

Cricket wasted time and effort out of all proportion to its importance, said Lord Wavell in a speech on sport when he was installed as Chancellor of Aberdeen University. That twenty-two players, umpires, and scorers should spend three, four, or even more days on a game, and continue doing so for months on end, seemed to the outsider the height of absurdity.

—Recent Cable Message.

Village cricket spread fast through the land. In those days, before it became scientific, cricket was the best game in the world to watch, with its rapid sequence of amusing incidents, each ball a potential crisis! Squire, farmer, blacksmith, and labourer, with their women and children came to see the play, were at ease together and happy all the summer afternoon. If the French noblesse had been capable of playing cricket with their peasants, their chateaux would never have been burnt.

—G. M. Trevelyan, "English Social History."

TWENTY-ONE years ago I sat at Lord's beside a young stranger from Scotland. I remarked that they didn't play much cricket in Scotland, did they? No, he replied. I supposed they had better things to do, and he smiled. I don't think I added, though it would have been pertinent, that this helped to account for the Scottish conquest of England. The Wavell family is English, and how much Scottish blood it may have, I don't know, but Lord Wavell, like his father, joined the Black Watch, and he was speaking to a gathering of Scots. Various reasons might be advanced for the fact that the Scots have not taken to cricket to anything like the extent of the English: climate, the comparative poverty of the country, social conditions, and national disposition. Cricket is a leisurely game, and the Scots have never enjoyed as much leisure as the English. They haven't been able to afford it. The Scot is a more serious and more rational-minded creature than the Englishman. He has some affinity with the Frenchman, and the French are not cricketers. Like liberalism, cricket is a frame of mind.

However, all this is no reason why even devoted and passionate lovers of cricket, of whom I am one, should not be fair to this very distinguished soldier-administrator when he criticises the game. He has only said what many others have said before him. And let us start by being clear as to what he did say. A number of men prominent in Wellington cricket whose comments I have seen, scoffed at his remarks. One of them said they weren't worth bother-



"The Scot is a more serious creature than the Englishman"

IS CRICKET A WASTE OF TIME?

(Written for "The Listener" by ALAN MULGAN)

ing about. But they seem to have misread the report by taking it as condemning all cricket, whereas Lord Wavell specifically referred to cricket which extends over days, and is played for months on end by the same people.

The "Cream" or the "Skin"?

This kind of cricket is only part of first-class cricket, and first-class cricket is only a thin skin on top of the game. I say "skin" advisedly. Some might say "cream"; it's a matter of opinion. I have no statistics, but I should say that all the cricket below first-class is 90-odd per cent. of the game—perhaps 98 or 99 per cent. All the tense interest in test matches, all the high-lighting of Press and radio reporting, doesn't alter that fact. Most cricket is cricket on one half-day or at most one day a week. The very popular League games in the North of England are in this class. Village cricket was played in England centuries before the county championship began or test matches were thought of, and if first-class cricket were wiped out to-morrow it would go on, and so would cricket in the back-blocks of Australia and New Zealand, in jungle clearings of Malaya, and wherever a British garrison or a British warship finds itself.

We are apt to forget that the enormous public interest in sport is quite a recent development, within the lifetime of some of us. Lawn tennis was invented only a few years before I was born. The English Rugby Union and the English Association Cup date to 1871, while test cricket is but 70 years old. The vast growth of interest in games may be attributed to several causes; improvement in play; rise in wages and reduction of hours; and publicity by the Press. When men worked six days a week, as many did in our own country until the Shops and Offices Act gave them a half-day, how could they watch games? Here we strike a conflict. The tendency everywhere is to reduce hours of work. We have come down to 40 and there are those who tell us that fewer still will suffice with good planning. We are to move into an age of greater leisure. At the same time some of us are concerned about the number of people who crowd to watch sport. But naturally, if people have more leisure, lots of them will spend their time in this way. Many of them would be better if they played and didn't merely watch, but if all able-bodied men decided to play, where, I wonder, would Britain find grounds for them?

Lord Wavell, however, must have had particularly in his mind the emergency state of his country. It does seem curious that when every man and woman is needed for industry, so many men in the pink of condition should

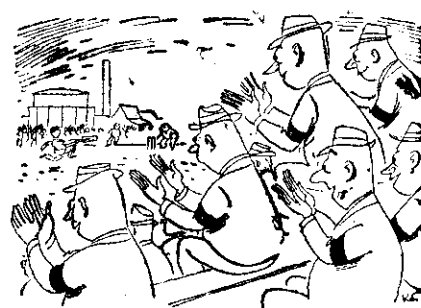
spend the whole summer (or a succession of summers if they go overseas) playing cricket before crowds. This kind of cricket goes on all through the week. But don't let us put all the blame on cricket. It isn't only the popularity of cricket with coal-miners that is worrying the authorities at home. (If I were a coal-miner I think I should want to see quite a lot of cricket or football or racing as a counter-weight). Lord Wavell properly emphasises the professional aspect. The real genuine amateur is being elbowed out. You can't be a tennis star without giving all or most of your time to the game. An Australian who resolves to climb to test rank must play a lot of inter-State cricket to get there, and how do his daily work and his prospects get on in the process? But how you are going to check what Lord Wavell calls a waste of time, money and manpower, without direct State action, I can't say.

There is also this point: If people in Britain are flocking to games in greater numbers than ever, it is partly because they seek relaxation from years of strain. And to many, cricket and football and other games are a blessed relief from the domestic and inter-

national anxieties of the hour. Players and Pressmen may question umpires' decisions, and tennis stars wash their shorts in public, but these and other upsets are zephyrs compared with the bitter gales that blow from the United Nations. So if austerity pulls another couple of holes in your belt, or Russia announces that she will agree to any compromise that gives her everything she wants, there is this comfort, that you can go to see England and Wales hurling themselves at each other at Twickenham, or sit through the long ecstasy of afternoon at Lords, and watch "the beautiful, beautiful game that is battle and service and sport and art."

"Let Us Be Honest"

This, however, is not conclusive. You can enjoy "the beautiful beautiful game" (the description is Arnold Wall's) without asking 22 men to take three or four days to provide it. You can see it on the English village ground with gracious trees as a setting and the church clock striking the hours, or on a New Zealand paddock. One Sunday afternoon last year I watched a cricket match in a great expanse of tawny tussock high country, with the white peaks of the Alps in the distance. An excellent match it was, quick and sporting. Let us be honest about this. Many of us do get excited about test matches. I have looked out at midnight and seen my neighbours' light still on; they were



listening to the ball-by-ball description. I have sat by my radio and blasphemed at the trend of play. But I think that in our hearts many of us see the humour of this seriousness. And if we really know cricket, we are aware that, as I have said, test cricket is only the thin top of the game. It has become so much like a struggle for national survival that even the players are worried. One hears of curious admissions. After a tour of Australia, a run of matches in New Zealand is a blissful holiday. But for goodness's sake don't let us preen ourselves about this. After all, I

don't know that any cricket enthusiasts in England or Australia ever went the length of some Aucklanders many years ago, when they sought the intervention of the Prime Minister to have a certain Rugby player included in a team for England.

Testimonies to the attractions of obscure cricket are impressive. The late Jimmy Lawrence, of Canterbury and New Zealand, who as a young man

helped L. A. Cuff to put on 306 for the first wicket against Auckland, went into such cricket at the end of a long career, and said he preferred it. "There's nowt like a game of cricket, lad. I said a game. Cricket was never made for any championship. . . . Cricket's a game, not a competition." This from the great George Hirst. Quite a number of county and test players in England go on playing club cricket into middle age. I saw some of that cricket, and my impression was that the players were not worrying a scrap about the test games going on in England at the time. My brother had booked seats for us at Lords for the test. He was a good player, I was a rabbit, but we loved the game equally, and we had not met for 11 years. His club fixed a match for the second day of the test, and he suggested to his captain, a member of the M.C.C. and an old county man, aged 68, that in the circumstances he might be excused. "Do you mean to tell me, Mulgan, that you would rather watch cricket than play?" was all the satisfaction he got. He played.

It is a large part of the defence of the game that there are cricketers who feel like that. But what is to be done about three and four-day matches or more at a time when it is a case of all hands to the pumps (excuse the intrusion of a sea metaphor) is a question. I must leave to Sir Stafford Cripps.