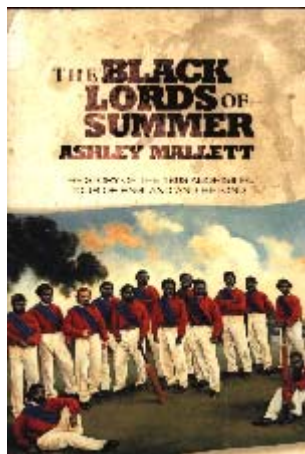


The Black Lords of Summer: The story of the 1868 Aboriginal tour of England and beyond by Ashley Mallett. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002, pp. 240, A\$30.00, paperback, ISBN 0 7022 3262 9.



In 1868 an Australian cricket team toured England. Their place in sports history is assured not by their playing record – they won fourteen out of forty-seven matches – but by the composition of the side: they were Aboriginal. The team was brought to Britain by Charles Lawrence, an entrepreneurial publican, who saw the potential profit. He marketed the touring side not just as cricketers but also as entertainers with spear, boomerang and stockwhip. Lawrence made over £2 000; the players, one of whom died on the tour from pneumonia, did not share in this bounty.

The story is well-known thanks to the pioneering studies of John Mulvaney in 1967 and his further work with Rex Harcourt in 1968. Presumably the publishers felt that enough time had elapsed for another version to seek a readership. Ashley Mallett was a test cricketer and a competent cricket journalist. He has written several biographies of individual Australian sportsmen and women but this time he attempts to integrate a collective biography into the book. He claims to have undertaken research for the book but he brings no new evidence to light. Most of the work draws upon the research and publications of other people. He offers ‘greater depth and colour’ than his predecessors, in particular on the cultural clash between Lawrence and his charges, but it is portrayed emotively and one-sidedly. Where he presents something different from Mulvaney is in going forward to cover Aboriginal cricketers of the twentieth century, but again he is reliant on the work of others, particularly the doctoral thesis of Bernard Whimpress, curator of the Adelaide Oval Museum. Mallett does not have the historian’s skill in sifting evidence to substantiate an argument; nor does he consider alternative hypotheses. Certainly Aborigines have been discriminated against in the cricket world, but if the prejudice was that strong how does he explain that some were selected for state sides in the first place?

Mallett is more concerned with telling a story than establishing historical truth. He brings the reader ‘a dramatic reconstruction’ of the tour, a sign of his associations with the television documentary that preceded this publication. Hence he invents conversations and thoughts and embellishes a few facts with many words of imagination. Such fantasy cricket has its place but not in something claiming to be history.

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