority.

Cricket was also seen as an attractive alternative to work. It seems likely that Aborigines fooled many whites into believing that their acceptance of cricket was a sign of their acceptance of civilization. As they were able to use whites as child-minders while their children were being educated, so cricket allowed them a measure of freedom. It is not as likely that the Aborigines were attracted to the moralizing public school view but perhaps pretended at playing it. In other words, they had their own agenda. However, since the public school ethic had the greater influence in the game Aboriginal cricketers were always substantially on the outer.

At the beginning of this paper I said that my work was exploratory and I have come about as far as I am able. At the same time I believe that it is important to take note of what Robert Pirsig calls 'ideological joes' - ideas which kill other ideas because they do not fit in with what one is thinking already. An Aboriginal disinclination to play cricket rather than discrimination may sometimes be a factor. Mullagh's preference to stay in western Victoria, his home country, rather than appear in intercolonial matches in Melbourne is a case in point. Eddie Gilbert's stated willingness to bowl bodyline at Jardine's Englishmen does not necessarily mean that he was being used as a tool by disreputable whites. Such an action, far from being 'unsporting' in Aboriginal terms, could fit well with traditional Aboriginal games which involve skills of avoidance. Finally it is easy to overestimate the importance of first-class cricket for Aborigines. That can be part of the mind-set of a cricket historian and difficult to shake off. While playing at the top level may have mattered to Marsh, Gilbert, Henry or King, it is likely that most Aborigines living restricted lives far from the major cities either couldn't give a damn about playing first-class cricket or were faced with more pressing concerns.
Endnotes


2. Special battalions such as the Sportsmen's Thousand were formed during World War I.


4. The Poonindie Mission team played against teams from Port Lincoln and St Peters College in the 1870s. A team from Point McLeay played against teams from Goolwa and Strathalbyn, and in the city on the Jubilee Oval in 1887. Harry Hewitt from Point McLeay was an outstanding all-round sportsman - a footballer, cricketer and athlete (see Figure 1). For further information on Hewitt, see *Advertiser* 25 January 1907, *Observer* 2 February 1907; *Register News Pictorial* 5, 13 and 14 November 1930 and 1 January 1931.


6. John Mulvaney's book *Cricket Walkabout*, describing that first tour was first published in 1967. A revised edition by Mulvaney and Rex Harcourt appeared in 1988. The 1868 team consisted primarily of Aborigines from the Western District of Victoria and was captained and coached by the former Surrey and then Sydney professional Charles Laurence. The tour was undertaken as an entrepreneurial venture. The tourists played 48 games between May and October 1868 and the investors made a profit of £1100.


10. ibid. p. 197.


14. The above paragraph is compiled from numerous references from Sydney daily newspapers, the *Referee* and two Bathurst newspapers.


19. The term 'sledgers' refers to persons on the fielding side making derogatory remarks to the batter to upset his or her concentration.