

CRICKET'S BIG BLACK-BEARDED KING

A Centennial Tribute to Dr. W. G. Grace

CRICKET can be many things—a delight, a bore, a study, a mystery, a passion, a hate, a comedy, a tragedy, a sleep and a forgetting, or an intolerable excitement. England gave it to the world, and all the Dominions (including the new ones) play it well. The Scots don't play it because every generation is too busy re-occupying England. The Welsh are not in the first class because they are always preparing for an Eisteddfod. Charles Stewart Parnell played cricket

and captained his side as he led the Nationalists in the Commons. He once closed a dispute during a match by marching his men off the field without consulting anybody. The people of Eire don't like cricket, and no doubt one reason is that it is English. Northern Ireland is too busy building ships, making linen, and watching its neighbour. The game has been played here and there in foreign countries, but mostly by Englishmen, and it has never taken root. Philadelphia had a passable team once, and in J. B. King a bowler who lives in history. Not even the skill and enthusiasm and popularity of Sir Aubrey Smith has extended the game beyond Hollywood.

A Sociable Game

But there is one thing we may say of cricket with certainty. There is no game anywhere that lends itself so much to statistics, comparisons, gossip, reminiscence, and the flowering of oddities of character. It is the longest and most leisurely of all games, and it is played in summer. Even the one-day match is several times longer than a Rugby game. You play for hours, or watch for hours, and as you watch you talk. There are intervals for refreshment; and players and spectators mix. It is a sociable game. Then, there is no team game in which there is anything like the cricketer's possible span of life. When George Smith pulled the match with Scotland out of the fire for the original All Blacks he was exceptionally old—34—but at that age a cricketer may look forward to years of play, even in high company. Wilfred Rhodes was about 50 when he was called on to help England in 1926. In club cricket men play on till middle age and indeed later. And whether it is village cricket, or county cricket, or test cricket, the game, more than any other, brings out the infinite variety in human character—perhaps reticence and pride, perhaps fruity or salty humour. The style is the man, and so is gesture and comment. Then there are the statistics of cricket. How many football fans can tell you the number of tries one of their heroes scored in a season? A true student of cricket can recall what Ranjitsinhji made in his first test match, in 1896, what Trumper did to English

bowling at Old Trafford in 1902, and who made the greatest score in test matches. Talk on cricket is as interminable as the flow of books on the game.

The Best-Known Englishman

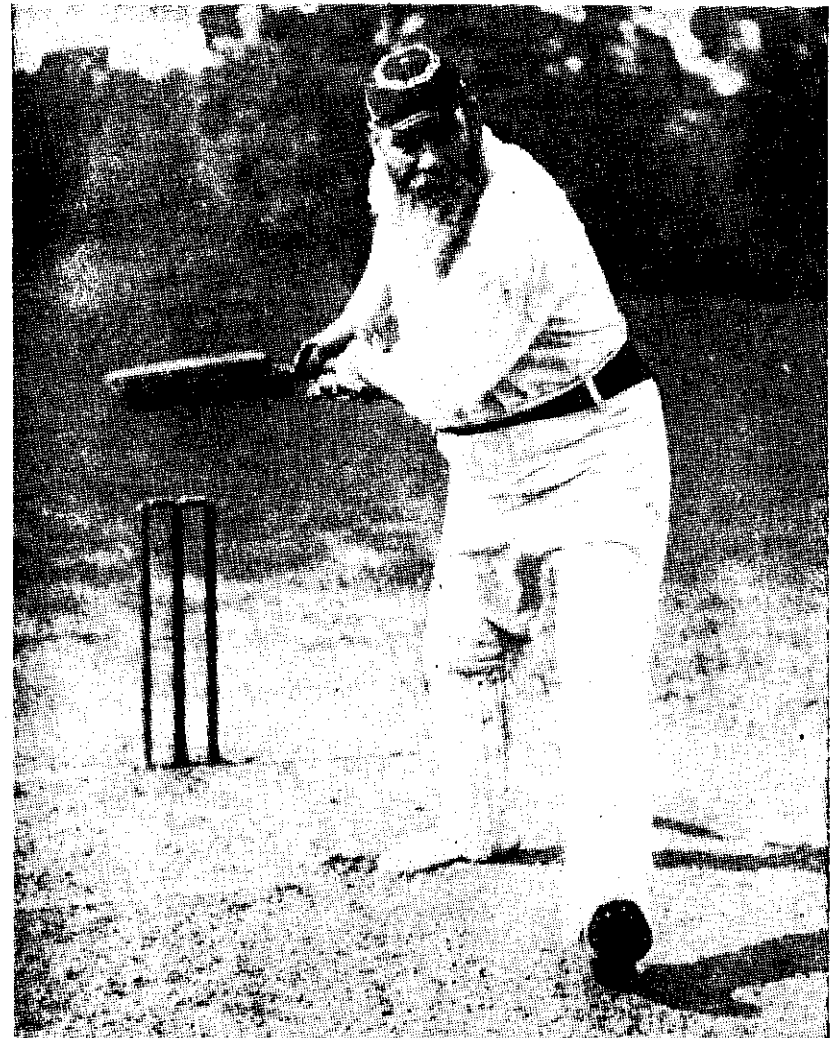
All this helps to explain why a huge cricketer with a big black beard is the most dominating figure in the history of games. There has never been anywhere anything like the reign in cricket of William Gilbert Grace. "The best-known of all Englishmen," a bishop called him. "Grace was certainly the most famous man of his day," says Neville Cardus, "if fame consists in being talked about by the largest number of perfect strangers. He was institutional; people regarded him and discussed him just as they regarded and discussed Mr. Gladstone and the National Debt. . . . Children at school put down his name in all seriousness among the seven wonders of the world, omitting, no doubt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon." And when he died in the first year of the first World War a newspaper ignored the crisis and put this in its bill: "Death of 'W.G.'"

The Time and the Man

There were several reasons for this: the time that Grace came into cricket; his greatness as a player; the amazing length of his career; and his personality. Remembering that a talk on Grace is to be broadcast, I shall give the minimum of statistics. Grace, a West Country man, with an air of rusticity about him, began his career in first-class cricket in 1865, at the age of 17, and went on, without the break of a single summer, till 1908. When he went to Australia in 1873, the Australians were just beginning to learn cricket. Grace lived to see the glorious batsmanship of Victor Trumper, and the two men died in the same year. The Australians learned much of their cricket from Englishmen, and Grace was one of their teachers. For years and years Grace was the acknowledged greatest batsman in the world. He went on and on until he became, as Cardus says, an institution. Note this passage from Grace's story of his own life. "In fact 1876 was the most extraordinary batting year I had until 1895"—19 years between those dates. In May, 1895, when he was 47, he made over a thousand runs. He played in his last test match in 1899, at the age of 51, and remained a first-class cricketer for another nine years.

Changing the Art

But this is only part of the story. He and his brother E.M. changed the whole art of batsmanship. They broke down the old conventions and made it the varied thing we know. When they began to play, there were still fast under-arm bowlers, and the question was being hotly debated whether a bowler should be allowed to raise his



DR. W. G. GRACE (Born July 18, 1848)
The beard took precedence over the Hanging Gardens of Babylon

arm above shoulder level. Grace was so great a batsman that even when he was young they suggested changing the rules to meet his skill. He was a terror to bowlers. In one match against a weakly-captained Yorkshire side, the bowlers went on strike and argued on the field who should go on bowling against the champion. And for years he played on wickets far more favourable to the bowlers than those of today. You might get a "shooter"—perhaps from a fast bowler—at any moment. Moreover Grace was a bowler. He took nearly three thousand wickets in first-class cricket. In 1902, when he was 54, against one of the strongest Australian sides, he took five wickets for 29 runs.

Overtopped the Lot

But there is still a lot more to be said. His career saw cricket become the very popular game it is, and no single man did so much as he to make it popular. Among cricketers he stands out as an Alpine peak among hills. In a literal sense this was true. He was a very tall man, and as the years passed he put on a lot of weight and his figure became huge. It was topped by a great black beard, so that when he was batting or fielding he over-topped everybody and was easily the most conspicuous figure on the ground. You might

sit in a tram with Bradman or Hammond, or pass them in the street, and not recognise them, but Grace you could not miss anywhere. His face was better known than any in England. He was shaggy, bear-like, and ponderous, and ambled rather than walked. A great cricketer has left a classic description of "W.G." in action as a bowler: "An enormous man rushing up to the wickets with both elbows out, a great black beard blowing on both sides of him, a huge yellow cap on top of a dark, swarthy face."

The Practical Man

What manner of man was he? As keen on the game as anybody ever was, tireless, dominating, sometimes irascible, but simple in his mental processes. He was no theorist. They had an argument one night about the best way to play a ball turning from the off. Grace said the best way was "to put the bat against it." In this anecdote there is the strength and weakness of his nation. As a captain he was conventional, and not among the great. Not for him the finesse of Noble or Bradman. In Canada he made the same speech of about 30 words wherever he went, with slight variations. He had never seen, so he said, "better bowling," or "a better ground," or "better fellows," or "prettier ladies," or "tasted better