SPORTS KNIGHT

A Hundred Years of Sporting Knights and Dames

PETER DONALDSON

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Chapter One

Cricket Administrators: Lacey, Toone, Warner, Levenson Gower and Allen

I

For much of the 20th century, there were some simple ground rules for anyone whose sights were set on a sporting knighthood. Firstly, attend a prestigious public school – Eton if possible but, at a pinch, Harrow or somewhere similar would probably do – and, when there, prioritise the playing field over the classroom. Secondly, on leaving, demonstrate a continuing commitment to games by sitting on as many committees as possible. Thirdly, carry on playing sport by all means but, under no circumstances, get paid for it. Finally, and this was critical, be born with a Y chromosome.

These guidelines held true for most sports but were best exemplified by cricket. In the inter-war years, the sport was honoured with three knighthoods. The recipients were all public schoolboys, all amateurs, all male and all better known for toiling behind a desk than in front of a wicket. By 1986, two more administrators had been added to what *The Guardian*'s Simon Burnton

memorably called 'the ranks of cricket-but-not-really-cricket knighthoods'. With nicknames like Plum, Shrimp and Gubby, these sporting grandees seemed to belong more to the age of Victorian amateurism than meritocratic professionalism.†

The first cricket administrator to be knighted, and indeed the very first person to receive a knighthood for any sport, was Francis Lacey. Married to the daughter of an earl and an alumnus of Sherborne and Cambridge, he differed from other committee men only in the severity of his demeanour. One colleague admitted he was 'unrelentingly stern and grim' in meetings. Another was struck by the mixture of 'curt politeness and public condescension' with which he treated professional cricketers. All of which probably explains why, in stark contrast to his peers, he never seems to have acquired a nickname.‡ His approach was not one which was designed to encourage such informal joshing. When secretary of Middlesex, it was his habit to stand by the gates at Lord's at the start of a new season and say to each of the professionals as they were summoned forward by their surname: 'Here's your contract and here's your first day's wages. I hope you have wintered well.' It was clear to everyone that the last sentence was a warning not a pleasantry.

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† Pelham 'Plum' Warner was knighted in 1937, Henry 'Shrimp' Levenson Gower in 1953 and George Oswald Browning 'Gubby' Allen in 1986. In fact, Allen was nicknamed 'Gobby' at Eton but clearly that was considered a little too vulgar for the hallowed committee rooms of Lord's.

‡ Although it is hard to believe that in the hyper-masculine world of the Victorian public school a pupil with the surname Lacey was not, at some point, given a nickname.

Lacey may have been something of a cold fish but the path that led him to a knighthood was pretty much the same as the one that his more clubbable successors would later take. Namely, a moderately successful playing career followed by a longer and much more consequential spell in the committee rooms of the game's governing body, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC). And it is unarguably the case that Lacey is now remembered (if he is remembered at all) not for his 16 years batting for Hampshire but for his 28 years as the MCC secretary. It was for this long administrative service that, in July 1926, just a few months before he retired, he was honoured as cricket's and sport's first knight.†

Sweating away in the committee rooms of Lord's was, then, the secret to a cricketing knighthood in these early years. For more than 200 years, the MCC effectively controlled cricket. It organised international tours, assumed responsibility for the laws of the game and decided which matches were to be considered first-class. It was, thought Lacey, 'the parliament of cricket'. Well, of course, he would think that. The only problem was that, unlike parliament, the MCC's authority had no popular mandate to back it up. Pelham 'Plum' Warner, president of the MCC in 1950 and the sport's third knight, may have believed that it was

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† George Rowland Hill, a former secretary and president of the Rugby Football Union, was included in the Birthday Honours of 1926. However, the award had nothing to do with sport but was instead given for 'political and public services' in recognition of his work with Greenwich Conservative Association. Similarly, Charles Clegg, who is sometimes cited as football's first knight, was included in the Birthday Honours of 1927 'for services to the Board of Trade and Ministry of Labour' and not for his time as chairman and president of the FA.

'the wish of every true cricketer that the MCC should […] always remain the mother of cricket' but that was only because by 'true cricketer' he meant privileged amateurs like himself. What the professional cricketer or ordinary fan of the game might think on the matter was, as far as Warner was concerned, neither here nor there.

Warner's sense of entitlement was simply a reflection of the privilege that pervaded the corridors of power inside Lord's. With the possible exception of The Jockey Club, the MCC was the most exclusive institution in British sport. Only six of the 20 inter-war club presidents were not aristocrats and they included a peer's son who was the proprietor of *The Times*, a baronet who became Lord Mayor of London, a Conservative MP who would go on to be Governor of Bengal and the chairman of the Midland Bank.† Things were not much different a rung down from the presidency. More than half of the 67 members who served on MCC committees between the wars were educated at either Eton or Harrow. The remainder had been obliged to rough it at the likes of Winchester, Charterhouse and Dulwich.

Of course, none of this should really have mattered. After all, the MCC was a private cricket club and the make-up of its membership was entirely its own concern. But the point was, unlike football clubs, all of which became limited liability companies in the late 19th century and, so, appointed managers to take charge of their day-to-day business concerns, cricket clubs maintained their status as members' clubs. This meant club committees,

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† Of the 111 presidents between 1825 and 1939, just 16 did not have a title.

and especially the secretaries and treasurers who organised club affairs, wielded enormous power. They controlled the finances, they organised the fixtures and, critically, they selected the teams. MCC committees fulfilled these functions at a national level. They were, essentially, the self-appointed regulators and guardians of the game, answerable to no outside authority.

This power structure shaped the character of cricket. The game was run to suit the needs and reflect the attitudes of the upper-middle-class men who sat on the various club committees. It was not uncommon, for example, for matches to start and finish at times convenient to the few amateur players involved. When Surrey played Derbyshire at Glossop in 1902, the gentleman amateurs from the south decided they would rather have a morning's grouse shooting than start the match at the allotted hour. When they deigned to return late in the afternoon, they simply called off the match. It never crossed their minds that the spectators, who had been sitting around all morning with nothing to do, might feel a little put out by all this. And why should it? Sport was not meant to be a vulgar amusement. As Plum Warner once remarked: 'Cricket is not a circus and it would be far better that it should be driven back to the village green […] than yield a jot to the petulant demands of the spectator.' No wonder Prime Minister Anthony Eden would later decide that the game could be exempted from the entertainment tax.

The professional cricketer was treated with the same disdain as the fans. Lacey, in his role as the MCC secretary, once demanded that the lbw rule should be amended to outlaw what he called 'pad play'. This was a tactic, particularly popular with professionals, whereby

the pad was used to defend the wicket from the bowling of off-spinners. Such a style of play, Lacey dismissively declared, was 'unethical'. Teams, he insisted, should be compelled to 'play the sort of cricket which one expects from men who love the game and all it stands for'. Which was all very well if cricket was your hobby but not if it was your livelihood.

Essential, therefore, for the ambitious administrator with one eye on a cricketing knighthood was a willingness to promote the agenda of a small clique of privileged amateurs who felt they owned the sport. And here, clubability was important. Being considered a 'good chap', one who could be relied upon to do the right thing, was valued more highly than almost anything else. It certainly outweighed having any actual talent for the game. Plum Warner (knighted 1937) and Gubby Allen (knighted 1986) did actually play Test cricket, although the former's lengthy breaks to pursue his stockbroking career meant he could not devote himself fully to the sport, while the latter's claim to fame of holding, along with Les Ames, the all-time Test eighth-wicket record is hardly the stuff of sporting knighthoods.† Nevertheless, compared with other cricketing administrators who were knighted, these two were sporting prodigies. Henry Levenson Gower (knighted 1953) only played in three Test matches, which was still three more than Francis Lacey. But Lacey did, at least, play some first-class cricket. Frederick Toone (knighted 1929) never graduated beyond slogging it out at club level.

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† The record stands at 246 against New Zealand in 1931 if anyone is interested.

Of all the cricketing pen pushers who have received a knighthood, it is Toone who best illustrates the importance of gentlemanly service in gaining recognition. He was knighted in April 1929, on his return from managing the 1928/29 Ashes tour of Australia, for 'helping to promote the best relations between the Commonwealth and the Mother Country'. It had been his third tour Down Under as England manager, though only the first he had actually won. And although the 4-1 series victory was undoubtedly gratifying, winning was not the be-all and end-all of such trips. Much more important was the way in which they were conducted. Yes, he and England captain Arthur Gilligan had used an earlier tour as an opportunity to disseminate Fascist literature but it had been done discreetly and no one had seemed particularly upset by it.† Indeed, far from causing ructions, Toone's diplomatic, light-touch management style always received widespread praise. He was, asserted the editor of *The Times*, 'courteous in manner, easy of address, and unfailingly tactful and obliging'. In short, he was a gentleman. And what better qualification for a knighthood could there be than that?

Another whose breeding and refinement no doubt helped to smooth the path to a title was H.D.G. Levenson Gower. Not only did he possess the obligatory nickname – 'Shrimp' – but he had that other nomenclatural

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† Both Toone and Gilligan were members of the British Fascists. Inspired by Mussolini, and not to be confused with the much more menacing British Union of Fascists of the 1930s, the BF's self-declared aim was to 'fight sedition and work for King and Country'. Maybe the relatively benign nature of the movement was best exemplified by one of its fundraisers in 1924 – 'a fascist whist drive at Gloucester Town Hall'. It was a far cry from the Nuremberg Rallies.

characteristic so common with the upper classes: a surname that defies all rules of English pronunciation and, as a result, somehow leaves the uninitiated feeling vaguely diminished.† Brought up in the Victorian tradition of country house cricket, the young Levenson Gower treated the game as little more than an excuse to pass an agreeable weekend drinking, eating and flirting with eligible young ladies. Perhaps his attitude to sport, and life generally, in these early years was best summed up by a brief pen portrait of his time at university. 'Shrimp,' the piece noted, 'was a jolly good fellow, the type who could go up to Magdalen College Oxford, spend four years captaining the Blues and still emerge without a degree.' But, on leaving Oxford, he quickly discovered that his true passion for cricket lay in administration. Elected to the MCC committee in his early 20s, he became a Test selector at 35 and played a leading role in organising the highly exclusive Scarborough Cricket Festival for more than five decades. It was for this indefatigable service that he was knighted in the New Year Honours of 1953 – although it is hard not to believe that having various strands of nobility on both sides of the family tree also helped his cause.

II

Levenson Gower's record of bureaucratic service to the game he loved was undoubtedly impressive but it paled into insignificance when compared to that of Warner and Allen. Between them, these two doyens of the boardroom effectively ran cricket from the end of the Great War to the

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† If, for any obscure reason, you should ever be obliged to read this section out loud, the correct pronunciation is LOO-suhn GOR.

late 1960s. And, unsurprisingly given they moved in the same social circles and were even briefly neighbours, their approach to life and their cultural values were remarkably similar.†

Both were resolutely establishment men, happiest, according to one cricket historian, 'in the company of clipped accents'. Born in the colonies – Warner in Trinidad, Allen in Australia – they not only regarded England as home but the English upper classes as God's chosen people. Boarding school (Rugby for Warner, Eton for Allen) and Oxbridge did nothing to challenge these views. They entered adult life with the sort of self-assurance that only a privileged education can bestow. Positions of authority, they assumed, would be theirs by right. With power, though, comes responsibility. And both fervently believed that gentlemen were honour bound to advance the interests of their class and nation – the two, naturally, being viewed as indistinguishable.

In part, this sense of duty helps to explain the attraction of a life devoted to dusty committee rooms and sporting bureaucracy. Cricket for Warner and Allen was much more than just a game. It was a political creed wrapped up in a moral code. Warner, speaking at the turn of the 20th century, insisted cricket 'strengthened the amity of the imperial family'. Thirty years later, with the forces of left and right threatening European stability, he was still convinced that the game he loved could help maintain the status quo. 'Cricket,' he told one interviewer,

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† Some suggest there may be an even better explanation for the two men's similarities. The claim is that Allen was Warner's son. Beyond Plum having a soft spot for Pearl Allen, Gubby's mother, there is, it has to be said, no evidence to support this allegation.

'is the antidote to all the "isms" in the world.' Allen was equally certain that Lord's, just as much as Downing Street, had a role to play in international politics. As the 'winds of change' swept through the British Empire in the 1960s, it was, he declared, the duty of the MCC and the cricket-playing dominions to protect the traditional world order.

And whatever one may think of their goals, it is hard not to marvel at the decades of dedicated service Plum and Gubby put in. Both men devoted their lives to cricket. For more than 70 years, Warner played, administered or wrote about the game. Occasionally, all three at the same time. Certainly, in this he was helped by an astute marriage to the daughter of a wealthy gin distiller, which enabled him to pursue his sporting passions free from the irritation of full-time work. But it was still, by any measure, an impressive track record as a cricketing cheerleader.

By contrast, Allen never married but did work. Which makes his astonishing commitment to sport simultaneously more understandable and more incredible. Like Plum, he managed to combine playing first-class cricket with endless hours of administrative toil. He was elected to the Middlesex committee in his late 20s and the MCC committee in his early 30s. From then on, he never let up. As late as his 80th birthday, he was still sitting on the MCC main committee, its special advisory committee and its finance and general purposes committee, as well as serving as a representative on the Cricket Council and a member of the coaching committee of the National Cricket Association. Just for good measure, he was also president of the Association of Cricket Umpires. No wonder he chose to live right next door to Lord's.

III

Yet, despite all the years of bureaucratic self-sacrifice, both Plum and Gubby nearly had their seamless paths to knighthoods derailed by cricketing crises. For Warner, the trouble occurred during the Test series against Australia in the English winter of 1932/33. Held amid a backdrop of Fascist challenges to British imperialism and economic instability in Australia, the tour, according to a *Times* editorial, was the perfect opportunity for 'two sporting rivals to meet in friendly rivalry and make a valuable contribution to the all-vital Imperial spirit'. And who better than Plum to carry out such a lofty aim? With his love of Empire and belief that the main function of MCC touring teams was to 'spread the gospel of British fair play', his appointment as manager for the series seemed an eminently sensible choice.

More difficult to fathom, however, was the decision to make Douglas Jardine England captain. Described by one recent biographer as 'aloof, humourless and uncompromising', he disliked Australians with an intensity that bordered on obsession. The behaviour of Australians, he told one interviewer before the touring party set off in late 1932, 'when judged by the standards accepted by the rest of the world, is not naturally good'. The coming tour, he ominously concluded, 'is something of a crusade'.

In purely cricketing terms, the goal of the tour was to contain the prodigious Australian batsman Don Bradman. To achieve this, Jardine opted to employ a form of bowling that ultimately lent its name to the five-match series: Bodyline. The tactic was simply a more aggressive form of leg theory, whereby the fielding was concentrated on the leg side, and the bowling, which included the occasional

bouncer, was focused on the leg stump. The critical difference between the two was that, with Bodyline, the primary target was the batsman not the stumps. Not everyone was a fan of the tactic. In 1920, Warner had condemned leg theory as 'unsportsmanlike and quite contrary to the spirit and traditions of the game'. They were words that would come back to haunt him.

Initially, however, everything went off without a hitch. Bradman was absent for the first Test in Sydney and a slow pitch for the second Test in Melbourne took some of the edge off the bowling. But then, with the series level, the circus moved on to Adelaide. Jardine decided the time was now ripe to employ Bodyline to its full effect. It was the moment Harold Larwood, the son of a Nottinghamshire miner and one of the fastest bowlers of all time, had been waiting for. His unfortunate target at the Adelaide Oval was the Australian captain, Bill Woodfull. In just the third over of Australia's first innings, with the fielders crowding the leg side, Woodfull was struck above the heart by a Larwood bouncer. As the Australian staggered away, bent double in pain, Jardine saw fit to inflame the situation by calling out: 'Well bowled, Harold.'

After the match, the hosts were in no mood to let bygones be bygones. Jardine's attempt to secure an apology because Larwood had been called a bastard by one of the Australian players was emphatically rebuffed when, at the end of play, he angrily stormed into the Aussie changing room. Calling his players to order, the Australian vice-captain, Vic Richardson, pointed at the enraged English captain and coolly asked: 'Okay, which of you bastards called Larwood a bastard instead of this bastard?' Plum did not fare much better when he later tried to smooth

things over with Woodfull. Hoping for a gentlemanly chat and perhaps even a complimentary gin and tonic, he was instead rebuked like a naughty schoolboy. 'I don't want to see you, Mr Warner,' he was told by the usually affable Woodfull. 'There are two teams out there. One is trying to play cricket; the other is not.'

Much more worrying, though, than these private reprimands was the public response of the Australian cricket authority. On the penultimate day of the Adelaide Test, the Australian Board of Control sent a cable to the MCC condemning the tourists' approach as 'unsportsmanlike' and warning that: 'Unless stopped at once, it is likely to upset the friendly relations existing between Australia and England.' The MCC mandarins were indignant. 'We deplore your cable,' they replied five days later, '[…] and your opinion there has been unsportsmanlike play.' The editor of *The Times* was even more outraged. There is 'nothing dishonourable or unsportsmanlike or foreign' about English bowling, he fumed. The third adjective was, of course, the worst slur of all.

As the whole brouhaha threatened to blow up into a major diplomatic incident, the mood in England gradually began to shift. Eventually, in November 1933, the MCC did a complete volte-face and condemned any bowling which involved a 'direct attack' upon the batsman. This put Warner in a difficult position. In the immediate aftermath of the tour, he had enjoyed basking in the reflected glory of an Ashes victory – England had won the series 4-1 – while still trying to occupy the high moral ground by reminding anyone who would listen that he had always frowned on leg theory. Now he would be forced to pick a side. Either stay loyal to Jardine, the architect of victory, or throw in

his lot with the MCC. Worried that either course of action would show him in a bad light and threaten his chances of a knighthood, he decided the only option was to lie low for a while. Reluctantly, he tendered his resignation as chair of the Test selectors.

Warner's biographer, Gerald Howat, has suggested that the Bodyline affair revealed Plum to be an 'ordinary man thrust into an extraordinary situation'. This is a charitable assessment. Happy to condemn leg theory in the 1920s when it was politically expedient to do so, he did nothing to rein in Jardine as the Bodyline scandal erupted after the Adelaide Test. Had he been truer to his convictions, and less concerned about his reputation, the story of the 1932/33 tour might have been very different.

But, to be fair to Warner, few people came away from the entire shambles covered in glory. Allen, a member of the England squad, was praised for his principled refusal to follow Jardine's orders to bowl Bodyline but his supercilious assessment, in a letter home, of Larwood as a 'swollen-headed, gutless, uneducated miner' hardly did him any favours. That really just leaves Woodfull. The Australian captain was happy to make known his disquiet over the England bowling to Warner in private but he refused to add to the escalating political fallout by employing retaliatory tactics or issuing public complaints. For some, his reputation was further enhanced when he turned down the offer of a knighthood in 1934. The honour was to be awarded for 'services to cricket' but the citation also made implicit references to his sensitive handling of the Bodyline affair. 'Had I been awarded it for being an educationalist,' Woodfull, a trained teacher and future head of Melbourne High School, later reflected, 'then I would have accepted

it. But under no circumstances would I accept it for playing cricket.'

Warner, however, was not the sort to be troubled by such ethical niceties. Once the noise surrounding Bodyline had died down, he blithely resumed his role as chairman of the selectors in time for the Ashes tour of 1936/37. Although the series ended in a 3-2 defeat, that was by the by. Much more important was that the whole thing had been a diplomatic triumph. At last, the unpleasantness of 1932/33 could be put behind him. When the long-awaited knighthood was finally confirmed in the Coronation Honours of 1937, there was never a chance of it not being accepted. After all, as even the ever-sympathetic Howat has noted: 'Warner needed the prizes that went with fame and duty.' And no matter how much Plum might admire the ideals of Henry Newbolt, that high priest of the Victorian cult of athleticism, he was not about to emulate Woodfull and forsake his 'ribboned coat'.†

IV

Commonwealth relations were again at the heart of the controversy that threatened to ruin Gubby Allen's chances of a knighthood. In 1961, widespread condemnation of apartheid, a government-imposed system of racial segregation, forced South Africa to withdraw from the Commonwealth. Over the next few years, the country's international sporting ties were formally severed. Invitations to the 1964 Olympics and the 1966 World

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† Newbolt's most famous poem, 'Vitaï Lampada' (1897), reminded readers that cricket should not be played 'for the sake of a ribboned coat/ Or the selfish hope of a season's fame/ But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote/ "Play up! play up! and play the game!"'

Cup were withdrawn, while the International Boxing Association issued an expulsion order in late 1967. To the surprise of absolutely no one, however, the cricketing authorities chose not to follow suit. Despite the protests of India, Pakistan and the West Indies, none of whom had ever played a Test against a racially segregated side, England and the Australasians continued to welcome the all-white South African teams.

By 1968, the pressure on the committee men at Lord's to make a stand was becoming almost impossible to ignore. Taking its lead from the civil rights movement in America, which had been enflamed by the assassination of Martin Luther King, and from the mass student protests across Europe, the anti-apartheid campaign in Britain grew increasingly combative. There were noisy, and occasionally violent, demonstrations on the streets of London and other major cities. Everywhere, the old order seemed on the brink of collapse. It did not help that this was the year that Lindsay Anderson's vicious satire on the English public school system, *If*…, hit the cinemas. A rallying cry for the counter-culture, the film, in the words of its lead, Malcolm McDowell, 'took a knife and shoved it right through the heart of the establishment'. And if there was one institution that embodied the establishment more than any other, it was the MCC.

It was in this febrile atmosphere that what became known as the D'Oliveira affair played out. Basil D'Oliveira, a South African-born cricketer, designated a 'Cape Coloured' by the apartheid authorities, moved to England in 1960 to pursue his sporting career. Six years later, having qualified for selection through residency, he was included in the English team to face the West Indies at

Lord's. From then on, he became a regular in the national squad. This was all fine until England were due to tour South Africa in the summer of 1968. The worry was that Dolly, as he was affectionately known (in England at least), might not be welcomed by the hosts.

In the months leading up to the tour, the MCC, with Allen, as club treasurer, taking the lead, made a series of formal and informal attempts to sound out the South African Cricket Board's stance on the possible inclusion of D'Oliveira in the touring party. The responses ranged from mildly troubling to distinctly depressing. Even the most optimistic reading of the replies suggested there was more than a good chance that, should Dolly travel, he would be bundled back on to the plane before his feet touched the tarmac in Johannesburg. Briefly, it looked like the problem might simply go away on its own. But, exasperatingly from the selectors' perspective, an early season slump in D'Oliveira's form was reversed by a series-saving 158 against the Australians at The Oval in late August. It was now going to be very difficult to justify not naming him in the squad for South Africa.

The selection committee met to draw up the touring party just a few days after The Oval Test. Although the meeting dragged on for six hours, there is no record of what was discussed. As one leading expert on cricket in this period has observed: 'Far more is known about the cabinet meetings of Harold Wilson, or the activities of the secret service in Moscow, or the details of the Poseidon nuclear missile programme than what the English selectors said and did that night.' But what is known is that, to the astonishment of most, it was resolved not to select Dolly. The sense of betrayal that this decision engendered was

perhaps best summed up by the reaction of England all-rounder Barry Knight. 'I thought, "They're as weak as gnat's piss",' he later told one interviewer. '"They're kow-towing to Vorster [the South African prime minister]." I thought, "Gubby Allen […] is a bit of an idiot."'

Knight was not alone in detecting Allen's guiding hand in the selectors' decision. Although no longer the selection committee's chairman, Gubby's status within the MCC meant he remained, by far, its most influential member. The current thinking is that, desperate for the tour to go ahead, he steered the committee towards excluding D'Oliveira by carefully husbanding the information it was allowed to see. In particular, he is accused of concealing the true strength of the South African authorities' opposition to Dolly, as that, in the eyes of many members, would have made it politically impossible to proceed with the series.

As it turned out, all of Allen's Machiavellian scheming proved futile. An injury to Warwickshire all-rounder Tom Cartwright shortly after the touring party was announced meant the selection committee was forced to draft in D'Oliveira as a late replacement. Predictably, the South Africans responded by immediately calling off the series. Within three weeks, then, Allen and the MCC had achieved the seemingly impossible and managed to alienate both the left and the right. Gubby, though, was not, in the words of one biographer, 'a naturally penitent man' and he still saw fit to give his full backing to a proposed tour by South Africa in 1970.†

Reflecting in 2004 on the D'Oliveira affair, Peter Oborne, the political commentator and renowned cricket

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† Naturally, the tour did not go ahead.

author, has argued that: 'It would probably be wrong to say that Allen supported apartheid but he regarded anti-apartheid demonstrators as enemies of decency […] and Vorster's white South Africa as an important part of the settled, traditional, closed world that the MCC was there to protect.' This is far from being an unqualified vote of confidence in Gubby as an advocate of racial equality. And certainly there is evidence that some of his attitudes towards those not fortunate enough to have been born British were firmly fixed in a less enlightened age. Few people, for example, even in the rarified confines of Lord's, would have considered it acceptable to describe a friend as 'so nice one would hardly know he was a foreigner'. Much more worrying, though, was a diary entry from one of his tours of Australia. The indigenous Australians he could spot at train stations along the Nullarbor Plain were, he wrote, 'a ghastly sight, and the sooner they die out the better'. Even Gilligan and Toone might have been shocked by that sentiment. All this is not to say that Allen was an out-and-out racist. He was simply the epitome of a class and generation whose moment in the sun had passed. The problem was, in the late summer of 1968, cricket generally, and the MCC specifically, failed to recognise this.

The D'Oliveira affair was not the only time Allen found himself on the wrong side of history. In the early 1960s, he sided with the old guard in the MCC and opposed the abolition of the divide between gentlemen and players in first-class cricket. By scrapping amateurism, he argued, the game would 'lose the spirit of freedom and gaiety which the best amateur players brought'. Luckily, wiser heads recognised that, without reform, something

much more important would be lost – namely, a vital financial lifeline. As the supporters of change continually pointed out, commercial sponsors in the meritocratic 60s were hardly likely to be attracted to a sport where professionals were treated as second-class citizens.

Twenty years later, in 1983, Gubby was still more interested in preserving cricket in aspic than confronting economic realities. Unhappy that a structural reform to the Cricket Council, the game's governing body since 1968, would reduce the power of the MCC, he tetchily gave up his place on the council. The fact that the government had made abundantly clear that no public money would be given to sports controlled by elite private members' clubs like the MCC was clearly viewed as a triviality not worthy of consideration.

Although Allen undoubtedly did some good work for cricket, most notably by helping establish the Youth Cricket Association and the National Coaching Scheme, his reputation has, nonetheless, taken something of a knock in recent years. The charge is that his 20-year domination of the Lord's committee rooms meant that, as one commentator has recently asserted, 'his prejudices became MCC prejudices, his enemies MCC enemies, his favourites MCC favourites'. Certainly, Allen's influence was all-pervasive. There was no aspect of the game where he could not and did not make his voice heard. The revisionists claim he did too much speaking and not enough listening. This seems a fair assessment. But, when it comes to knighthoods, longevity counts for more than almost anything else. And so, when Gubby finally resigned as an MCC trustee in 1985 at the age of 83, ending a five-decade-long association with Lord's, the announcement

that he was to be included in the following year's Birthday Honours raised few eyebrows.

The careers of the cricket administrators who have received knighthoods are, then, instructive. They reveal just how much the game values commitment, fealty and, especially, long service. In many ways, the last of these attributes has a particular resonance when it comes to the doling out of honours, for the word knight derives from the Saxon *cnyht*, meaning attendant or servant. And there is no doubt that men like Plum and Gubby attended to the game they loved with unmatched dedication. What is less certain is how well they served it. Too often they viewed change with suspicion and confused reform with revolution. When reviewing all the bureaucratic decision-making that resulted in these already privileged men receiving titles, it is hard not to be drawn into tweaking the great C.L.R. James's famous adage by asking: what do they know of life that only cricket know?[†2]

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† In his peerless 1963 cricket memoir, *Beyond a Boundary*, James posed the question, 'What do they know of cricket that only cricket know?'