

## INTRODUCTION

George Headley	Len Hutton
Jeffrey Stollmeyer	Willie Watson
Frank Worrell	Peter May
Everton Weekes	Denis Compton
Clyde Walcott	Tom Graveney
Garry Sobers	Trevor Bailey
Gerry Gomez	Godfrey Evans
Denis Atkinson	Jim Laker
Sonny Ramadhin	Tony Lock
Alf Valentine	Fred Trueman
Frank King	Brian Statham

These composite teams selected from players who appeared in the series between West Indies and England in 1953/54 may not reflect the first-choice sides at that precise moment in history. But there are many names to conjure with here.

The series was bookended by the final appearance of one legendary West Indies figure, Headley, in the first Test and the debut of another, Sobers, in the last. Worrell, Weekes and Walcott, the great Barbadian triad better known then as the 'W formation' and now as the 'Three Ws', all scored big hundreds. The 'little pals' Ramadhin and Valentine, immortalised by the calypso which celebrated the first win by West Indies on English soil in 1950, continued to cast a spell over some of the visiting batsmen.

England had famous spin twins of their own, Laker and Lock, even if the ghost of Johnny Wardle, who played in two of the Tests, might still be heard grumbling he should have played more. The young fast bowlers, Trueman and Statham, would evolve into one of the most celebrated new-ball pairs in Test cricket. Hutton and Compton were the two greatest English batsmen from the generation whose careers spanned the Second World War; May and Graveney were two of the finest from the next generation. Many of the players who graced the series could still be considered now for all-time XIs, even after the passage of nearly 70 years and more than 2,000 Tests.

The cricketers on both sides will remain at the heart of this book. But they are not the only reason the 1953/54 tour should be remembered. Before a ball was bowled, the expedition led by Hutton set some notable precedents. It was the first time an MCC team had been sent overseas under a professional captain. It was the first time they had made the outward journey by air. And it was the first time the West Indies had been visited by a side ostensibly representing England's best.

Having just presided over the first home Ashes victory since 1926, Hutton came to the Caribbean with a squad almost at full strength. The only notable omission was Alec Bedser, rested in view of the next winter's tour to Australia. While there was always a sense of Hutton treating the series in the Caribbean as a dry run for that challenge, he had played on losing sides against West Indies away in 1947/48 and at home in 1950. He badly wanted to beat them. For their part, despite a setback on their recent tour to Australia, West Indies had never been defeated in a series on their own soil. The press on both sides understandably built up the contest as the unofficial 'world championship of cricket'.

The series lived up to its billing. The play, if sometimes attritional, was almost always gripping. There were three individual double-centuries, eight hundreds and 28 other scores over fifty, but also four spectacular collapses where a total of 19 wickets fell for just 59 runs. There were some stunning catches. There were run-outs sublime and ridiculous. And yet, in the words of John Arlott, 'this tour was, in impact, so much more than a matter of batting, bowling and fielding that its events and the constituents of its atmosphere would fill several books'.

Arlott came to this conclusion in the 1955 *Wisden*, reviewing the two books by English journalists which emerged in the immediate aftermath of MCC's visit: E.W. Swanton's *West Indian Adventure* and Alex Bannister's *Cricket Cauldron*. Swanton lamented 'a tragedy of misunderstanding and muddle mattering far more than the result of the games'. Bannister regretted that 'almost from first to last a wave of prejudice, acrimony and undeniable bitterness made the tour the most unpleasant and unfortunate experience in cricket since the visit of D.R. Jardine's MCC team to Australia in 1932/33'. The general view, reflected by *The Times*, was that 1953/54 ranked as 'the second

most controversial tour in cricket history'. Some of the protagonists were prepared to go even further. Tom Graveney felt Hutton's tour 'might go down as the most unpleasant, the most controversial of all time'. Clyde Walcott believed the series caused a greater 'storm' than Bodyline.

It may be more than a coincidence that full records did not survive for either tour in the Lord's archives. Yet, while Bodyline has inspired a large body of literature, no full-length account of the other extraordinary chapter in cricket history, and late-colonial history, has been produced since Swanton and Bannister.

What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?

C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963)

Arlott's suggestion that events on the field were less than half the story anticipates this celebrated aphorism from what he was to call 'the finest book' about the game. *Beyond a Boundary* was first published the year after James's home island of Trinidad gained independence. Its rhetorical question is so often quoted that it has become a cliché, sighted on T-shirts at a quiet day's county cricket and cited in articles shelved in the dustier nooks of academic libraries.

The question's original context is James's analysis of West Indies cricket against the political background of 'nationalist passions and gains' during the period when the Caribbean islands were 'in the full tide of the transition from colonialism to independence'. The 1953/54 tour features prominently in this account. Indeed, the robust criticism of Hutton and his men in *Beyond a Boundary* provides a running commentary, from a West Indian perspective, on the carefully worded tour report in the 1955 *Wisden*.

The umpiring – as so often in the age before neutral officials – was a persistent issue. *Wisden* confessed: 'To a man the MCC team recognised their responsibilities as ambassadors of sport, but, being human, the less phlegmatic did not always hide their annoyance and displeasure.' James observed more briskly that one of the reasons the English team became 'actively disliked' was 'unsportsmanlike behaviour by individuals'.

*Wisden* was pained to admit that the tour was marred by 'controversy and uneasiness', ascribed partly to 'the constant

emphasis upon victory which the MCC players found to be stressed by English residents in the West Indies'. James was more categorical. Hutton's team 'had given the impression that it was not merely playing cricket but was out to establish the prestige of Britain and, by that, of the local whites'.

Merely in cricketing terms, Test matches had more importance when there were far fewer of them and no one-day internationals. David Frith was working in a Sydney newspaper office in 1954 and remembers being on tenterhooks for news of his idol Hutton as the scores were cabled across. His sense that 'in those days Test series stood out so wonderfully' is supported by the fact Hutton's tour was sometimes on the front page of newspapers in Britain and always on the front page in the West Indies.

Many of the headlines were lurid. There were so many incidents on and off the field that Reg Hayter, the journalist who wrote up the tour for *Wisden*, found he had exceeded his Reuters word limit halfway through the series. This caused him immediate issues in an age where newswires were expensive and newsprint still rationed. But he was more concerned about a decline in 'the principles of sportsmanship' and the way modern Test cricket was becoming so deadly serious.

From other perspectives, cricket could seem gloriously, or ridiculously, trivial: 'One sunny afternoon, whilst Peter May is making a century at Lord's against Middlesex ... and the old men are dozing in the Long Room, a hydrogen bomb may explode.' The Yorkshire-born theatre critic Harold Hobson made this observation later in the decade, but 1954 has often been described as the year of the H-Bomb, the moment when it became clear that the second generation of nuclear weapons could annihilate humankind.

The Cold War was undeniably a constituent of the tour's atmosphere. Four months before British Guiana hosted the third Test, Winston Churchill's government was so disturbed by the Communist tendencies of the colony's democratically elected nationalist leaders that it placed some of them under house arrest, suspended the constitution and shipped in a battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Graveney and Hutton – perhaps with some help from their ghostwriters – later reflected that the MCC team had been thrown into a 'vat of unrest' and an 'impossible vortex'. If

the cricketers on both sides really were playing for national prestige, it had become an intense and complex thing.

‘A race has been freed, but a society has not been formed’

Lord Harris, Governor of Trinidad (1848)

The third Lord Harris made this remark a decade after the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies took practical effect in 1838. In the century between Emancipation and the Second World War, not much changed for the former slaves except their legal status. The islands essentially remained sugar ‘monocultures’, the very term suggestive of what the St Lucian poet Derek Walcott called a ‘malarial enervation’, and an economic dependence on one export crop now subject to the vagaries of the world economy. In the 1930s a ton of sugar sometimes sold for less than a cricket ball, circumstances which led to serious labour unrest across the region. The complete findings of the 1938 Moyne Commission, sent out from London to investigate the causes, were not published for the duration of the war because of their potential propaganda value to the Germans.

Cricket arguably played a more central role in the formation of West Indian society than any sport anywhere in the world. The fourth Lord Harris, born in Trinidad while his father was Governor, promoted the idea that nothing which ‘ever came out of England has had such an influence on character and nation-building as this wonderful game of ours’. As *éminence grise* of MCC from the last years of Victoria to the eve of Bodyline, he believed that cricket had a crucial role in ‘connecting together every part of the British Empire’ and, in theory at least, connecting all races and classes within each Dominion and colony. Pelham Warner, also born in Trinidad, assumed both Harris’s role at MCC and his faith in cricket’s civilising mission. He took pleasure in the way the game was loved by ‘the whole population’ of the West Indies and suggested that any Governor of Barbados should have played cricket for his public school. The image the British cultivated of themselves, as benevolent trustees teaching ‘backward’ races the rules of the constitutional game, was reinforced by the way the

politicians negotiating independence, whether they were white, brown or black, were also sometimes Blues.

From the perspective of the governed, the only respectable routes for aspirational browns and blacks were to marry up, to cram up or to pad up. C.L.R. James, who took all three, liked to quote the words of his friend and fellow Trinidadian Learie Constantine: cricket was one of the few ways to prove 'they are no better than we'. James believed his people, playing it on the beaches and playing it on the streets, had found not only a means of self-expression but also a potent symbol of 'national' consciousness, which he trusted would be realised in a Federation of independent islands. Tony Cozier's observation that cricket 'is the one West Indian endeavour which has endured without fragmentation' is intended as a tribute to this vast cultural investment in the game. But it also invites an inference drawn by his father Jimmy: 'Unity is not the strongest feature of the West Indian character.'

West Indies cricket has always been literally insular. During and after the war, its fiercely competitive inter-island rivalry improved the level of play but also heightened the level of parochialism. Furthermore, cricket's ability to serve as the game of the empire and the game of the people was coming under increasing strain. Not only did its encouragement of racial integration and social mobility usually stop at the boundary edge, but the sport itself preserved discrimination in its own structures, most notably in the unwritten rule about the captaincy of the West Indies team. In 1953/54, Jim Laker might not have been thinking just about his own side when he regretted that 'the issue became one of white man versus the coloured man rather than a game of cricket'.

'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found  
a role'

Dean Acheson, former US Secretary of State (1962)

Acheson touched a raw nerve with this observation, made when Britain's remaining colonial holdings, including the major ones in the British West Indies, were being liquidated on a more bracing timetable than previously envisaged. Towards the end of the war, Britain still ruled nearly 800 million people outside her own

borders. After the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, the number remaining was calculated at 168,075. Back in 1964, James Bond, a new configuration of the English gentleman created by Ian Fleming in Jamaica, was taking a quantum of solace in the qualities which had withstood the wind of change: 'The liberation of our Colonies may have gone too fast, but we still climb Everest and beat plenty of the world at plenty of sports.'

At the point of Hutton's tour, in the winter after the Coronation and the conquest of Everest, Britain still hoped that relations with what the Queen had called her 'Imperial family' would represent a managed continuation rather than a scuttling repudiation of empire. While statues of Viceroy's had been coming down in India since 1947, during Coronation year statues went up in London to General Gordon and David Livingstone. The Duke of Edinburgh also unveiled the Imperial Memorial Gallery at Lord's. It is true that in April 1954 the Movement for Colonial Freedom was formed, its treasurer Anthony Wedgwood Benn describing the ending of empire as 'a moral challenge parallel with the moral challenge of slavery in the last century'. But, later in the same year, Enoch Powell was among the Tory MPs who formed the Suez Group in an attempt to keep British troops in the canal zone, and so restore 'faith in Britain's imperial mission and destiny'.

At home, mainstream opinion fell somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum. The people who still believed most strongly in an imperial destiny, and in beating the world at sports, were the settler minorities in the remaining colonies. If Hutton's men came home traumatised by their experience of the 'colour question', this was due not just to the hostility of nationalists who wanted independence from Britain but also to the desperation of loyalists who did not. Player-manager Charles Palmer recollected that 'every day on the tour we were being invited to social functions, invariably with the white people'. They kept telling him that beating the West Indies cricket team was 'a matter of life or death'. Palmer, far from seeking to establish the prestige of local whites as James suggested, became disillusioned with the stakes being attached to the series: 'We wanted to win, but not for them.'

English players and journalists were also informed, at certain functions, that a black captain would spell 'the end of Test cricket

in the West Indies'. If many had arrived without a grasp of how colour permeated every nuance of status in the Caribbean, they were more familiar with the attitudes of the local elite who 'thought it was a humiliation for them to be the first to have a professional captain sent out from England'. As that first professional captain, Hutton quickly realised he was not qualified to deal with all the issues confronting him. He was better acquainted with another intransigent elite, the Marylebone Cricket Club, working behind his back in London. On the 1953/54 tour, the imperial mindset and the amateur ethos were dancing one of their last duets.

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*Who Only Cricket Know* is in three parts. Part I has three pairs of chapters on the background to the series, beginning with the two Test victories which, through the established power of radio in the West Indies in 1950 and the emerging power of television in England in 1953, seemed so symbolic of national prestige. On the other hand, the selection of the two teams in 1953/54 tended to highlight divisions of race and class, sharpened in the Caribbean by insular rivalry, in England by the north-south divide, and in both cases by the distinction between amateurs and professionals. The two captains, Jeffrey Stollmeyer, the amateur, and Len Hutton, the professional, provide striking examples of the interplay between individual personalities and historical forces which makes the 1953/54 series so fascinating.

At the heart of Part II are the five Test matches. They all have remarkable storylines in their own right, even before we try to eavesdrop on the confidences of the dressing rooms and try to understand the complexities of each host island.

Part III looks at the aftermath of the tour. Its first two chapters draw on the Lord's archives to show how MCC sought to punish Trueman, Bailey and Hutton for perceived breaches of the amateur ethos (even though Bailey was technically an amateur). Its last two trace the reverberations of the 1953/54 series in the West Indies, up to the point when Frank Worrell triumphed as the first tenured black captain of the cricket team, just as the political project of Federation was collapsing.