

Chapter 4

Hugh de Sélincourt, *The Cricket Match*, and Englishness between the Wars

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In 1924, the novelist Hugh de Sélincourt published a little volume entitled *The Cricket Match*. It marked a departure from his usual, more serious literary productions, books that interrogated the relationship between the sexes and urged more liberal attitudes to female sexuality.¹ *The Cricket Match* belonged to another world entirely. It described in detail a single day in the life of a village, Tillingfold, when its cricket team played and triumphed over neighbours and arch-rivals, Raveley. Light-hearted yet insightful, it caught the imagination of the cricket-reading public at the time and has been republished many times in the last hundred years. The book's success made de Sélincourt an important commentator on cricket in the interwar years.

De Sélincourt was by no means the first novelist to write about the game. Indeed, the buffoonery of village cricket had provided an irresistible target for storytellers ever since Charles Dickens's *Pickwickians* stumbled into Dingley Dell; the somewhat absurd sketch of the game by A.G. Macdonnell in *England, Their England* (1933) demonstrated that the tradition was flourishing a century later. In *The Cricket Match*, however, de Sélincourt found a new way to discuss the village game. He refused to treat his characters as a cast of clowns. Instead, he delineated them with the skill he would have brought to bear on the figures in a 'serious' novel, exploring their personalities, circumstances and aspirations. What was offered to the reader was a group of sympathetic three-dimensional figures, engaged in a common enterprise. The approach lent the book a universal quality: de Sélincourt captured with uncanny precision the range of emotions that all cricketers experience before, during and after a game, at whatever level they are playing.

However, as this chapter will demonstrate, re-reading *The Cricket Match* at the remove of one hundred years suggests there was more to the book's success than simply a keen psychological reading of the game. It also offered insightful reflections on contemporary society. De Sélincourt used his focus on a single

¹ Malcolm Pittock, 'Hugh de Sélincourt: A Forgotten Anti-War Novelist', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 41 (2012), 476.

cricket match as a means to explore issues like social class and community in the village; it became a vehicle to celebrate ways of being 'male' and, ultimately, 'English' at a time when war had stripped away many of the old certainties on which society had rested before 1914, and when mass democracy posed unknowable dangers to traditional ways of life.

Hugh de Sélincourt

Hugh de Sélincourt was born in 1878, the tenth child of Charles de Sélincourt, who ran a very profitable fabric importing business.² Hugh attended Dulwich College and Oxford University and then turned his hand to literary pursuits – presumably with some sort of income from family coffers. He became drama critic for the *Star* and later literary critic for the *Observer* – a role he gave up in 1914.³ In 1907 he published his first novel, *A Boy's Marriage*, and seven more followed before the outbreak of war. What part he played in the war is not clear, though he does not appear to have served.⁴ He did, however, write several acerbically anti-war novels during the conflict, highlighting both the futility of war and the unthinking hypocrisy of those who supported it when other people's lives were being sacrificed for their own principles.⁵

After the war, de Sélincourt and his wife Janet moved to a house named Sand Pits in the hamlet of Thakeham, near Storrington in the Sussex Downs. He clearly enjoyed the experience of living in a village. His surviving diary for 1924 suggests that while he worked hard at writing he pursued an active life beyond his study walls. He was a keen walker, a voracious reader and an avid gardener, working long hours digging, planting and rolling the gardens alongside Ted, his gardener. He also enjoyed a busy social life, with people calling into Sand Pits on a regular basis; he himself would often drop in and have 'tea with the Teds', as he affectionately called the gardener's family, or play billiards at the Storrington Village Hall of whose committee he was a member.⁶ He and Janet were on good terms with the Aggs family who purchased Little

² Charles, the illegitimate child of an English mother and a member of the French court, moved back to England on his father's death and was naturalised in 1859: TNA, HO/188/2862.

³ De Sélincourt's niece, Dorothy, married A.A. Milne while his elder brother Basil was an essayist and novelist who married bestselling American novelist Mary Douglas Sedgwick. Two other siblings pursued academic careers: Ernest was a Wordsworth specialist who became Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1828–33) and then Deputy Head of Birmingham University; Agnes became head of Westfield College.

⁴ Pittock, 'Hugh de Sélincourt', 476.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 482–3.

⁶ West Sussex Record Office, de Sélincourt MSS 1/2.

Thakeham, a superb Lutyens house, in 1919, and he also developed a very close friendship with Vera Pragnell, who had set up The Sanctuary, a Utopian community on 27 acres of Sussex heathland, in 1923.⁷

Woven through his life in the village was cricket. A keen schoolboy cricketer, he had dropped the game after leaving Dulwich, and it was not until he moved to Sand Pits that his old interest reasserted itself. Introduced to the Storrington club by Ted, he played throughout the interwar years and was captain for most of the 1920s. *The Cricket Match*, which was written at the end of the 1923 season, draws heavily on his experiences of the village and its team. Indeed, both the village and several of the characters were recognisable to contemporaries when the book appeared in 1924.⁸

Storrington was a large village. In 1921 it had about 1,200 residents, having recovered from a late nineteenth-century decline occasioned by the railway passing it by. The village was a shopping and service centre for the surrounding district, with drapers, shoemakers, butchers and solicitors; it even had a bank which opened for two hours twice a week. Cricket was played on the Recreation Ground, a piece of land acquired under the powers given to the new Parish Council established in 1894. In the book, though, these political and economic considerations are allowed to fade into the background and the village is re-christened Tillingfold, a name evoking the tilled land and folded sheep typical of Downland agriculture. It was in this bucolic setting that the cricket match to which the novel is devoted took place.

The Cricket Match

De Sélincourt was still a relatively new arrival in Storrington when he wrote *The Cricket Match*. He was part of that influx to rural districts in the 1920s and 1930s tracked by historians such as Jeremy Burchardt.⁹ His ‘outsider’ status allowed him to bring a critical eye to the scenes he surveyed, even as – like so many other in-migrants in this period – he romanticised the rural [communities](#)

⁷ Clive Webb, ‘Utopian dreams, Earthly Realities’, *History Today*, 73 (Jan. 2023) <<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/utopian-dreams-earthly-realities>> (accessed 4 Sept. 2023).

⁸ As often commented upon in reviews: e.g. ‘The Cricket Match: A Village Epic’, *Worthing Gazette*, 4 June 1924, 10. De Sélincourt dedicated later cricketing volumes to the team or individual players.

⁹ Jeremy Burchardt, ‘Historicizing Counter-urbanization: In-migration and the Reconstruction of Rural Space in Berkshire (UK), 1901–51’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38 (2012), 155–66.

of which he was now a part.¹⁰ De Sélincourt was conscious of this, and in the novel cast himself as Paul Gavinier, captain of the cricket team, and has him reflect how his French-sounding name set him apart from his fellows.

The book opens with an immersive sensory portrait of day-break in Tillingfold: the sights, sounds and smells that made it real – the ‘picturesque cottages’, the sound of the train passing five miles away that emphasised the village’s remoteness, the smell of the ‘sweet air touched by the savour of the sea on the far side of the Downs’.¹¹ But his real interest is the people and the community and attention turns quickly to life in the village itself. Tillingfold is, of course, Storrington in the thinnest of disguises, and much of what de Sélincourt claims for it can be verified in the columns of the contemporary press. Particularly striking is the extent to which many of the amenities in the village depended on voluntary activities and the contributions and leadership of the wealthier members of society. Thus, in Tillingfold as in real-life Storrington, the rich families subscribed to events such as the Flower Show, became vice-presidents of the Village Room or the Cricket and Football Clubs (subscribing accordingly), and served on the Parish Council. The existence of such recreational and associational facilities were, as Keith Snell has written, signs of community flourishing, especially when bonded with the local government of the parish, the legal manifestation of local belonging.¹²

Yet de Sélincourt was not blind to the fact that life was hard for many in Tillingfold, and that the sense of dissatisfaction it engendered was pregnant with mischief for his ideal of settled community. The second chapter foregrounds the different realities experienced by members of the Tillingfold cricket team. First, we encounter Sid Smith, who lives in a small house with his wife and a ‘blinkin’ swarm o’ kids’.¹³ The family is poor, and his primary concern on the morning of the match is the state of his ‘forlorn, soiled [cricket] trousers’: he begs his wife to do what she can to make them presentable while he goes out to work for the morning. After a breakfast comprising ‘two large slices of bread and dripping at the corner of the kitchen table’, he sets out on the three-mile walk to his work, as a hod-carrier to a bricklayer.

¹⁰ Kristin Bluemel, ‘The Regional and the Rural in Companion to British Literature of the 1930s’, in James Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the 1930s* (Cambridge, 2019), 160–1.

¹¹ Hugh de Sélincourt, *The Cricket Match* (London, 1924) [hereafter *TCM*], 9–10.

¹² K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006), 499, 504; Jeremy Burchardt, ‘“A New Rural Civilisation”: Village Halls, Community and Citizenship in the 1920s’, in Paul Brassley, et al. (eds), *The English Countryside Between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?* (Woodbridge, 2006), 26–35.

¹³ *TCM*, 23.

Sid's experience – and his dissatisfaction with his lot – is contrasted with that of the young man in the local great house, Edgar Trine. He is brought morning tea in bed, served by the 'neat housemaid', Kate, and some comedy ensues as he directs her to choose which of his five pairs of whites he will wear.¹⁴ On rising he comes down to a fine breakfast involving freshly sliced ham, and his mother announces that she's delighted he's playing for the village: "With all this discontent that's about nowadays, it is so good for them all", she says: "I am sure we all ought to mix with the people far more than we do." Edgar's assumption that his class position entitles him to lead is also made clear, as he remarks: 'Best cricket going, village cricket... Real keenness. Oh, I'm all for village cricket. If I were down here more, I wouldn't mind running the show.'¹⁵

The third character to whom we are introduced is John McLeod, Secretary and Treasurer of the Tillingfold Cricket Club. His role in the novel is to exude contentment with his lot and empathy with his fellow villagers. As he tells his wife: 'I've always had the luck, Maria. Here we are. Nice little house in a beautiful village.' On this particular morning he gets his breakfast in bed: coffee, toast, two boiled eggs and several rashers of bacon. As ever, he is hugely appreciative: 'The height of luxury... Waited on like a lord. Breakfast in bed! Well, I never. No man ever had such a wife!'¹⁶ After she has cleared away his breakfast things, however, he finds himself dwelling on all the 'incomprehensibly unnecessary unhappiness... he knew existed in the beautiful village: the crossness, the unkindness, the gossip. "Ah, they've not all had your luck, my boy", he said to himself to appease his anger. "Suppose you had to shovel rubble all day like Sid Smith, where'd your temper be of an evening; or to do any other work you couldn't fancy, with another chap bossing you all the time".¹⁷

The characters of Sid, Trine and John McLeod are not to be read solely in class terms; they also stand for different visions of community. McLeod represents the best of the existing community; a long scene early in the book concerns the long-awaited delivery of some smart blue caps for the cricket team, and their distribution. However, McLeod realises that Sid probably cannot spare three shillings for such a thing and so contrives a way to give him the cap; Sam sees through this, identifies the true cause of the gift and feels a mixture of pleasure at having the cap and humiliation at not being able to pay for it.¹⁸ It is a suggestion, perhaps, that the older system of the better off looking after the poor through well-intentioned charity is no longer a straightforward thing. A similar point is made in relation to Trine: his easy assumption of leadership

¹⁴ *TCM*, 25.

¹⁵ *TCM*, 27.

¹⁶ *TCM*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *TCM*, 72–6.

jars, and, we are made privy to the struggles that Gauvinier has in actually getting an XI together and then managing their individual foibles, pridefulness and petulance.¹⁹ De Sélincourt seems to saying that the days when the lord of the manor snapped his fingers and the community fell into line were long gone.

The figure of Sid is perhaps the most engaging. His life is hard and his burdens are many; de Sélincourt's focus throughout the novel is on how cricket, and the sense of community it engenders, can save such a man from the siren song of socialism. For class envy is not absent from the village. Early in the novel we meet another member of the XI, Tom Hunter, a local mechanic who has never been the same since coming back from the War and grumbles about everything including the cliquishness of the committee that runs the club. He is juxtaposed with an interesting 'outsider' character, Waite, a stockbroker from Beckenham who is clearly a very good cricketer and, visiting the village, gets a game. When another teammate, Bannister, praises Waite's batting, de Sélincourt inserts this short dialogue:

'Look at the chance for practice these gents get,' Tom, who was apt to be sore on this subject, rather crossly remarked.

'You always takes what chances there are, eh?' said Bannister, who thought Tom slack in attending practice.

Bannister's rejoinder is important because it highlights how de Sélincourt elaborates class tensions in order to knock them down. The detailed drawing out of the characters, the exploration of their hopes and feelings, represents the players as a community of individuals, each with his own skills, opportunities and hardships, bound together as cricketers; they are not just creatures of class.

In this, of course, de Sélincourt reflects the time-honoured notion that cricket was essentially classless – that lords and labourers could and did play happily alongside one another, and that the everyday distinctions that set them apart were subsumed within a larger sporting unity when they stepped onto the field.²⁰ In Tillingfold de Sélincourt records how each player, 'as he came to the ground, got slowly caught up in the spirit of the game, emerging... from the habits of worry and care; as each man was given the chance not too frequently offered in modern life of living for a time outside himself, with a common purpose, in which he took a genuine interest.'²¹ And later in the game as the

¹⁹ *TCM*, 47.

²⁰ Anthony Bateman, *Cricket, Literature and Culture: Symbolising the Nation, Destabilising Empire* (Farnham, 2009), 7; Matthew Cragoe, 'The Parish Elite at Play? Cricket, Community and the 'Middling Sort' in Eighteenth-Century Kent', *History*, 102 (2017), 45–67.

²¹ *TCM*, 93–4.

action reaches a crescendo of excitement, Gauvinier revels ‘in the good feeling that emanates from eleven men, joined together for a common end. And all the men forgot themselves and were happy in this good feeling, the most tonic, healthful feeling that exists.’²²

A particularly good practical example of this spirit of unity – and its limits – comes later in the novel, when Sid is bowling and persuades a Ravelly batsman to send up a catch that Trine takes. As the team celebrates together, de Sélincourt notes, ‘There was no disparity at all between the two men now. They were just two men in flannels.’ Yet de Sélincourt recognises that this on-field fellowship is potentially transient. The next evening, he writes, Trine would not understand the rather surly salute he would get should he pass Sid on the road at the end of a working day, when poor Sid was exhausted and Trine was simply going home on his chestnut mare to change for dinner.

The experience of that fellowship on the field was nevertheless important in de Sélincourt’s estimation, and it was supplemented by other factors which, collectively, helped the individuals playing the game to overcome their differing material circumstances and place identity with community over that with class. In de Sélincourt’s story, several interlocking processes worked together to create connection rather than division. The first of these was the sense of manliness gained from playing cricket.²³ Several characters are singled out,²⁴ but the idea was most fully realised in relation to Sid Smith.²⁵ De Sélincourt’s description of Smith walking to the wicket draws it out in detail:

Sid Smith walked slowly, proudly, happily towards the wicket. On the cricket ground he felt sure he was a man, a fact which the difficult circumstances of his life obscured at other times, for he worked under a skilled labourer and felt, when he felt anything, more like the other fellow’s extra arm than a separate entity; and at home – though of course he could assert himself at times and feel a bully... he was really more like one of four children... Neither at work nor at home, somehow, did he ever feel a man – the kind, good-natured creature he persisted in dimly imagining he ought to be.

On the cricket field, however, he achieves that status.

A second context was the sense of long continuity represented by the game in the village. The experience of playing cricket binds together players across generations – both on and off the field. Early in the book we are introduced

²² *TCM*, 231.

²³ Anthony Bateman, ‘Performing Imperial Masculinities: The Discourse and Practice of Cricket’, in Rainer Edif and Antony Rowland (eds), *Performing Masculinity* (London, 2010), 78–94.

²⁴ *TCM*, 41, 132.

²⁵ *TCM*, 139–40.

to Storrington's rotund and rather elderly umpire, Sam Bird. He had played cricket for Tillingfold before many of the players' parents 'had begun to walk out together,' and he knew the name and deeds of every man who had played cricket 'within the last forty years and more.' His presence on the field was matched by the gaze of former players on the boundary's edge. When the latest recruit to the village XI, fifteen-year-old Horace Cairie, pulls off a brave stop, it catches the eye of the aged Mr Hodkiss, who had been Storrington's leading batsman over thirty years ago.²⁶ 'I do like to see a young one slippy in the field,' he announces to no-one in particular: 'That's a good little lad, that is; a good little lad.'²⁷ And this leads into a passage of reflection which ties the current scene playing out in front of his eyes into the dim and distant past, fifty or sixty years before, in the same village.

And memory took him back with all the ease imaginable to the many, many years ago when he himself was a keen little nipper, playing among men, winning his spurs; took him back (so strong is the power of fellow-feeling) so vividly and so swiftly and so completely that, could he have caught a glimpse of himself, he would not have recognised as himself the queer, bent, wrinkled, fattish chap on the bench, old now, so old.²⁸

If cricket thus represented a strong bond between generations of players, it also provided a focal point for expressions of communal identity. In *The Cricket Match*, spectators from the village turn up in surprising numbers to watch the game and are active participants throughout. De Sélincourt makes repeated reference to the way in which they not only uttered catcalls and shouted things like 'Good old Jim!' or 'Well hit, mate!', but at times of particular excitement would burst into chanting. Thus, as the game approached its climax, and young Horace took an extraordinary catch, the crowd found its voice: 'And now the old catch, to the tune of the church chimes, broke out round the ground in steady earnest: "Play up Tillingfold; play up, Tillingfold!"'²⁹

The image of cricketers being urged to 'Play up!' by their fellow villagers to the tune of the village church bells is a powerful testament to the notion that the game embodied the whole community at an almost mystical level, that it was – as Gauvinier reflects – 'a perfect little work of art, in which the whole community took part'³⁰ Indeed, as Ross McKibbin has suggested, cricket had a greater social reach and unifying impact than any other sport in interwar England, precisely because it was 'played and followed throughout the country

²⁶ *TCM*, 130–1.

²⁷ *TCM*, 231.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *TCM*, 243; cf. David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), 66.

³⁰ *TCM*, 90.

by all social classes and by both men and women.³¹ Other games, notably football, were undoubtedly played by more people, but in de Sélincourt's estimation the two games were not comparable. Indeed, in *The Cricket Match* football is presented as a symptom of the disruption that the war had caused to village life. Before the match, the umpire Sam Bird comes across a group of lads kicking a football around on the field and reflects that much has changed: 'The lads have all run wild... There's no doing anything with them. Some say it's due to their fathers being away at the war, and I may say that I am of the same opinion also.'³²

De Sélincourt readily admitted the attractions of football for youngsters: 'Off with your jackets: four decent goal posts ready at once... The more the merrier. No old 'uns need apply. Dribble and hack and punt and charge about. Sweat and enjoy yourselves.'³³ Cricket by contrast required huge amounts of kit and always involved someone looking over your shoulder, saying "Oh, you ought to play with a straight bat" or "Keep your right leg still, my boy" or "Watch the ball" or "Where's that left elbow now?". It drained all the spontaneity from the game. However, it was precisely this aspect, of the game's lore and craft being handed down from one generation to the next, that de Sélincourt felt made cricket a superior pastime than football. The process of intergenerational transmission, bridging differences of age and class as it moulded the next generation of players who would represent the village on the cricket field fostered both the cohesion and continuity of the community. It was something that had been imperilled by the war having removed so many men from the villages.³⁴

The Cricket Match was thus more than a simple fable about a day of sport. De Sélincourt used cricket as a vehicle to explore a vision of a community bound together by time and tradition, qualities which trumped other divisions. In doing so, as the next section suggests, he fashioned a distinctive new vision for village cricket, one that would come to enjoy enormous popularity between the wars.

Village Cricket and Community

Cricket emerged from the First World War with one of its major narratives severely compromised. Before 1914, it was common for commentators to dwell on the game's ability to develop character, and particularly those traits which

³¹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 332.

³² *TCM*, 83–4.

³³ *TCM*, 80–1.

³⁴ The war's impact on cricket was often explored by interwar writers. See Bateman, *Cricket, Literature and Culture*, 64–9; Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Oxford, 2013), 190–1.

would make a boy into a soldier worthy of defending the empire in its colonial wars. Sir Henry Newbolt's well-known poem *Vitai Lampada*, with its juxtaposed scenes of a hard-fought school cricket match in verse one, and a desperate military encounter in some far-flung foreign field in verse two, with the repeated exhortation to 'Play up! Play up! And play the game!', is perhaps the best-known example of the genre.³⁵

As the poem's third and final verse reminds us, however, the poem merely codifies a message that was being taught at all the great public schools in England at this time: that cricket and service to the nation went hand in hand. The message was actively proselytised by those such as the author and public speaker E.W. Hornung. As the historian of Uppingham School, Malcolm Tozer, has written, men like Hornung promoted the idea that cricket was 'a training ground for life, and service to the Empire was the ultimate test'.³⁶ At Radley, it was said 'the playing fields became as important as the chapel'.³⁷

When war broke out in 1914, cricket and cricketers visibly 'played the game'. It was noted how enthusiastic the nation's cricketers were to enlist for the armed services. As Simon John has shown, the wider cultural context within which the type of people who played cricket made them especially susceptible to the 'swell of patriotism' which accompanied the outbreak of war.³⁸ The decision of the MCC to abandon first-class cricket for the duration of the war also stood in contrast to the refusal of the Football Association to contemplate such a move.³⁹

Yet long before the war ended, its terrible toll had begun to make the pre-1914 claims for the martial value of cricket sound hollow. *Punch* began to feature spiky pieces like that from 1917 in which a stand of young willow trees who, prior to the war, objected to being 'maimed' in order to supply young men with cricket bats, eventually contribute to the war effort by supplying artificial limbs for soldiers maimed at the front – young men who will now never play cricket.⁴⁰ It was little wonder, therefore, as Alison Light has remarked, that after 1918 the

³⁵ Jonathan F. Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997), 97.

³⁶ Malcolm Tozer, 'A Sacred Trinity – Cricket, School, Empire: E.W. Hornung and his Young Guard', in J.A. Mangan (ed.), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (Abingdon, 1992), 17–18. J.A. Mangan, 'Muscular, Militaristic and Manly': The British Middle-Class Hero as Moral Messenger', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 13 (1996), 38–47; Simon John, 'A Different Kind of Test Match: Cricket, English Society and the First World War', 33 (2013), 19–48.

³⁷ Keith A.P. Sandiford, 'England', in Brian Stoddart and Keith A.P. Sandiford (eds), *The Imperial Game: Cricket, Culture and Society* (Manchester, 1998), 16.

³⁸ John, "Different Kind of Test Match", 23–4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Punch*, 18 July 1917, 44.

'kind of supremacist glorification of nationhood which had inspired the imperialist endeavour in the late nineteenth century' quickly disappeared.⁴¹ It was replaced by a new 'national idea' where the English appeared as a home-loving, private people 'more inward-looking, more domestic and more private.'⁴² 'Self-effacement' was elevated to the status of a national virtue.

The new, inward-looking Englishness was associated with an embrace of the pastoral.⁴³ An explosion of interest in exploring the countryside during the interwar years, whether on foot, or by bicycle or car, testified to the contemporary thirst for experiencing the rural at first hand.⁴⁴ The suburbs, meanwhile, offered people a chance to (almost) live the dream. As Kristin Bluemel has noted, the middle classes, in particular, eagerly consumed both the quasi-rural opportunities offered by the new suburbs around major towns and cities and the 'outpouring of novels about regional and rural Britain' that reflected the deep concern of writers with the ideal of rural community.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, as Jonathan Parry, in a youthful foray into the twentieth century, has discussed, politicians picked up on the theme and sought to turn it to party advantage.⁴⁶ No one was more master of the art than the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, who reaffirmed and updated the party's traditional association with the countryside, offering wistful portraits of a unifying rural Englishness that was the birthright of all English citizens, and was the antithesis of the base materialism and class conflict allegedly offered by the Labour Party's socialism.⁴⁷ If

⁴¹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (Oxford, 1991), 8–11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁴³ Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920* (London, 1986), 62–88.

⁴⁴ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 62–100.

⁴⁵ Bluemel, 'The Regional and the Rural', 160–1. Even detective fiction was touched by this impulse: K.D.M. Snell, 'A Drop of Water from a Stagnant Pool? Inter-war Detective Fiction and the Rural Community', *Social History*, 35 (2010), 25–7.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Parry, 'The Quest for Leadership in Unionist Politics, 1886–1956', *Parliamentary History*, 12 (1993), 296–311.

⁴⁷ Matthew Cragoe, 'Conservatives, "Englishness" and "Civic Nationalism"', in Duncan Tanner et al. (eds), *Debating Nationhood and Governance in Britain, 1885–1939: Perspectives from the Four Nations* (Manchester, 2006), 192–210; John Ramsden, *Politics in the Age of Balfour and Baldwin* (London, 1978), 208–10; J.H. Grainger, *Patriotisms, 1900–1939* (London, 1986), 86–103. Though cf. Ross McKibbin, who cautions against taking Baldwin's views as representative of all grassroots Tory sentiment: 'Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the "Public" in Inter-war Britain', in idem, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 270. For the Labour Party and cricket, see Stephen G. Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: Organised Labour and Sport in Interwar Britain* (Manchester, 1988), 76.

this held only limited appeal for grass-roots Tories who wanted strong foreign policy and tax cuts to revive industry, it did help mould that ‘living, spiritual counter-atmosphere’ that appealed to the broader electorate and secured the Conservative Party a near monopoly on power between the wars.⁴⁸

As the nation’s self-image changed, so did cricket’s. While the notion that cricket’s great purpose was to train young men for the imperial battlefield was heard much less frequently after 1918,⁴⁹ and was openly criticised in *Punch* (which insisted in 1920 that the great purpose of games like cricket should be recreation, not martial preparation),⁵⁰ cricket retained its status as the ‘national sport’. As *The Times* put it in 1920, ‘cricket has probably had a greater share than any other of our national sports in making England what it is.’⁵¹ Now that England was to be defined by its local, pastoral associations, the valorisation of the village game was a logical step.

In *The Cricket Match*, de Sélincourt did precisely this, weaving together community and cricket in an authentically pastoral setting.⁵² Glory was to be found not on some foreign field, but on the local village green. The war, of course, was always there in the background. There was the unfortunate mechanic, Tom Hunter, who had endured ‘trench fever and poison gas’ during the conflict and now only occasionally – as during the match – ‘appeared the keen, kind and very bashful Tom Hunter he was intended to be’; there were the little boys playing football, apparently for want of the instruction in cricket they would have received as a matter of course had the war not taken all the men away to the front; there was even the cricket pitch itself, which had apparently only just been brought back to a semblance of its pre-war self, as if the very soil on which the community stood had taken half a decade to recover from the conflict.⁵³

But if the effects of the war were visible in the novel, so too were the redemptive elements of community and cricket itself. The way the team represented the village was carefully constructed. The wide range of social classes and ages comprehended within the XI demonstrated the reach of the game, something emphasised by the way the community itself came down to watch and engage in the contest.⁵⁴ The one-ness of the team and the community was under-

⁴⁸ Parry, ‘Leadership in Unionist Politics’, 304–5.

⁴⁹ ‘Revival of the Annual Dinner’, *Grantham Journal*, 13 Dec. 1919, 2; Bateman, *Cricket, Literature and Culture*, 55–9.

⁵⁰ ‘Epilogue’, *Punch*, 29 June 1921, 517–18.

⁵¹ John, “‘A Different kind of Test’”, 20.

⁵² Cf. Duncan Stone, ‘Suburbanization and Cultural Change: The Case of Club Cricket in Surrey, 1870–1939’, *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 44–68.

⁵³ *TCM*, 41, 132, 251.

⁵⁴ *TCM*, 242–3.

scored in the closing scenes, when the team melted back into the village to drink, dance and socialise with friends before making their way home.⁵⁵ And throughout the novel there was de Sélincourt's emphasis on cricket's unique ability to lift men above the immediate circumstances of life and instil a spirit of communal purpose all by itself.

The columns of *Punch* illustrate the contours of this newly domesticated village cricket well. The magazine had had some sport with rustics playing cricket before the war, highlighting either their buffoonery or – in the case of the famous 'Spinner' cartoons – the precocious ability of an unlettered village boy to unsettle his betters on the cricket field.⁵⁶ In the interwar years, however, the humour changed. Cartoonists strove to capture the sense of community associated with the game. A nice example from 1935 depicted a vicar talking with one of his parishioners and remarking that he sees her husband has been selected to be the umpire for Saturday's cricket match; 'Yes, 'e is Sir', she replies: 'E's quite ignorant of the game, Sir, but they know 'e'll be fair.'⁵⁷ While this picks up on the vagaries of village umpiring – a long-running joke in *Punch* – the exchange highlights the cardinal English virtue of fairness. Faith in that principle was the bedrock of everything else in these idealised communities.⁵⁸

Gender provided another hook on which to hang a joke. In pre-war cartoons, women were sometimes depicted at cricket matches mistakenly calling 'umpires' 'vampires' or something similar. In the interwar period, however, they are regularly presented as being at ease in less formal suburban or village settings and the humour derives from their possessing a slightly different, more social or domestic, set of priorities from their cricket-playing spouses.

A typical example from 1930 (fig. 4.1) showed a wife and her friends sitting comfortably at the boundary's edge in deck chairs, and the wife saying to her despondent husband, trailing off the field having been dismissed by the first ball of the match: 'This *is* nice darling; now you'll be able to enjoy the cricket with us!'⁵⁹

Another cartoon from 1935 (fig. 4.2) showed a somewhat panic-stricken fielder trying to get into position under a ball that had been skied to him near

⁵⁵ *TCM*, 249–56.

⁵⁶ *Punch*, 8 June 1904; 403; 9 Aug. 1905, 95; 15 May 1907, 347.

⁵⁷ *Punch*, 10 July 1935, 53.

⁵⁸ See Jonathan Duke-Evans, *The History and Significance of Fair Play: An English Tradition* (Oxford, 2023) for the sporting basis. For its wider embedding in popular culture, Rohan MacWilliam, 'Radicalism and Popular Culture: The Tichborne Case and the Politics of "Fair Play", 1867–1886', in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 57–60.

⁵⁹ *Punch*, 30 July 1930, 116.



Fig. 4.1. 'This is nice darling; now you'll be able to enjoy the cricket with us', *Punch*, 30 July 1930.

Fond Wife (first ball, first wicket). "THAT IS NICE, DARLING; NOW YOU'LL BE ABLE TO ENJOY THE CRICKET WITH US."

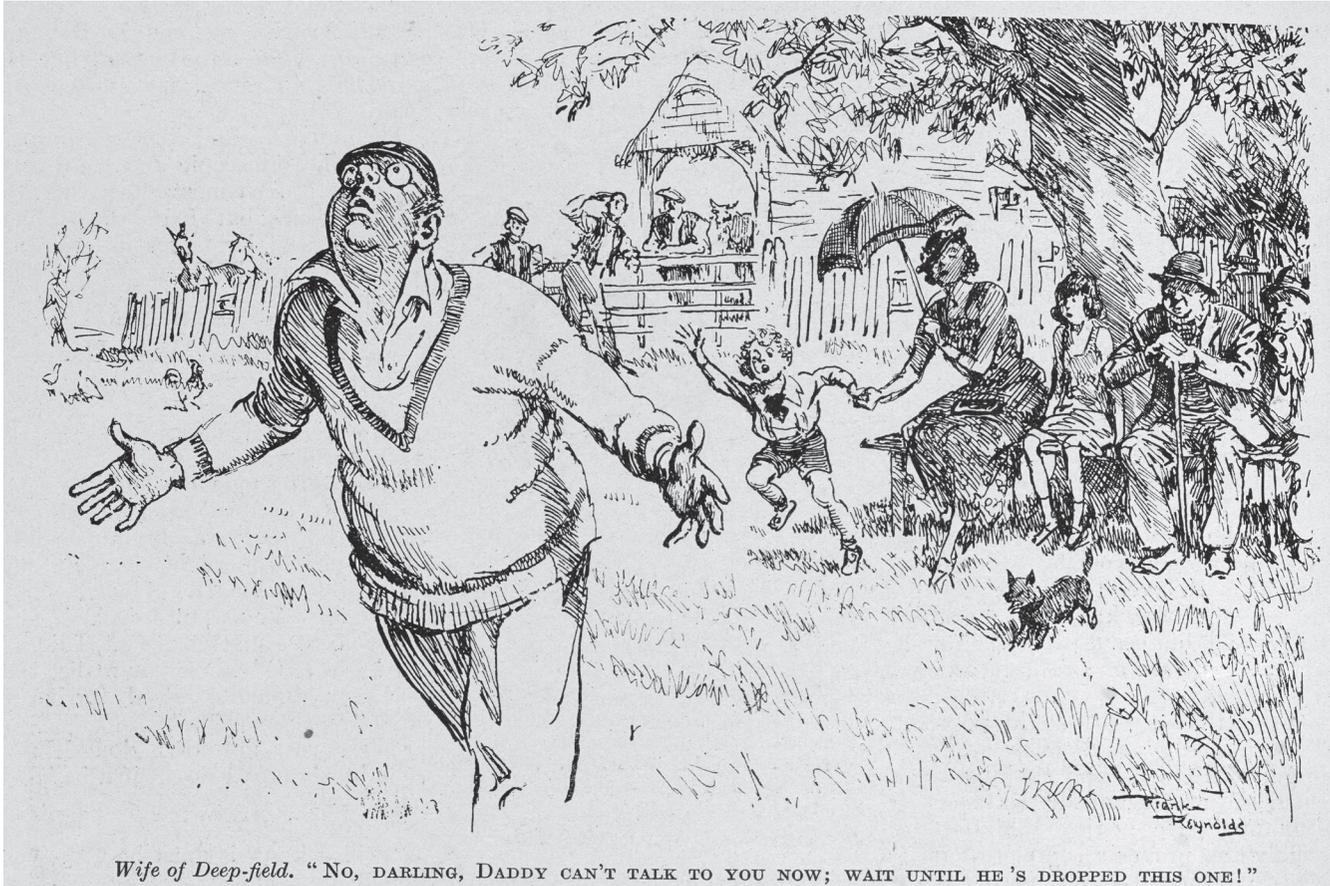


Fig. 4.2. 'No, darling, Daddy can't talk to you now; wait until he's dropped this one!', *Punch*, 8 May 1935.

the boundary, while in the background his wife restrains their little son and says 'No, darling, Daddy can't talk to you now; wait until he's dropped this one!'⁶⁰

Whatever the virtue of the humour, the cartoons demonstrate the way in which cricket on the village green was, as Ross McKibbin has written, 'a social mainstay of English rural life and ideally suited to its rhythms' by the 1930s.⁶¹

When dealing with rural cricket, many articles in *Punch* positively wallowed in the romantic nostalgia of Baldwinite Englishness and were quick to decry anything that might threaten it.⁶² The practice employed in some villages of importing 'outsiders' to help the team win league matches was heavily criticised, for example, as it undermined the organic nature of local community.⁶³ More often, however, the threat was political. For much of the period, the threat was deemed to come specifically from the left wing of politics: organised labour, 'Class War', Bolshevism, and 'the doctrine of *class-consciousness* as taught by the Socialist party in its infant seminaries' were familiar bêtes noires.⁶⁴ The particular point which stuck in Mr Punch's craw was that the socialists did not appreciate the beneficial effects of healthily competitive sport for the community and – by extension – the nation. This point spawned regular cartoons and satirical articles: a barber in 1924 speculating about the cricketing prospects for the forthcoming season, assuming the 'socialists' did not dig up all the wickets for allotments; a story in 1930 describing the confusion into which a Russian collective village was thrown when instructed by Moscow to play a competitive cricket match – something that in their eyes would set man against man and 'play into the hands of the Capitalist Governments, which seek to divide the workers'; another in 1933 describing how the Russians took over Britain after a great war in 1943 and obliterated all games because of their 'bourgeois principles'.⁶⁵

The sentiment evoked by *Punch* chimed with the views of those who promoted village cricket at the grass roots level. The Vicar of Waterlooville, Hampshire, for example, told diners at their annual cricket club dinner in 1927 that

⁶⁰ *Punch*, 8 May 1935, 562.

⁶¹ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 333.

⁶² See, e.g., 'Bonham's Day', *Punch*, 22 July 1925, 76–7, about a modern game played on Halfpenny Down, home of the fabled Hambledon team.

⁶³ 'How we shall spend out Summer?', *Punch*, 26 Apr. 1933, 466–7; Stone, 'Suburbanization and Cultural Change', 63; Derek Birley, *A Social History of English Cricket* (London, 1999), 217–20.

⁶⁴ 'Class War', *Punch*, 12 Nov. 1924, 534. In the later 1930s, Nazi Germany was similarly decried.

⁶⁵ 'The Adaptable Barber', *Punch*, 2 Apr. 1924, 349; 'Cricket in Russian', *Punch*, 26 May 1930, 612; 'Footballerina', *Punch*, 1 Jan. 1933, unpaginated front material.

in the same way as a village without a spiritual centre was dead, so was a community without sports clubs. He promised he would do all he could to promote sport in the parish, 'because he felt sport had made England what it was.' 'Nations such as Russia and China that did not play cricket', he went on, 'did not play the game in the larger sense.'⁶⁶ As *Punch* put it in 1938, 'They don't play cricket in Totalitarian countries.'⁶⁷

The cult of village cricket thus became widespread during the interwar years. For all the glamour of Test and County cricket, it came to be recognised as the game's most authentic form. As the *West Sussex Gazette* remarked when reviewing a reissue of *The Cricket Match* in 1931, the book 'deals with the cricket we see most of in Sussex; the cricket which really counts for most in the heart of the game; and the cricket which has to be kept alive if the game remains the national English game.'⁶⁸ Hugh de Sélincourt made a similar point in his book *Moreover* (1934): 'without us', he wrote, 'there would be no county cricket: no Test Matches.'⁶⁹ The same thing was often said by professional cricketers when they visited local clubs to deliver prizes at annual dinners and the like. Even Douglas Jardine, England captain during the controversial Bodyline series with Australia in 1932–3, was prepared to acknowledge that the village green 'was the natural home of cricket.'⁷⁰ De Sélincourt became known as its primary exponent.

The Impact of The Cricket Match

The Cricket Match was published in summer 1924 and garnered favourable reviews. Many reviewers were struck by the skill with which the characters were drawn. *Punch* remarked that 'All the Tillingford [sic] players and several of their rivals are drawn with so nice a skill that one seems to know them not only on the cricket field but also in their daily life', while the *Gentlewoman* felt the book was 'full of the charm of real Sussex village life.'⁷¹ The *Yorkshire Post*, which went on to make it one of their Books of the Year,⁷² admired his use of cricket as a peg for his 'suggestive sketches' of village life, and added that 'some of his men and women are thought-provoking people in this new day.'⁷³ The

⁶⁶ 'Village Cricket', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 14 Jan. 1927, 4.

⁶⁷ 'Epilogue', *Punch*, 194, 29 June 1938, 727–8.

⁶⁸ 'Reviews', *West Sussex Gazette*, 30 Apr. 1931, 6.

⁶⁹ Hugh De Sélincourt, *Moreover: Reflections on the Game of Cricket* (London, 1934), 49.

⁷⁰ Quoted in 'Expert Instructions', *Punch*, 2 Dec 1936, 642.

⁷¹ *Punch*, 18 June 1924, 679–80; *Gentlewoman*, 31 July 1926, 31.

⁷² *Yorkshire Post*, 3 Dec. 1924, 24.

⁷³ 'The Cricket Match', *Yorkshire Post*, 11 June 1924, 4.

Daily Herald, meanwhile, considered it much more than a ‘well-written cricket-yarn’: ‘it is full of shrewd and sympathetic comment on the game of life no less than the game of cricket.’⁷⁴

The Cricket Match propelled de Sélincourt into a new phase of his literary career. Whilst his novels garnered some critical attention, his cricket writing gained him a dedicated readership. The book went through several editions and was added to Cape’s Travellers collection in 1928. More books flowed from his pen, and he became acknowledged as the village game’s literary voice. Encomiums rolled in. Not only did Baldwin profess himself an admirer but J.M. Barrie wrote to tell de Sélincourt he was ‘an ardent lover’ of *The Cricket Match*, adding, ‘I envied you the writing of this book.’ It was, he said, ‘the best story about cricket or any other game that was ever written.’⁷⁵

De Sélincourt’s writing started to appear regularly in published anthologies, such as *A Cricket XI* (1927). The other authors in this volume – Charles Dickens, P.G. Wodehouse, Thomas Hughes, E.W. Hornung and Mary Russell Mitford – show the literary company he was keeping. In 1935 he was included in another collection, *Bat and Ball*, edited by Thomas Moulton, which, besides the illustrious Neville Cardus (the *Manchester Guardian*’s cricket correspondent and acknowledged doyen of interwar cricket writers), included contributions from Douglas Jardine, Hedley Verity, Maurice Tate, and “Plum” Warner – some of the great names of contemporary cricket.⁷⁶ One imagines that inclusion in the second collection pleased de Sélincourt the more. He was delighted to learn that *The Cricket Match* had been enjoyed by a number of leading Australian and England cricketers, and spent fifteen pages of *Moreover* describing an evening he spent with Jardine in London.⁷⁷ He was a ‘wholly small boy’ throughout, he recorded. In the later 1930s, he also began to feature regularly on the radio, talking about cricket.⁷⁸

De Sélincourt’s assimilation into the canon of cricket writing occurred very quickly. His approach, while psychologically compelling, chimed with the emphasis on community and the pastoral prevalent in this period. Through the medium of village cricket, de Sélincourt portrayed village society as many imagined it had been in the past and could be in the future – classless, friendly, intimate – ‘men of varying social standing united into one happy family by the claims of cricket,’ as one critic put it.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ ‘Village Cricket’, *Daily Herald*, 18 June 1924, 7.

⁷⁵ Letter from J.M. Barrie, Aug. 1930, Sélincourt MSS 1/1.

⁷⁶ ‘Sport with the Lid Off’, *Bystander*, 28 August 1935, 41. He was often mentioned alongside Cardus: see, e.g., ‘Unhappy Cricket’, *Graphic*, 30 Aug. 1930, 334.

⁷⁷ De Sélincourt, *Moreover*, 57, 67–82.

⁷⁸ ‘Week-end Wireless’, *North Wilts Herald*, 16 Aug. 1935, 10.

⁷⁹ ‘Literature’, *Montrose Standard*, 15 May 1931, 6.

The fact that de Sélincourt played village cricket added authenticity to his books. He remained Storrington's leading bowler throughout the interwar years, was a useful middle order batsman and a decent slip fielder. Perhaps more significantly, in light of his writing, was the way he conducted himself – the way he 'played the game'. As the club chairman, Col. H.V. Ravenscroft, of the Abbey, Storrington, put it when making a presentation to de Sélincourt in 1930, 'the good name for sportsmanship in cricket which Storrington enjoyed was largely due to the efforts of Mr de Sélincourt and his association with the club.'⁸⁰ He certainly laboured as hard off the field as he did on it to ensure the club was successful working tirelessly at tasks such as rolling the pitch during the week to get the wicket ready for the weekend's game, attending club meetings, and encouraging other – especially younger – players. A particularly good example of this was at the Storrington club dinner in 1928 when a star-studded panel of cricketing guests, including two of Sussex's England players – Arthur Gilligan (who captained England in Australia, 1924–5) and Maurice Tate – joined the party. Addressing this august assembly, de Sélincourt drew the attention of the great and the good to the youngest member present:

I can assure these gentlemen that I have never played in such keen cricket as in Storrington, and such men as Jack Quait, who at the age of 16, can make fifty runs against a good side, should be encouraged, and we are proud of him. It is magnificent to sit at supper with such men as we have with us to-night.⁸¹

What that can have meant to young Quait it is impossible to know, but the spirit in which these remarks were uttered was typical of de Sélincourt. This was the older generation reaching down to the younger, creating those vertical bonds through the fellowship of cricket which were one of the buttresses of local community, and therefore of society more widely.

* * *

At one hundred years' remove, *The Cricket Match* still works as a piece of writing. The story is exciting and well told, while the psychological insights into cricketing ring as true today as they did in 1924. Equally, the book struck a deep contemporary chord of longing – for a vision of Englishness residing in ordered, homogenous village communities, distant from the war and the divisions of industrial society. De Sélincourt clearly felt that himself and was part of the movement of people out of cities into the countryside at this time. Like many others who made that move, he was concerned to promote the ideals

⁸⁰ 'Cricket Club Presentation', *West Sussex Gazette*, 17 July 1929, 4.

⁸¹ 'Gilligan and Tate at Storrington', *Worthing Herald*, 18 Feb. 1928, 2.

of rural communality that had brought him to Sussex – and the idealisations of community in *The Cricket Match* are a major part of its appeal. However, by marrying this idea with cricket, de Sélincourt managed to forge anew the association between the game of cricket and the prevailing idea of what it meant to be English in terms acceptable to a generation traumatised by the shock of the First World War. On the village green, cricket was once again the ‘national game.’