



ROCKLEY WILSON'S ONLY TEST MATCH BY MARTIN HOWE

Of the seven Yorkshire cricketers who have played but a single Test match for England, none is more interesting than Evelyn Rockley Wilson, known to cricket as Rockley Wilson. His one Test, at the age of 42 years, was the final encounter in the 1920/21 Ashes series in Australia when J.W.H.T. Douglas' side suffered the humiliation of a 5-0 whitewash.

Wilson performed well with the ball in this match at the Sydney Cricket Ground, indeed well enough to prompt many to ask why he had not been chosen in previous Tests. He was not selected for England again however. Given the result of the series, and Wilson's age, this is not too surprising; but his prospects were not enhanced by the barracking and unruly crowd behaviour that he provoked in the Sydney Test. The incidents may seem a storm in a teacup by today's standards (and compared with what was to follow on the 1932/33 bodyline tour), but nevertheless they were to lead the MCC to change the terms of the contracts of players selected to play for their country. This makes Rockley Wilson's only Test Match interesting enough to be the main subject matter of this article. Rockley Wilson was not only a fine cricketer but, in the words of The Times, "a personality both on and off the field in a day when the word had not been debased." Before we recount the story of Rockley's one Test match, something should be said about his background, character and career outside the Test match arena.

Family Background

Rockley Wilson was born on 25 March 1879 in Bolsterstone, a Pennine village near Sheffield, where his father, William Reginald Wilson, a keen follower of cricket, was the vicar of the parish church of St Mary's. The Wilsons were a family of some substance, with relations who owned extensive estates in the area, including the ancient Manor of Bolsterstone. The Rev. William R. Wilson (later Canon Wilson) and his wife Martha had five sons and two daughters. Rockley was the youngest of the sons. His brother, Clement Eustace Macro, played first-class cricket for Cambridge University, eight times for Yorkshire between 1896 and 1899, and twice for England in South Africa in the 1898/99 series, before he gave up the game to enter the church. Another brother, R.A. Wilson, also played for Cambridge and also entered the church, while a third, C.R. Wilson, another excellent cricketer, served on the Yorkshire committee for 32 years. Rockley Wilson grew up in a cricketing household. He and his brothers spent many hours playing cricket on the vicarage lawn.

Cricketer-Teacher

From Rugby School, where he was outstanding both academically and at all sports and at cricket in particular, Rockley went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, to read Classics. Like his brother Clement, Rockley Wilson made his first class debut as a Cambridge University undergraduate - but in fact against the University for A.J. Webbe's XI in 1899 (for which side he made a century) - and in the same season he made his first appearance for Yorkshire (against Somerset). He was a regular in the Cambridge side thereafter and was captain in 1902. As well as his appearances in first class games for Cambridge, Rockley Wilson played a handful of games for Yorkshire while still an undergraduate. Yorkshire enquired about his availability for the 1903

season, but Wilson took up a teaching post at Winchester College and for many years was lost to the first-class game. His duties at Winchester included responsibility for cricket at the school and he proved to be an inspiring coach (one who publicly recognised his coaching skills was Douglas Jardine who became one of Rockley's life-long correspondents). Wilson played only country house cricket from 1903 until 1913. Of course, Yorkshire leading lights such as Lord Hawke and the Hon. F.S.Jackson would have encountered Wilson in some of these fixtures and Lord Hawke was able to observe him at close quarters when Wilson was one of a party of amateur cricketers that his Lordship led on a tour of Argentina in 1911/12. In fact, his success on that tour led to an offer to play for Hampshire. When Yorkshire realised that they were about to lose a potentially valuable player, they renewed their interest in him and he returned to the county side in 1913. He wished, he explained, to see for himself the changes in the game brought about by the development of swerve and googly bowling. Any thoughts of an extended run in first class cricket had to be set aside, however, for the four years of the Great War. Rockley was commissioned in the Rifle Brigade and towards the end of the war served as an Intelligence Officer in Palestine - where he turned in some impressive bowling performances on matting pitches in intra-Army games. Then, for five seasons after the War, Rockley Wilson became a virtual fixture in the Yorkshir side in the August vacations.

Rockley Wilson was an excellent slow leg-break bowler, relying more on variations of flight and pace than spin. He saw the essential art of slow bowling as "length, length and length." In his youth he was no mean batsman, regularly opening the batting for Cambridge University against the county sides. He scored his only century for Yorkshire in 1913 (104 not out against Essex), but by 1919 he was never to be more than a lower order batsman in first-class matches. His opportunity with Yorkshire arose because of the deaths during the War of Major Booth (killed at the Battle of the Somme) and Alonzo Drake, and the retirement in 1914 of Schofield Haigh (who joined the staff of Winchester College as professional cricket coach). Wilson certainly made the most of his opportunity with outstanding bowling performances in 1920 and 1921 in particular. In 1920 he took 39 wickets for Yorkshire at 15.18 in his eight championship matches, and 64 at 13.84 in all first class matches including ten in the match for Yorkshire against the MCC, captained by J.W.H.T.Douglas, at Scarborough), putting him second to Wilfred Rhodes in the Yorkshire bowling averages and fourth in the national averages. In 1921, he went one better, finishing top of both the Yorkshire and the national bowling averages with 41 wickets in the championship at 11.34 and 51 at 11.19 in all first class matches. Later seasons were not so successful for Rockley Wilson and 1923 was his last in first-class cricket.

In a career spanning (intermittently) 20 seasons, he took 467 wickets in first-class cricket at an average of 17.63. For Yorkshire, his tally was 197 wickets at an average of 15.76. These are remarkable figures by any standard.

After retirement from first-class cricket, he continued his responsibilities for cricket coaching at Winchester College with great enthusiasm until 1928 and he continued to play club cricket until his 60th year.

A Singular Man

What can we say about Rockley Wilson the man? He was of medium height and build, fresh-faced, even boyish in appearance, and modest in manner. He had an impish sense of humour and a ready wit. He was a master of the impromptu remark or aside, often funny, sometimes cutting (he had little time for the pompous or the foolish). An amusing raconteur and an accomplished public speaker with a soft, high-pitched voice, Rockley was as ready to lace his remarks with cricketing metaphors as with classical quotations and illusions. He accumulated an impressive cricket library (to a lesser extent, so did his brother Clement). Blessed with an exceptional memory, Rockley Wilson was a walking encyclopaedia of cricket facts and statistics, always ready to put his knowledge to others' use. In Wilson's company, there was little need to reach for a copy of Wisden.

Cricket may have been Rockley Wilson's major passion, but he had other interests including billiards, at which he was a proficient player, and philately. Rockley's war-time letters from Palestine contain many references to his delight at the acquisition of interesting or rare postage stamps.

Rockley Wilson never married. Except for a spell when he shared a house with a sister, Rockley lived alone in Winchester, helped by a housekeeper and his handyman and chauffeur. He continued to take an interest in College affairs long after his retirement from teaching in 1945 and, by all accounts, became something of an institution around the town. Cricket remained his abiding interest. He cultivated his wide circle of acquaintances within the game, and, until his final years, could regularly be found at Lords enjoying the cricket and the company.

Having thus covered the background, now let us turn to Wilson's part in the 1920/21 tour of Australia and his one Test appearance.

Test Cricketer

Rockley Wilson was a surprise selection for the tour. He was not included in the party that was announced on 26 July 1920 (by which date Rockley Wilson had yet to appear that season for Yorkshire) with R.H.Spooner as captain, a "happy choice" as The Times put it. But Spooner had played little cricket that season and was troubled by injuries (he had been badly wounded twice in the Great War). After some heart-searching, Spooner announced on 16 August that he would not be able to tour. The vice-captain, J.W.H.T.Douglas, was then invited to take on the captaincy, and the selectors announced that another amateur would be added to the party later (P.G.H.Fender now being the only one, other than Douglas himself). On 18 August, by when Rockley Wilson had appeared in four games for Yorkshire, in which he collected 17 wickets, came the announcement that he was the chosen amateur. The Times described him, somewhat unenthusiastically, as "a fine all-round cricketer, a good batsman and a very accurate bowler." Later still, the selectors invited the Northants all-rounder V.W.C.Jupp, who had turned amateur the previous season, to join the party, but he declined and the additional place went to Bill Hitch, the Surrey professional and quick bowler. The selectors may have had Jupp in mind to take Douglas' place as vice-captain. In the event, they handed that honour to Rockley Wilson. Percy Fender might have seemed the more logical choice as he had had a very successful first season as Surrey's captain; but Fender was never a favoured son of the cricket establishment (and was not much admired by the captain, J.W.H.T. Douglas).

The consequence of all this was that if Douglas had fallen under a bus, or over the side of RMS Osterley (on which vessel the party voyaged to Australia), then Rockley Wilson would have found himself the captain of England, and of a party which included such giants of the game as Wilfred Rhodes, Jack Hobbs, Frank Woolley and J.W.Hearne (as well as two other Yorkshire colleagues, Abram Waddington and Arthur Dolphin, the reserve wicket-keeper). In the event, of course, no such calamity befell Douglas, and Wilson captained the side only in a handful of meaningless up-country matches. His greatest contribution as vice-captain was to relieve Douglas of some of the burden of speech-making at the many civic and cricketing receptions and functions with which the English cricketers were regaled on their long tour of the country. Rockley used his knowledge of the history and personalities of the game, and his natural quick wit, to good effect in his speeches. In Melbourne, on the eve of the game against Victoria, for example, "he kept all amused for a few minutes while he dived back into cricket history and brought out an anecdote or a set of figures for each of the past masters of the game that he spotted amongst the gathering." It seems likely that his reputation as a speaker came to exceed his reputation as a cricketer on this tour.

England were beaten by Australia in all five Test Matches, the first such humiliation, and, not surprisingly, Douglas did not escape criticism of his captaincy. One of the criticisms was of his handling of his bowlers, and in particular his reluctance to give more opportunities to his slow bowlers who included, ironically, Wilson and Fender. While Fender played in the last three Tests, Rockley Wilson's only appearance was in the Fifth and final Test at Sydney, when he may have got his chance as much because the two fast bowlers, Hitch and Howell, were unfit as for his own bowling abilities. Australia won the match by nine wickets but Wilson emerged with some credit. He bowled steadily to take two for 28 in the first innings from 14.3 overs, bothering Gregory, in particular, in his innings of 93 with his restricting accuracy (Fender had five wickets but was much less economical), and one wicket for 8 in six overs in the second innings. In England's two innings, Wilson totalled a modest 10 runs, but in the course of his first visit to the wicket he was subjected to

some hostile barracking. This was not the first such incident on the tour, but Rockley Wilson was a central figure in what at Sydney became something of a cause celebre.

The Barracking Controversy

The first reported barracking of the tourists was in the match against Victoria in Melbourne (before which Rockley Wilson had made the speech just mentioned). England piled up 418 runs for three wickets declared in response to Victoria's first innings total of 274 and they then dismissed the State side for 85 on a nasty, rain-affected pitch, Rhodes taking six for 39 and Woolley four for 27. It was the slow scoring of Jack Hobbs and J.W.Hearne in their innings of 131 and 87 respectively that raised the ire of some spectators. However, the barracking, which included such shouts to Hobbs as "What do you think the boundary is for?" (Hobbs only scored four fours in his innings though it needs to be added that the bowlers concentrated on bowling outside the off stump to a packed off side field) was hardly venomous. Indeed, Douglas described it to the Press as "good natured and humorous" so there was hardly the making of a serious incident here.

It was at the up-country match against a Bendigo XV in December that the beginnings of more serious trouble blew up. Its cause was the content of certain of the reports that Rockley Wilson and Percy Fender had been commissioned to provide to British newspapers during the tour. It needs to be remembered that any amateur who toured Australia at this time would be out of pocket. Travel and accommodation costs would be met but all other expenses fell to the player and these could add up to a tidy sum. It is not surprising that the fluent Wilson jumped at the chance to earn some money as a part-time journalist. After The Times had published a piece about the outward sea journey, he was invited to write regular articles for the Daily Express (Percy Fender wrote for the Daily News). His editors encouraged Rockley to add colour to his match reports. Rockley obliged. During the First Test match at Sydney that preceded the game at Bendigo, Rockley Wilson had cabled a report that included some criticism of the umpiring (the umpires in those days being provided by the host country of course). The player-cum-journalists found that reports intended for British readers were soon relayed back to Australia, and part of the crowd at Bendigo consequently gave Wilson the bird when he came to the crease. Characteristically, he responded by bowing to the crowd. Douglas and Wilson complained about the barracking, however, and this led the mayor of the township to say that Wilson's sarcastic reaction to the crowd's shouts made him the responsible party. It was reported that Wilson responded that he would see that the MCC never visited Bendigo again, though Rockley strongly denied he had said any such thing.

Thereafter, Wilson was regularly barracked by the Australian crowds and, in his turn, so was Fender. It got to such a pitch that police protection was requested for the MCC team for the match against Victoria in February that was immediately to precede the Fourth Test at Melbourne. The request, which hardly endeared the tourists to the crowd, was refused. In the Test, Fender was noisily barracked, a section of the crowd shouting in unison "Please Go Home Fender", a chant that was taken up on all his subsequent appearances on the tour.

It was in the Fifth and final Test at Sydney that the most serious incidents occurred. It all began when England took the field in the final stages of the first day, having scored only 204 in their first innings. Jack Hobbs had torn a thigh muscle in the previous match against New South Wales and had only agreed at the last minute to play in the Test, and then only under a deal of pressure from his captain. Hobbs was much handicapped in the field and his laboured running after the ball was greeted with derisory shouts from the crowd. Although most of the crowd were unaware of Hobbs' injury, Wilson and Fender chose to criticise the behaviour of the crowd in their reports to their newspapers. To a modern eye, the reports hardly seem explosive. For example, Wilson wrote "It was unworthy of a Sydney crowd to jeer at Hobbs running lame as a certain section did." On the second day, by when the crowd were aware of the criticisms made of them, Wilson had to join Rhodes at the crease when England had stumbled to 14 for 2 in their second innings and he was roundly booed all the way to the crease. When play was resumed after the Sunday rest day, and Rhodes was out, Hobbs was warmly applauded as he walked to the

wicket, the crowd, now obviously having learned of his handicap when fielding, even chorusing “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.” In contrast, Wilson was again loudly barracked when he returned to the pavilion on his own dismissal, with some in the crowd chanting the letters L I A R or shouting “Go home”, others just booing and jeering “like animals” as Cecil Parkin put it. Upset by the reaction, Wilson remonstrated with the crowd until shepherded into the dressing room. Wilson’s weak throwing when England again took to the field also encouraged a volley of uncomplimentary shouts such as “Throw it up Miss Wilson.” Similar rounds of booing and name-calling greeted Wilson in his final appearances of the tour.

No doubt Australian crowds were always more = inclined vocally to give vent to their feelings about the play and the players than were their English counterparts (Bramall Lane notwithstanding) but any barracking would usually be good natured, as it had been at Melbourne in the first match with Victoria mentioned above. Most Australians still had warm feelings towards the ‘Mother Country’, bonded by the shared experiences of the Great War. However, the Australian economy was depressed, unemployment high, and living standards generally low. There was some resentment that, after the sacrifices of Australian youth, particularly at Gallipoli, Britain was not doing enough to help Australia to get back on her feet. Australian crowds, some with memories of the British officer class during the War, could easily be aroused by any perceived insults by English amateur and upper-class cricketers such as Douglas, Fender and Wilson (and later, of course, Jardine) or by any of their shortcomings on or off the field. The Test series had been very keenly anticipated in Australia. The overwhelming success of Warwick Armstrong’s team gave the crowds plenty to cheer about and many opportunities to turn the knife in the England team’s failings, sometimes in what must have seemed a hurtful way.

Naturally, the British Press was inclined to blame the crowd, sometimes rather patronisingly. The Daily Express, which had hired Rockley Wilson, observed in a lead article on 1 March 1921 that “the whole thing is wretched” and went on to say: “If Tests are to continue at all, if cricket is to keep its place as a clean and wholesome game, the decencies of sportsmanship must be preserved all over the ground, not only inside the boundaries.” On 2 March 1921, The Times came closer to the heart of the matter. It criticised the barracking and the “occasional heated questioning of umpires’ decisions” as “entirely foreign to the spirit of the game” but added that the problem was exacerbated “by the tone of certain journalistic messages sent home by members of the English side.” It considered the practice of cricketers on tour writing about the games to be “undesirable and harmful” and concluded that no one should be selected to play for his country without the understanding that “when he becomes a Test player, he lays down his pen.”

While a present-day reader would not find the reports of Rockley Wilson and Percy Fender particularly controversial or one-sided (Wilson had roundly criticised the “sloppy fielding” of the England side in the First Test, for example), in the context of the time the strictures of The Times are understandable. The MCC certainly thought some action was needed and so Wilson, Fender and Douglas, the captain, were in due course called to Lords to be interviewed by the President and Treasurer. Although the President reported that the “explanations given by these cricketers was satisfactory,” a critical motion in the name of Sir Charles Bright was put down for discussion at the AGM scheduled for 4 May 1921. It read: “That the reporting for the Press on matches by those who take part in them is not in the best interests of Cricket, and that all possible steps should be taken to discourage the practice.” According to Wisden, the motion was carried but it appears that the MCC Committee pre-empted any debate on the matter by referring it to the Board of Control for Test Matches. The Board took the firm line advocated by The Times. Its minutes of 19 April 1921 record: “The Board of Control accepted a suggestion from the MCC Committee, and have advised the Selection Committee that when inviting anyone to play for England, it shall be on the condition that the player does not contribute a report or a statement of any kind to the Press, until the end of the season, as regards any Test Match for which he is selected and in which he plays.” Tour contracts since then have endeavoured to control the practice; for example, the Conditions of Employment of today’s contracted England players include detailed rules governing any public statements, and any written or broadcast comments, on matches or on matters of “general cricket interest.

As it was the MCC policy that required the captain to be an amateur and other amateurs to be included in the touring party, it could be argued that it was incumbent upon the MCC to recognise the financial difficulties faced by some touring amateur players, perhaps by permitting more generous payment of their expenses. For a player as educated as Rockley Wilson, journalism was an obvious source of earnings while on tour. His aim was to write interesting, well-informed accounts for the cricket-loving public in England. He would have denied that it was any part of his purpose to stir up controversy, but he may not have understood the workings of the mass-circulation newspapers or the sensitivity to criticism of Australian spectators. Perhaps he should have borne in mind the risk to which Jack Hobbs drew attention in his own comment on the incidents to which he was witness. "One moral from the whole affair is the lesson it teaches to those responsible for handling the news cabled from one country to another. By emphasising extracts in as sensational way, they give a distorted view of the facts and damage the relations between the two nations." A safe conclusion is that the business did the Test careers of Rockley Wilson and Percy Fender no good at all.

As we have seen, Wilson continued to play for Yorkshire in his school holidays for another three seasons after his return from Australia, and with considerable success, but he was never again selected to play for his country. His age, and the pressure on the selectors to find new blood after such a disastrous tour "down-under", must have limited his appeal to the selectors, despite a bowling prowess confirmed by his topping the national averages in 1921. A more pertinent question arises over selection for the annual Gentlemen versus Players fixture at the Scarborough Festival in September each year. While hardly comparable to being chosen for England, appearance for either side in this important fixture in the cricket calendar carried much prestige at the time. Rockley Wilson had appeared for the Gentlemen in both 1919 and 1920, performing creditably in both matches (indeed, in the 1919 match at Scarborough, he achieved the first ever hat-trick in the fixture). However, he was not selected in 1921, despite his outstanding bowling performances for Yorkshire in the preceding August. Was this the price the authorities exacted for him having blotted his copybook in Australia (or "brought the game into disrepute" in modern parlance)? We cannot know (though it may be noted that the equally guilty Percy Fender was included in the 1921 Gentlemen's side). If it was a punishment, it was for one season only, for Rockley Wilson was again selected for the Gentlemen for the 1922 Scarborough Festival match. As we have seen, by the time of the following Scarborough Festival, Rockley Wilson's first-class career was over.

The End Of An Innings

Rockley Wilson died of heart failure at his home in Winchester on 21 July 1957. His obituaries recognised his qualities not only as a cricketer but also as a delightful personality with a great sense of humour and an irrepressible love of the game. Winchester College later marked his contribution to cricket at the school with a memorial pavilion, opened on 28 May 1966.

Peter Thomas describes Rockley Wilson as "quite one of the most remarkable cricketers the game has ever known." The longevity of his career in first-class cricket, his complete command of the art of slow bowling, his deep knowledge of the game, and his erudition and wit, as evidenced in the many anecdotes about him, surely justify Thomas' epithet. Had he played first class cricket on a more regular basis after leaving Cambridge, there is little doubt he would have won more England caps. As it was, his one appearance for his country came in the twilight of his career and for a side already demoralised by four successive Test match defeats. This appearance was overshadowed by the barracking he received from a crowd offended by remarks in his reports on the tour for British newspapers. He could not have imagined that his articles would have been the stuff of controversy. But they were, and the controversy adds further interest to the story of Thomas' remarkable cricketer.

