



England v Australia 1905

By one of those coincidences of chronology which delight the composers of articles, Australia have toured England this summer exactly a century after their predecessors did so in 1905. Let us be honest at the start: the tour of 1905 did not have the aura of that of 1899 nor that of 1902 but there is a sufficiency of interest for us to consider it. We may pertinently ask how much the contest for the Ashes was seen as such by contemporaries.

By 1905 the Ashes may be said to have achieved their majority (and more). First spoken of by 1882, the metaphor was principally taken up by the Australian press and rather less enthusiastically by, for example, the *London Sportsman*, a year later. There are at least four distinct accounts of their origin, the most persuasive being that associated with the town of Rupertswood in the State of Victoria. The mythology refused to die and 'Plum' Warner's team of 1903/04 gave it respectability in his book "How We Recovered the Ashes", marking the triumph of the first official MCC tour to Australia. Yet an English reviewer could comment that the title was 'slang and of very temporary importance'.

In the immediate future he had a point. Not once, in the contemporary periodical "Cricket", nor in "Wisden" was the term used in each's lengthy coverage of the Test matches in 1905. But in the long-run, the Ashes had come to stay, to remain a prize of mythical substance and elusive value, and their home a matter of controversy in our own times. One essential difference must be declared: those who came in 1905 sought to reclaim what had been lost in 1903/04. Those who came in 2005 had (in English eyes) held them for far too long.

Writing a letter to his old friend, Sir Pelham Warner, in 1941 (during the darkest days of war), the Australia captain of 1905, Sir Stanley Jackson, recalled a conversation with his opposite number, Joe Darling. "After tossing the coin for the First Test, Darling said to me, 'How old are you?' and then 'When is your birthday?'. 'Then we are twins. This is a record which will never be repeated.'" And, one hundred years later, the 'record' stands. We may continue the strange comparisons between the two men. Both became legislators, Darling for the Tasmanian Assembly of which he became Speaker, and Jackson for the British Parliament. Both were styled 'the Honourable' - Darling by virtue of Office and Jackson by family title. Each was decorated for public service and they would die in 1946 and 1947 respectively. There the similarities end, for Jackson would win the toss in all five Test matches. When the two men met in the Scarborough Festival at the conclusion of the Tour Darling, stripped to the waist, proposed a wrestling match instead of the toss of a coin. But dignity prevailed and Jackson won again.

In the series itself, England were undoubtedly the stronger side although at 119 for seven on the opening day at Trent Bridge the omens were not good. In the end they led on first innings by 25 runs and at no time thereafter were they ever behind on an innings. England won at Trent Bridge by 213 runs; the Lord's Test was spoilt by rain when England led in the second innings by 251 runs with five wickets in hand. The game at Old Trafford brought an overwhelming English victory by an innings and 80 runs. At Headingley, again after a declaration with five wickets down, Australia faced another large

target. Bad light brought a close ten minutes early with Australia 175 runs behind with three wickets remaining. The Fourth Test at The Oval left Australia to get 329 runs in two and a half hours. Little attempt was made and the match concluded with the visitors over 200 behind with six wickets left. England thus won by two matches to nil. Test matches in those days were of only three days' duration. Two of the three drawn games were affected by weather.

The averages gave a distinct pointer to the superiority of England. For the first time in an Anglo-Australia series one country took the top six places in both batting and bowling averages. Jackson led from the front with a batting average of 70.28 and a bowling one of 15.46. England's top batsmen after him - C.B.Fry, J.T.Tyldesley, Wilfred Rhodes, R.H.Spooner and A.C. MacLaren all topped the Australian R.A.Duff. Collectively, they represent the outstanding batsmanship of cricket's 'Golden Age'. Of the Australian bowling Frank Laver came top but behind all except George Hirst. A contemporary remarked before the tour, "English bowlers have little to learn from the Australians." The achievements of the Australian Laver call for comment. Before the tour, the Australians regarded him as a player "whose services might occasionally be sought" and he had come principally as manager. But he would return with the 1909 side more flatteringly described now as "a bowler whose accuracy and well-concealed variation of pace suited English wickets well". (His choice, yet again, as player-manager for the triangulator Series of 1912 was blocked by the Board of Control. This conflict between player-power and the administrators led to six of the principal Australians refusing to tour in what proved to be a rather less-than-successful experiment.)

The strength of England's batting explains why Warner was never picked at home for any of his 15 Tests despite being the successful "and reigning" captain at the start of the 1905 series. His leadership qualities were never in doubt and he would captain England twice in Australia (though illness almost totally marred his appearances in 1911/12). In other matches, against the 1905 Australians, he lay 18th in the list with an average of 28.

The British public flocked to the Tests and Cricket commented that "people who pay a shilling to see an Australian match are apt to economise by saving two sixpences over other matches for in these hard times there is not much money to spare". A striking comparison between 1905 and 2005 may simply be made in comparing prices. Where a Test match ticket may today come close to £50, its cost a century earlier was a thousand times less. Among those who watched one day's play of the Fifth Test in 1905 were the future Edward VIII and George VI, accompanied by Prince George of Sparta, whom the press described as "an enthusiast over the game" - with, presumably, few opportunities to display his enthusiasm.

Those 1905 Australians, remarked Wisden, "apart from the matches against England, had a brilliant tour". The only county match lost was against Essex, "with far less than their full strength...and stale and tired after a long journey from Dublin". They had their moments of great triumph when, for example, W.W. Armstrong made, in his 303 not out against Somerset, the then highest score ever made by an Australian in England. Yorkshire and Lancashire were beaten in successive matches by 174 runs and 244 runs while, at the very end of a long tour, Northamptonshire, Lancashire and Kent were beaten in successive matches each by an innings.

A century ago Anglo-Australian Test matches held our ancestors in thrall as they do today in a world of challenges and issues in sport which in those far-off times cannot ever have been dreamt of.