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David Underdown. *Start of Play: Cricket and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England.* Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 2000. xxi + 258 pp. Â£20.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7139-9330-1.

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David Underdown, a prominent historian of the political history of mid-seventeenth century England, has turned his formidable talents to a subject dear to his heart: cricket. According to Jacques Barzun, a long transplanted Frenchman in the United States, if someone wishes truly to know America, it is necessary for them to understand baseball. Underdown, an Englishman also long resident in the United States, would argue that a similar observation might just as well apply to England and cricket. Certainly anyone reading his new book *Start of Play: Cricket and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* will agree that they understand much better the ground level effects of the vast social and economic changes that swept English society during the eighteenth century.

Start of Play consists of eight chapters. The first four chapters trace the origins of cricket and its place in both the elite and popular cultures. Cricket's prehistory is the subject of the first chapter which reveals that it evolved out of the bat and ball variety of games. The first written record of cricket dates to 1598 but is a reference in legal proceedings to events that had occurred fifty years earlier during the 1550s. Cricket developed in the weald and down lands of southern England in the counties of Surrey, Sussex, and Kent. The wooded, broken lands of the weald supplied the individualistic people who were attracted to bat and ball games like cricket but they preferred to play their games on the flat meadows of the downs. Cricket was just one among many regional varieties of bat and ball games but it was the one that rose to become a national game by the end of the eighteenth century. After 1600 references to cricket multiply in the written records as the game grew in popularity. Although some scholars of cricket have attributed Celtic origins to the game, that is not true. It was a peasant game that possessed charms that attracted aristocrats and gentry to pick it up. Underdown suggests that the landed elite used cricket to promote social cohesion and dampen down discontent among the laboring classes and the poor.

Chapter two traces cricket's peasant origins within the popular, festive culture of rural England. Festivals established and maintained local identity and games helped to attract people to the festivals. Rural games such as horse-racing and cockfighting also attracted gambling by aristocrats. Cricket initially did not attracted gamblers, instead it was played purely for fun. Cricket matches were common in southern England but did not involve the elite even as late as the 1750s. The third chapter describes the entry of the aristocrats into the culture of cricket. Eighteenth-century aristocrats put forth and image of themselves as the leaders of society. Many things

they did or possessed, whether they were great houses, cultural patronage, or charity, were designed to demonstrate their status. Sports were important to the aristocracy and they came to be participants in the culture of cricket. The first great noble to become involved with the game was Charles Lennox, the second Duke of Richmond. He sponsored the village team of Slindon, Sussex during the early 1740s and used cricket to court popularity with county voters. Noble involvement transformed cricket from an informal, rural past-time into an organized, professional sport.

Underdown traces London's influence on the professionalization of cricket in his fourth chapter. London was the dominant city of England and it was a rapidly growing metropolis. Its concentration of population, many of whom were well-to-do, made London the leader in the commercialization of leisure. Pleasure gardens, prize fights, and public executions all competed for the leisure time and money of Londoners. By the 1730s cricket quickly became the most widely played sport in London. Considerable social mixing took place at cricket matches which in the mid-eighteenth century were held at the Artillery Ground. Crowds of spectators, sometimes approached 10,000 people while first-class players became celebrities.

The heartland of English cricket in the later eighteenth century was not London, as chapter five shows, rather it was the parish of Hambledon in Hampshire. The parish's team dominated cricket-playing from the 1760s through the 1780s. Cricket promoted local community and cohesion even in a badly divided parish such as Hambledon. The earliest mention of cricket at Hambledon dates to 1756 but it active cricket playing began during the early 1740s. Hambledon's teams consisted largely of local men through the 1780s. The players were independent-minded and did not engage in gambling. They played for local pride and fame as much as for money and as such the game remained very much a rural past-time deeply rooted in the local society. In chapter six, Underdown reveals that a big source of Hambledon's success was its cricket club which consisted of well-to-do residents and local gentry. Club members provided important financial support for the team but at Hambledon no powerful aristocrat dominated the club.

Chapters seven and eight trace the decline of Hambledon and the rise of the professional cricket of the Marylebone Cricket Club in London. In 1781 the Hambledon club moved its matches from the traditional site of Broadhalfpenny Down to Windmill Down. >From that point onward the gap between the rich and the less-well-to-do on the team and club widened. Then in 1786 George Finch, the ninth earl of Winchilsea became president of the Hambledon club and proceeded to use his office to recruit Hambledon's best players for London teams. He went on to found the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) in 1788. The MCC increasingly dominated and professionalized the sport. Meanwhile the Hambledon club declined although it did not die until the 1820s. Meanwhile the old village communities of southern England also died out as industrial and agricultural revolutions wrought profound social changes.

Underdown has already traced the relations between sporting customs, environment, social and economic organization, and politics in his *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603-1660* (1985) for the counties of Somerset and Wiltshire during the first half of the seventeenth century. *Start of Play* continues the same approach into the eighteenth century although focusing exclusively on cricket. The story of Hambledon's cricket does mirror the great changes sweeping eighteenth century England. Hanoverian or Georgian England has been regarded as an age of stability but underneath considerable turmoil and profound changes were taking place in the counties and in London. Those conditions helped to make Hambledon's great era of cricket possible and they ultimately destroyed it. Throughout *Start of Play* Underdown documents his narrative and conclusions with voluminous research in the relevant primary and secondary literature. No one should view *Start of Play* as a study merely concerned with cricket. Rather it speaks eloquently to the impact of the agricultural revolution and the changes it brought to the eighteenth-century English social structure, popular culture, the rise of a leisure industry, and the rise of professional sports and its consequences.

Most importantly Underdown shows quite clearly how all of those issues were inter-related. In this effort he joins the ranks of another great historian and cricket enthusiast C.L.R. James. The uninitiated (that is, most Americans) may still not clearly understand how cricket is played after reading *Start of Play* but they will definitely understand better the nature and the evolution of English culture and society in the eighteenth century.

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