The Publication History of Ranjitsinhji’s *The Jubilee Book of Cricket*

DAVID FINKELSTEIN

In 1897, the Edinburgh based publishers William Blackwood & Sons published the best known cricket book of the early twentieth century, Prince Ranjitsinhji’s *The Jubilee Book of Cricket*. In this work, Ranjitsinhji, one of the most famous and eccentric of late Victorian cricketers, known for his unorthodox batting stance and propensity for breaking batting records, compiled a personal account of cricketing insight that became a bestseller. Despite it being an iconic work of its time, little has been written about Ranjitsinhji’s text and the process by which a cricketing legend was translated into a bestselling author.

The negotiations between the well-established, conservative Scottish publishing firm and a transplanted, Indian upper-class sportsman were conducted in a manner that said a great deal about class and the exportation and flow within the British Empire of Victorian conceptions of sports ethics and ‘gentlemanly conduct’. Intermediaries both in the negotiation process and in the writing process contributed greatly to turning a mere idea into a fully-fledged book within the space of six months. This case study draws on unpublished archival material to offer an example of the interlinking of sports with commerce, and the use of celebrity to successfully promote the printed results of this collaboration.

**Prince Ranji**

Ranjitsinhji Vibhaji, later Maharaja Jam Sahib of Navanagar, though known throughout his life generally as Ranjitsinhji or Ranji, was born 10 September 1872 in Sarodar, a village on the Kathiawar peninsula of north-west India. *(figure 17)* His family was related to the ruler of Navanagar, and indeed for a time between the ages of six and ten Ranji was made temporary heir to the Jam Sahib of Navanagar, Vihabji, due to the latter’s failure to produce a male successor. Ranji was sent to Rajkumar College, at Rajkot, a college set up to educate future and potential dynastic rulers, where from seven until sixteen he was tutored appropriately. Personal matters would become complicated for him when he turned ten, for at this stage Vihabji had a son, Jaswantsinhji, who was elected heir to the Navanagar throne, and succeeded to it on his father’s death in 1895. Controversy over this succession ended on Jaswantsinhji’s death, under mysterious circumstances in 1906, and Ranjitsinhji pushed ahead of other claimants, holding the position until his death in 1933.

Ranji’s turbulent personal, sporting and political life has been subject of
Figure 17: Ranjitsinhji, from The Windsor Magazine, vol. 6, October 1897, p. 523.
several biographies, the latest of which, Simon Wilde’s *Ranji: The Strange Genius of Ranjitsinhji* (2005), argues convincingly that Ranji’s achievements in cricket became crucial to his political ascendancy – that is, he was able to use it to retain British support for his cause when needed. How, then, did he get involved in cricket, and in what manner did this translate into the work?

**RANJI AND CRICKET**

Ranji gained his love of cricket from his time at Rajkumar College, where the English headmaster, Chester MacNaghten, supported his involvement in sport and his academic development. It was Chester who also arranged for him to enter Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1889, where he concentrated his efforts in sport (to the detriment of his academic work). He joined the university club, and through great effort and practice, the development of unorthodox batting stances, and successful plays for local clubs, he became the first Indian to gain entry into the first eleven of the Cambridge cricket team, in 1892, and thus the first to earn a ‘cricket blue’. He left Cambridge in 1894 and began playing for county cricket teams, most notably Sussex county, where he partnered another famous cricketer, C.B. Fry, who became a friendly rival and close friend. Between them they notched up several cricketing records for batting, fielding and scoring between 1895 and 1904. Ranji was also famously chosen to represent England in test matches against Australia in spring 1897, and also toured with the team across Australia in autumn 1897-1898; the Australian racial bar during this visit was lifted for him in the form of Australia providing him with an exemption on the duty tax imposed on non-white entrants to the country.

**RANJI AND THE JUBILEE BOOK OF CRICKET**

Ranji’s test match successes, and his impending visit to Australia in September 1897 prompted publishing interest in his views on cricket. As far back as August 1896, the Edinburgh based publishing firm William Blackwood & Sons had contemplated getting Ranji to contribute to their renowned monthly journal *Blackwood’s Magazine*, in particular prompted by friendly intervention on their behalf by Alfred Gibson, sports journalist for the *Star*, contributor to periodicals such as the *Windsor Magazine*, and under the pseudonym ‘Rover’, sports writer for the *Morning Leader* (founded in 1892 and later amalgamated with the *Daily News*). In late February 1897 Gibson contacted the firm’s London manager David Storrar Meldrum, whom he knew well, to alert him that Ranji had in mind writing a book on cricket. ‘Ranji has not written on cricket,’ he reported, ‘but if you could get him to do so, it would be a great hit. Everyone rich and otherwise would spend a shilling to read Ranji on the Australians.’ Gibson offered to steer Ranji and his work to Blackwood’s, and suggested other individuals to approach should Ranji spurn the firm’s overtures. David Meldrum and William Blackwood III, head of the

---

40 | *Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*
firm, jumped at this chance to enter into partnership with a sporting legend. Blackwood accordingly wrote to Ranji on 1 March 1897 asking for a contribution to *Blackwood’s Magazine* on Cricket in the Victorian Era (a piece later incorporated into the book), and promoting his firm’s ability to make Ranji’s planned book a success. ‘We are accustomed to bring out such publications in a high class manner, and it would be a pleasure to me to make your work specially attractive from every point of view,’ he wrote.²

The firm then entered into negotiation with Ranji’s legal representatives, Ashurst, Morris, Crisp and Co., and after viewing sample chapters and following a two month period of negotiation, secured on 11 May 1897 a firm commitment to publish the work at an uncharacteristically high price: £2,000 in advances, and a royalty of 20% of the nominal selling price of the various editions planned.³ The constant agitation and difficulties subsequently encountered in getting Ranji to meet deadlines for copy and proofs, and the consequent delay to the work’s publication, however, led the firm to revise the agreement in July so as to lower the advance to £1,000.⁴ They would later supplement this with a further £500 based on the healthy sales achieved in the first months of publication.

To recoup the sums involved, the firm made several plans to maximise returns on their investment – first, through fees from pre-publication serialisations of material both in the UK and in the colonies; second, by income from advertisements for the colonial editions; and third, by issuing three different editions aimed at separate stratified markets. These were to be:

- a deluxe edition of 355 copies priced at £5.5s., gilt edged and personally signed by Ranji;
- a fine paper edition of 148 copies priced at £1.5s.;
- a popular edition at 6s.; five editions of this version would be printed between August and December 1897, totalling 26,000 copies, and another 6,250 printed in April 1898 due to unprecedented demand, bringing the total issued within the year to 32,250.

The firm initially had hoped to publish the work in July 1897, just as the cricket season was winding down, and with enough time to capitalise on the publicity attending Ranji’s impending tour with England in Australia. With this in mind, the firm pressed Ranji to produce a final chapter on his thoughts on Australian cricket, and contacted several Australian cricketers in England to help him with the piece, including W.L. Murdoch (1854-1911), a wicket-keeper who had played for Australia in the 1880s and then captained Sussex where Ranji played between 1893-1899, and Frederick Robert Spofforth (1853-1926) (figure 18) - a highly-praised, over-arm bowler who had played against England in the 1870s and 1880s, and had written several magazine articles in the 1890s on the history of Australian cricket. The article was never produced, though the firm was able to feature the book’s final chapter, ‘Cricket in the Victorian Era’, as a sample ‘taster’ in its July 1897 issue of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. 

---

*Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society* | 41
Figure 18: F.R. Spofforth, *The Jubilee Book of Cricket*, p. 142.
This pattern of tense negotiation and tardy delivery would become a standard feature of the firm’s dealings with the Prince throughout the book’s production. During the crucial months of June and July leading up to publication, Ranji was slow to produce copy, edit proofs, correct diagrams and commission photographs needed. The Prince originally planned to dedicate the book to one of his early mentors, the cricketer Stanley Jackson, (figure 19) but in light of it being the Jubilee year of Queen Victoria’s coronation, changed his mind and sought permission to dedicate it to her instead. However, to his publishers’ frustration, Ranji dithered in writing to the Queen’s royal secretary for official sanction, thus compromising early dispatch of publicity material highlighting this feature.

At other times, chapters were completed by other authors but not well revised by Ranji. Threaded throughout the correspondence between the Blackwood firm, Ranji and his lawyers are clusters of letters and telegrams pleading for completion of promised drafts, with insouciant responses from Ranji promising work by return of post, followed by threats from Blackwood’s when material failed to arrive to cancel publication of the work. Thus one telegram despatched by Blackwood’s on 28 June 1897 read, ‘No corrected proof returned yet, must withhold publication this season if not received immediately.’ Two weeks later, a similar urgent telegram was sent to Ranji’s lawyers: ‘No word from Prince today. We give him till Monday when if completion is not forward we shall withhold publication this season.’

Editorial work was complicated further by the fact that Ranji involved Henry Montagu Butler, Master of Trinity College, in looking over corrected proofs – the resulting extra flourishes and changes Butler insisted on had the printers in despair. Ranji’s troubled path to publication was common knowledge in literary and sporting circles, a point highlighted in an interview with Ranji published in The Windsor Magazine in October 1897: Ranji was pointedly asked to comment on ‘the strange story from Blackwood’s – about compositors turning grey, and about the expletive and explosive humour of the management concerning your treatment of the proofs.’ Ranji ‘laughed heartily but deftly turned the incident aside’, at which point the writer of the profile, without naming Butler, discreetly outlined his involvement in the revision process: ‘The Professor had more regard for classical English than for cricket, and he ornamented the margins of the proofs profusely. These went directly to the printers, and created no small amount of consternation. I believe it took a wonderful amount of tact and diplomatic skill to unravel the situation and lighten the margins.’

The support Ranji received in producing the work are aspects of the book’s production that have been the subject of much speculation. The work was written and published within the space of six months, between March and early August 1897, an amazingly quick operation for what was a complex text that included over 100 photographs of contemporary cricketers and game stances, diagrams of fielding positions, six chapters on aspects of cricket such
Figure 19: F.S. Jackson, from *The Windsor Magazine*, vol. 6, July 1897, p. 155.

Figure 20: Ranjitsinhji at bat, from *The Windsor Magazine*, vol. 6, July 1897, p. 153.

Ranji did not write all of these pieces, and where appropriate authors were credited for their contributions. However, evidence in the Blackwood letters suggest that he did not in fact write much of the rest of the book either. When the book was published, the cricket journalist and local historian A.J. Gaston sent Blackwood’s a bill for his contribution to the sections on County Cricket, which had been unacknowledged in the work but were significant in their details. The invoice was duly forwarded to Ranji’s legal firm. More significant was the intervention of representatives for C.B. Fry, Ranji’s batting partner, who contacted the firm and Ranji’s lawyers in September 1897 to demand, and eventually negotiate, a percentage of the royalties for his contribution to Ranji’s text. Fry had in essence acted as ghost-writer for Ranji, producing not only important sequences in the book but also rewriting and recasting the article on ‘Cricket in the Victorian Era’ published in Blackwood’s Magazine in July 1897 and reproduced in the Jubilee book. Fry’s interventions would have made sense – he wrote often for contemporary magazine and newspaper publications during this period, subsidising his career as an amateur cricketer.

Simon Wilde plays down Fry’s contribution to the volume in his biography of Ranji, noting only that he helped with final revisions and dismissing ‘unfounded speculations about Ranji’s ability to write such a book and Fry’s precise contribution.’ However, the fact that royalties were accorded to Fry suggests that his participation was not confined to minor editorial matters.

Fry’s service to Ranji did not end there – he also acted as an astute and supportive publicist for the book and for Ranji’s personal image. In July 1897, as the book was being prepared for launch, Fry produced an article on cricketing contemporaries for The Windsor Magazine that included a fulsome appreciation of Ranji’s cricketing skills. ‘He is mellow and kind and single-hearted, and has no spark of jealousy in his composition,’ Fry effused. ‘No one has a keener eye for what is good in other people; the better they play the more he likes it. He is a cricketer to the tips of his slim fingers, an artist with an artist’s eye for the game.’

It would not be the only piece of publicity placed in magazines and newspapers extolling Ranji and his new book. Blackwood’s assiduously worked at placing extracts of Ranji’s work in useful outlets – The Windsor Magazine featured a chapter in its August 1897 issue; the Daily Chronicle paid £150 to serialise 30,000 words; and the Manchester Guardian paid £200 for similar serialisation rights. Furthermore, interviews were printed in relevant journals – as for example the profile featured in the October issue of the ubiquitous Windsor Magazine. The firm failed to secure serialisation rights in the colonial market, which they blamed on Ranji’s failure to produce in time his promised chapter on Australian cricket. Nevertheless, the 925 copies issued in a Colonial Edition of 6s. sold out, netting over £138, and over 800
copies were sold as exports, also netting a tidy sum of £142.

The firm’s hopes for sales of advertisements in the Colonial Edition were also hampered by the late and rushed production of the work – at least one appeal for an advertisement exists in the archives, an undated message sent to H.J. Gray, the Cambridge manufacturers of the cricket bats that were featured prominently in a full page spread in the book.\textsuperscript{11} It has not been possible to verify whether an advertisement for these bats does in fact appear in the Colonial Edition. (figure 21)

Sales for the work, despite being issued late in the season in the first week of August 1897, were phenomenal. In five months, between August and the end of December 1897, over 197 of the deluxe edition of 355 copies were sold; 910 of the 1,428 copies of the fine paper edition sold; and 23,000 of the 26,000 printed in the 6s. popular edition sold. Another 6,800 copies of the popular edition would be printed and sold over the next four years. In all, the work made a handsome profit for the publishers of £4,254.\textsuperscript{12}

CONCLUSION

For Ranji, this book became an ideal opportunity to associate himself with a firm with strong connections to the ruling conservative elite, the military and imperial audiences who had a say in the running and management of India. Ranji would use his cricketing fame and connections, and the publicity created in the wake of the book’s publication, to pursue his political claims in the decades that followed. The work also forged his image as a gentleman cricketer. This entered British popular culture via the popular ‘Billy Bunter’ series of adventure tales, created by Charles Hamilton under the \textit{nom de plume} Frank Richards, which ran in the boys’ weekly magazine \textit{The Magnet} from 1907 until 1940. One of the ‘famous five’ characters who featured throughout the series was ‘Inky’, or Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, an athletic, cricket playing Indian prince clearly modeled on Ranjitsinhji.

Such a portrayal signified the extent to which Ranjit would become identified with England. In later years, his continued Anglophilia, identification with British social customs and modes of conduct, refusal to support the development of cricket in India, and continued connexion with the political status quo of British-ruled India would lead to the Indian National Congress questioning and finding wanting his commitment to India. By the time of his death in 1933, his reputation in India had declined dramatically. Nevertheless, his sporting record and place in British cricketing history as an outstanding ‘gentleman cricketer’ would remain intact, thanks in no small part to the success of \textit{The Jubilee Book of Cricket}.\textsuperscript{13}
Figure 21: Playfair Driver Bat, from *The Jubilee Book of Cricket*, p. 146.

2. Blackwood Archive, MS 30384, p. 76. William Blackwood III to Ranjitsinhji, 1 March 1897.

3. Blackwood Archive, MS 30690, Memorandum of Agreement, dated 11 May 1897.


5. Blackwood Archive, MS 30339, p. 141.


8. The Windsor Magazine, October 1897, p. 524.


