

SUPERBLY RESEARCHED AND RICHLY ILLUSTRATED

Book Review by Peter Davies

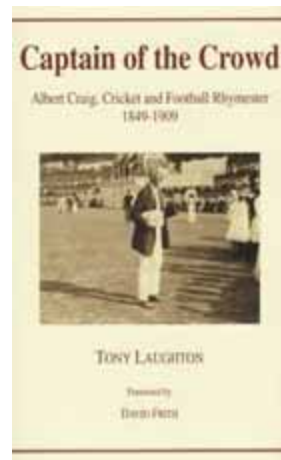
Captain of The Crowd by Tony Laughton

Published 2008

294 Pages

Published by MCC

(available for £28 post free from Boundary Books, The Haven, West Street, Childrey
OX12 9UL – boundarybooks@btinternet.com)



One recent book reviewer noted: “This is undoubtedly the best cricket book of the year, and if it does not win that plaudit from Wisden, The Cricket Society and every other cricket book award, then I can hardly wait to read the winner as it must be also five stars.” Say no more.

This is a terrific volume: superbly researched, richly illustrated and lavishly produced. It is a coffee-table book but also, at the same time, a wonderful piece of scholarship.

Tony Laughton is an acquaintance of the Calderdale and Kirklees Cricket Heritage Project in that, quite out of the blue, he attended the launch event in March 2004. He heard about the occasion, was aware that Craig was born in Meltham, and estimated that the project launch would enable him to meet some fellow cricket enthusiasts.

He came along with his wife, got chatting with others at the launch, and, if I remember correctly, actually put out a call for assistance along the lines of: 'If anyone has any old Craig memorabilia in their attic...'

So, there is an interesting Huddersfield 'angle' to this story. Craig was born in the hamlet of Thick Hollins near Meltham to parents who were 'illiterate textile workers'. There are a full 26 pages on his 'Yorkshire roots' and it is interesting to note that Craig talked often of the famous Lascelles Hall player 'Eph' Lockwood.

But the significance of Craig comes in the fact that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the 'Golden Age' of cricket, he was a rhymester - a man who would mingle with cricket and football crowds and stir them into action. Legend has it

he was almost as famous, and as recognisable a figure, as W.G.Grace. He was best known at The Oval and at Arsenal Football Club.

It is difficult to think of a twenty-first century equivalent. We have the Barmy Army in cricket and swathes of witty fans - who once stood but now sit - at football matches. But Craig was something very different. He saw it as his duty to attend sporting events, devise humorous rhymes, and sell these on to spectators at a penny a sheet.

His first rhyme was published in 1878 and an early compilation of his work was entitled 'Original Franchise Songs Suitable for Entertainments and Public Gatherings – composed by Albert Craig. One Penny Each'. In 1885 he wrote about a 'Grand Cricket Match' in Leeds:

It prov'd to be at Horsforth Park
A real red-letter day
Exponents of the "manly game"
Stood proudly forth to play
They seem'd as fine a set of men
As ever struck a ball;
Led on by genial Captain HAWKE
And gallant LOUIS HALL

Another local link of course because Hall was a Batley legend.

The book is a joy. It is difficult to convey how thorough the author's research has been and how beautifully he writes and illustrates the story of Craig. It really is a *tour de force*, a breathtakingly thorough investigation into the life and times of a man who had such a unique role in late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century sport.

The foreword to the book is written by the eminent cricket historian David Frith. Previously, Laughton has written about cricketologist A.D.Taylor and he obviously specialises in bringing to life interesting but perhaps neglected sporting figures.

Captain of the Crowd – this was the nickname Craig acquired – is a fantastic book. It is a 10-out-of-10 volume in every respect. Perfect.

POSTSCRIPT

JOINT MCC AND THE CRICKET SOCIETY PRESS RELEASE: 9 MARCH
RELEASE

SHORT-LIST ANNOUNCED FOR NEW CRICKET SOCIETY AND MCC BOOK
AWARD

Booker-listed Joseph O'Neill's post-9/11 novel with a cricketing theme "Netherland" and William Buckland's withering analysis of and prescription for English cricket "Pommies" are among the four short-listed authors and books in line for The Cricket Society and MCC Book of the Year Award 2009. The competition, run by The Cricket Society since 1970, is for the first time a partnership between The Cricket Society and MCC. The £3000 award for the winner will be presented by Christopher Martin-Jenkins at an awards evening in the Long Room at Lord's on Monday 27 April. The audience of up to 180 will include many of today's finest cricket writers and journalists.

Previous award winners have included Mike Brearley, EW Swanton and David Frith. Two years' ago the delighted winner Scyld Berry hailed his award as "cricket's seal of literary approval". Chair of judges and cricket and social historian Eric Midwinter said: "We have this year a strong, varied and evenly matched short-list. There is all to play for and I expect a lively judges' final meeting next month."

The Cricket Society and MCC have recently agreed an initial partnership of three years with an awards evening at Lord's. From 2010, there is likely to be a different, external head of judges each year.

Notes for editors

The four books on the short-list are (alphabetically by author):

- *Life beyond the airing cupboard*, by John Barclay, Fairfield Books
- *Pommies, England cricket through an Australian lens*, by William Buckland, Matador
- *Captain of the crowd, Albert Craig, cricket and football rhymester, 1848-1909*, by Tony Laughton, Boundary Books
- *Netherland*, by Joseph O'Neill, Fourth Estate

2. A total of 15 books, nominated by either Cricket Society or MCC members and not by publishers, were in the frame. They were whittled down to four by the panel of judges, which comprises: Eric Midwinter (Chair); Stephen Fay; Stephen Green; Chris Finch; and competition administrator Nigel Hancock. All the judges are members of MCC and/ or The Cricket Society.

3. The initial agreement between The Cricket Society and MCC covers the 2009, 2010 and 2011 competitions. Eric Midwinter is retiring as chair of judges after the current competition and from 2010 a panel of two MCC nominees and two The Cricket Society nominees will be chaired by a new, external head of judges. The competition may be extended to include an award for other forms of cricket communication.

4. The Cricket Society (www.cricketsociety.com), founded in 1945, encourages a love of cricket through playing, watching, reading and listening. It supports young cricketers, holds regular meetings for members in a variety of locations in England and Wales, publishes an acclaimed journal, and has its own cricket team.

5. MCC is the custodian of the laws and spirit of cricket and an innovative independent voice in world cricket. It is also the world's most active cricket-playing club and the owner of Lord's - 'The home of cricket'. MCC plays around 500 games annually. At any given moment in the year, there is usually an MCC team playing or coaching cricket somewhere in the world. MCC fund the University Centres of Cricketing Excellence and has a long-established academy at Lord's – MCC Young Cricketers. Between them, many talented cricketers have been developed, including Sir Ian Botham, Mark Waugh and current England players Andrew Strauss, Nicola Shaw, Caroline Atkins and Monty Panesar. The Club is passionate about promoting the game and the spirit of cricket all over the world.

6. For further information contact neil.robinson@mcc.org.uk or
BillAllen@CricketSociety.com (NigelHancock@CricketSociety.com from 27 March)