

Richard Haynes (2012): Cricket and Broadcasting, Sport in History, 32:3, 460-463

Jack Williams, *Cricket and broadcasting*. Manchester University Press, 2011, 240p, HB 978-0719-0-7748-7.

The relationship between cricket and broadcasting has been written about more than any other form of mediated sport. This is partly because the sport enjoys a voluminous catalogue of memoir, biography, journalism and analysis, much of which has been written by former players turned broadcasters, or journalists who also ply their trade in radio or television. There have also those from within broadcasting, such as Brian Johnston, John Arlott and Peter Baxter, who over the years have shared their insights on commentary and the peculiarities in production of cricket broadcasting. In spite of this literature, there has not been a detailed academic history of cricket and broadcasting, which is why Jack Williams' new book in the Studies in Popular Culture series by Manchester University Press is most welcome.

Cricket and broadcasting brings together much of the literature on the subject with archival evidence and interviews with those who have made this field of broadcasting a much treasured aspect of British popular culture. Williams makes a compelling argument for a need to develop a detailed study of the relationship between cricket and broadcasting in order to understand how radio, and then television, transformed the sport. Furthermore, in concentrating on how cricket has been covered by both forms of media, it is possible to shed light on how the sport is understood by the public, as editors, producers and commentators frame and shape both our consumption and knowledge of cricket.

The book opens with a brief overview of existing studies of broadcast sport. Williams acknowledges the poverty of broadcast histories of sport, particularly within general histories of radio and television, which, with few exceptions, provide limited details of how sport became a core ingredient of broadcast content and helped to build popular audiences.

Drawing from papers held at a number of archives including the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham, the MCC library and the papers of the England and Wales Cricket Board the remaining chapters build a historical narrative of how BBC radio, and then television, developed their coverage and experimented with their forms of programming. When compared to today's blanket coverage of the sport on radio and pay-TV the extent of pre-War broadcasts of Test cricket were selective and intermittent. However, Williams notes there were experiments in overseas coverage of cricket, including what were called 'synthetic commentaries' from the Bodyline series of 1932-33 by the French commercial channel Poste Parisien (p.12).

In the post-War era, as television grew in popularity in British households, so the extent of television coverage also increased exponentially. In a very useful table of scheduled hours of televised cricket from 1950 to 2004, Williams illustrates the growth of coverage and the dramatic effect the arrival of dedicated sports channels, such as Sky Sports, have had on the viewers access to the sport. In comparison to other sports, cricket has received more coverage than most. Williams calculates that from the mid-1950s to the 1980s cricket received more television coverage than any other sport, which was given a further fillip in the 1990s from the dedicated coverage of BSkyB.

The emergent relationship between cricket and broadcasting also had economic consequences for the sport. Chapter 2 traces the development of

negotiations between the governing bodies of cricket and broadcasters, which for more than three decades was dominated by agreements between the BBC and the MCC. Williams observes: 'Until the end of the twentieth century the history of cricket broadcasting in England is very largely the history of how the BBC covered cricket' (p.30). The BBC's annual payments for radio coverage ranged from £738 in 1947 to more than £90,000 in the 1990s. In television, rights fees ranged from £5000 in 1954 to more than £11m in the mid-1990s. In the main, income from the rights to radio coverage were insignificant, and the value of television rights to cricket were suppressed for many years because of a lack of competition from commercial television. Williams plots the changing nature of rights deals and the increased competition from Channel 4, Channel 5 and most crucially BSkyB whose predominance over all forms of televised cricket, from twenty-20, one day limited overs and Test cricket is now virtually absolute in the UK. As Williams notes in Chapter 6 on the financing of cricket, television has been central to its survival, not merely through rights income, but also in its draw to advertisers and sponsors. Cricket, perhaps more than most sports, has been willing to adapt its rules and competitions to suit the needs of television and commercial investors. Income from television enables the county clubs to survive, and as Williams concludes somewhat soberly: 'Broadcasting is now the lifeblood of cricket in England' (p.152).

In chapters 3 and 4 Williams focuses on the presentation of cricket in radio and television. In radio, the BBC had innovated ball-by-ball coverage through its flagship programme *Test Match Special* (TMS), and although it struggled to find a home on any one particular BBC network, moving from Radio 3, to Radio 2, Radio 4 and latterly Radio 5 Live Sports Extra, it has nevertheless developed cult status in British broadcasting more generally. As the book reveals, a large part of its success

comes from the combination of commentary and listener engagement – the reading of letters, phone calls, and email (to which we might also add social media like Twitter). *TMS* commentary has also developed outside the norm of mainstream sports production, which has helped foster a very esoteric form of broadcasting, exemplified through commentators such as Brian Johnston, John Arlott and Henry Blofeld. As Williams notes the casual style of *TMS* has often drawn criticism from BBC Sports management for being too ‘self-indulgent’, but there is no denying that over its longstanding run, the programme has brought a wider audience to cricket via the radio.

Broadcasting has also been a highly successful breeding ground for former players to build second careers as commentators, and Williams provides detailed accounts of how different commentators developed their own personal styles. Again, it is noted that not all were liked, and the issues surrounding the transformation of a star cricketer into an accomplished broadcaster is at the heart of this debate. The book explains the differences between radio and television commentary on cricket, and Williams suggests: ‘Many commentators have seemed more suited to one medium’ (p.93).

Chapter 7 raises an interesting question, whether the broadcasting of cricket has encouraged and affected the playing of the game. Williams reviews the evidence, which he admits is thin. He focuses on the way in which the introduction of limited overs cricket has changed the techniques of play, with young players emulating the styles of play that enable the fast accumulation of runs, perhaps to the detriment of Test cricket. Williams suggests the exposure of women’s cricket on niche sports channels has led to higher numbers of women and girls playing the sport, but does not dwell on the nature of this coverage. The book also traces historical shifts in umpiring

driven by broadcasting and the use of television technology as an aid to decision making.

The book concludes by reviewing the changing nature of cricket in the 21st Century, with its focus on cricket stars and the commercial imperatives that accompany them. The opportunities for leading players, and indeed broadcasters, to exploit their notoriety in the sport is explained in detail, with a catalogue of big-money deals emerging in the last decade or so, particularly in India with the development of lucrative contracts for the Indian Premier League. The betting scandal of 2010 came too late for inclusion in this book, but Williams acknowledges that the drive by television to build new audiences for cricket has left the sport totally beholden to the whims of both television executives and commercial investors who may not have the integrity of the game at heart. His final sentence in the book is therefore quite telling: 'The survival of cricket depends on how it shapes its relationship with broadcasting (p.219). Because this may well be so, means that understanding how cricket got to this state of affairs is more important than ever. Jack Williams book goes a long way to telling that story.

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