

Overthrowing Cricket's

EMPIRE



How Every Team Beat England
for the First Time

Jarrold Kimber

With Abhishek Mukherjee

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Australia

*'The Australians came down like a wolf on the fold,
The Marylebone cricks for a trifle were bowled;
Our Grace before dinner was very soon done,
And Grace after dinner did not get a run.'*

– *Punch*, May 1878

THERE WAS no selection committee or even a nation to represent. The reason these guys were making the tour to England was not for the good of the game; it was because these middle-class professionals saw it as a way of making a lot of money. They spent £50 each to make a collective and represent Australia on a tour. One of the players they'd go up against was AG Steel. When he presented the squad, he introduced Fred Spofforth as 'the demon "n-word" bowler'. This was 1878 and, because the previous team had been indigenous, the locals expected the same. No one in the UK thought this current squad was a real team worth worrying about. The English players had thought of them as a bit of a

joke. Australia had already beaten England in what we now recognise as the first Test, but that was on the other side of the world. And no one thought that was a strong England team. It was, after all, Grace-less.

WG said of the Australian tourists, 'We never for a moment thought of classing them with an English team.' Charles Alcock, secretary of Surrey, remarked, 'The idea of a visit from an Australian team was at first treated as something of a joke by English cricketers.'

But Grace was going to play them for MCC at Lord's and 4,742 people turned up to see the game. MCC had Monkey Hornby, George Hearne, Alfred Shaw, Fred Morley and Grace. They weren't just there to win, they actively wanted to humiliate these Australians. This was supposed to be a three-day match but it didn't last even one, and changed cricket forever.

There was a storm at Lord's on 27 May. It had been a wet early summer, and there had been almost enough rain to finish the day before it started. But when the sun broke through, the pitch was playable and MCC batted first.

WG Grace, the Father of Cricket, opened the batting, and swung a ball to leg. Later he would do it again, but the Australian captain Dave Gregory had told Billy Midwinter to move to that gap as the bowler was coming in (this was not illegal then). The crowd cheered. They didn't really know the Australians, and they were just happy the underdogs

had started well. England lost one more wicket and then pushed the scoring along as best they could. At 27/2, Fred Spofforth came on.

First-change bowlers usually give respite; Spofforth changed cricket forever.

'The demon' Fred Spofforth was a bank clerk from Sydney. He was born in Balmain, to a bank clerk father from Yorkshire. He had started out as a lob bowler, literally underarming the ball up high and landing it near the batter. But, like many Australians, he had been inspired by the round and overarm bowling of the early English tourists. Spofforth had an obsessive personality, and he learned everything he could about bowling and then practised it until he conquered it.

Batters said that looking into his eyes was like looking into death itself. They would stare at him, then look away, only to look back and he'd still be staring straight through them. He looked like a theatre demon, and he acted like a real one. His giant hooked-beak nose flared. His moustache bristled with blood lust. Richard Hodgson, a vicar, said he reminded him of the spirit of evil in Faust, 'his hair parted down the middle, to give the impression of horns'. He might as well have had fangs and a cape.

This was just how he looked. His bowling was scarier.

His run-up was quite simple, a slow amble of 10–12 paces. Not a fearless charge, but a polite jog. At the crease

he had a maniacal action that would summon up hellfire and unleash it on his enemies, turning him from comic villain to actual bringer of the apocalypse. A giant mutant, half man, half octopus, standing well above you, limbs flailing in every direction and the ball spitting out of him at a pace quicker than any human had bowled before.

And the demon had swerve.

By swerve, read swing. There was a thought at the time that swing was an optical illusion. But Spofforth knew it was real and wanted to make it better. He studied baseball pitching and wrote to a university professor asking him to explain swerve. The reply said it was impossible. He looked into articles on aerodynamics. This was in the late 1800s, and he was a more dedicated professional than many today. He was like Glenn McGrath, but more book-smart, quicker in his day and far more evil.

Being that overarm bowling had just been legalised and become widespread, it makes sense that no one had bowled with swing before. Spofforth told people he could swing the ball out, in, up and down. It really wasn't until Hawkeye data was around that anyone understood what he meant clearly. But in his day, the batters must have believed the ball was possessed.

In truth, it looks like he swung it in. Later in his career he would also develop slower and faster balls that looked the same to the batters. He couldn't have worried batters

more if he'd told them he sold his soul to the devil at midnight.

And on a Lord's pitch with rain, on 27 May 1878, he was a monster.

His first over went for two runs. He would go for only that many again in the innings. And giving those two more runs, MCC had gone from 27/2 to all out for 33. The demon had eaten their souls. 5.3 four-ball overs. Three maidens. Four runs. Six wickets.

Australia didn't do much better with the bat but somehow they found a lead of eight runs. The talk around the ground was that Grace would fix the demon. He would tame him and destroy the others. Grace was not the same player who once scored more hundreds than the rest of all the first-class players in a single summer. But in the late 1870s, he was still the best batter in the world, averaging 50% more than a standard top-six batter.

This was the man they called the nonsuch, in the home of the sport he built. He wouldn't allow this Aussie freak to torment them any further. Spofforth beat him first ball, he yelled 'bowled' on his second.

MCC would lose within a day by nine wickets to a bunch of blokes who paid 50 quid to travel there. The demon took 10-20 in the match. Seven of his victims were bowled. And he sent off Monkey Hornby retired hurt. Spofforth had screamed at the home of cricket.

With that one day, cricket became truly international. Those in England could no longer ignore what had happened – Australia had beaten a touring side and MCC at home. This was heading for proper international contests.

Had Spofforth or Harry Boyle (who took 9-19) had bad days, MCC would have charged ahead and the whole tour would have been little more than a decent money-maker for those involved. But England couldn't ignore this. Grace had been destroyed, a team had arrived, and cricket took a leap forward.

England had God; Australia had the devil.

Spofforth and Boyle had bowled Australia into the cricket conversation in 1878, and the Australians would tour England again in 1880.

But it wasn't all great for Australia. When they arrived in England, few teams wanted to play them after a riot had broken out in a match involving the English tourists the previous summer. Lord Harris was at the Sydney Cricket Ground and still upset. Not one match was scheduled for London, and they even had to advertise for opponents.

Gloucestershire were willing to play them. That was the home of the Graces, and also Billy Midwinter's team. Both teams struggled in the first innings, but Walter Gilbert (a Grace cousin) and EM Grace did enough to give Gloucestershire a good first-innings lead of 81 runs. Australia finally found some form in the second innings and ended up with a 165-run lead at the close of play on day two.

WG Grace asked for the pitch to be rolled, and it was. Then, before play the next day, he wanted the pitch rolled again. Billy Murdoch, who was now Australian captain, complained. Grace got what he wanted most times, but in Clifton, Gloucestershire, he was infallible. The pitch was rolled. A flat batting wicket was made flatter. Murdoch was angry, Spofforth was raging. He carved Gloucestershire up with 7-54 to give Australia a comfortable victory.

The Oval broke the London ban, which was difficult for many reasons. Surrey and Harris had to be convinced, and Sussex had a game scheduled that had to be moved. Eventually, Lord Harris put together a side for a Test. In reality, lots of matches were called Tests in this era, and nothing was official about that term.

But this was different. The England team was very strong and included not one, not two, but a hat-trick of Graces. They also included professionals. It would be the first Test ever played in England, and the best-attended match in memory. It was also WG Grace's first Test, and with the help of Spofforth being out injured, Grace scored runs. In the first innings he made 152 and Australia replied with 149.

Before the game, Grace and Murdoch had a friendly bet for one sovereign. Who would top score out of the two? Murdoch didn't score, but Australia were asked to follow on, and at 187/8 it wasn't looking good. Murdoch was still there, and he batted for another 140 runs with the last two wickets.

In doing so Grace said he played one of the best innings ever, and Murdoch beat Grace by a run, winning the sovereign. He wore it around his neck for the rest of his life.

Still, Murdoch could only get Australia a lead of 56. It was not nearly enough. Harris clearly thought the game was over and sent out his numbers eight and nine to slog their way to the low total. Instead, Australia were inspired by their captain, and had England 31/5 when people began to panic, which is also when WG Grace came in and the game was won as he steered them home.

The performance of Murdoch, on and off the field, and the loss healed the riot wounds forever.

This was really the first Test where two very strong teams were up against each other. It may not have been Test cricket as we know it, but each country fielded a powerful side. And it was clear England were still slightly better.

In 1882 Australia were back in England for another tour. At this point there had been eight Tests played between England and Australia; the Aussies had won five of them, and England only that 1880 Test at The Oval. But England had used one strong team, and Australia lost to them.

The tour was going very well for Australia. Hugh Massie started with a huge 206 against Oxford, one of the strongest teams in England. Against Lancashire, the county champions, Spofforth took just the 16 wickets.

The England team for The Oval match was far better on paper. Australia had Billy Murdoch as their star batter and captain, but their batting was weak. As it had been since the beginning. They had Spofforth and Boyle with the ball, but they had to bowl to a batting line-up of Grace and others who had scored more than 10,000 first-class runs. England were the better team, in better form.

Australia won the toss and their innings lasted 80 overs (four balls each). They made 63 runs. By 3:30pm England were batting. Spofforth, who was disgusted with his batters, took it out on England and got rid of Grace and practically everyone else although he didn't take the opportunity to Mankad – before we called it that – Monkey Hornby. England stuttered on with the bat. They passed Australia's score, and then on the verge of stumps were all out for 101. Spofforth had taken 7-46. But England already had a handy lead after only one day of cricket.

Hugh Massie would play nine Tests for Australia as a batter. He would average 15 and make one score of over 50. It just happened to be his day. Massie clearly decided that he might as well hit out. In a Virender Sehwag-style gambit, he hit as hard and long as he could.

Australia were scoring at quicker than a run a minute. Charles Bannerman was hardly hitting it off the square; statistician Charles Davis has estimated his Test strike rate at 22.6. Massie was smashing it. He was dropped at long-

off. In all he made 55 from 62 balls. In terms of runs, it couldn't compare to his dazzling 206 against Oxford, but in the history of English versus Australian cricket, 55 runs have rarely been more important.

Despite the start Massie gave them, the batters were still struggling. Murdoch was trying to hold them together, and coming in at number eight was young Sammy Jones. He was a handy all-rounder, and with Murdoch helped move the total to 114. Then Murdoch hit one into the leg side. They easily completed the single as the keeper threw the ball at the stumps. WG Grace went to pick the ball up. Jones, according to some, looked at him and nodded. Then he walked down the wicket and attended to the pitch, paying no attention to what Grace did behind him.

While Jones tapped the wicket, God whipped off the bails. God then turned to the square leg umpire and appealed; the umpire gave it. God claimed it. Murdoch was furious and complained to God. Even other English players complained. But God and the umpires did not change their minds. Under the laws of cricket, Jones was out. Fifty years would pass, but Sammy Jones would never forgive Grace.

In the famed game when Grace refused to leave the field after being given out lbw, Grace went on to score 400 not out. When he left the field, the scorebook said 399, but Grace told the scorer to round it up. Grace had spent his entire career bullying people, pushing the term 'gentleman'

as far as it would go, laughing it up as a shamateur claiming huge expenses and getting his own way. Before the modern Olympics, he had played in Australia, Malta, Ceylon, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. He would have seen no difference in changing a score in a normal match than running out the naive Sammy Jones.

But Grace didn't do this in a match against a Grimsby XXII, he did it in a national sporting contest. These cricket matches now meant something more. You weren't playing for a team or region, you were playing for something bigger. National pride would get the very best out of athletes the world over. A secret pill for motivation. On that day that one slight awoke it within the Australians. And especially one man. As Sammy Jones left the field, the next batter in was the demon.

Spofforth, a man of anger and fury on a good day, was exactly the wrong man to walk into that situation. Grace would have said something, or smirked, or just been smug, and Spofforth would have raged. Spofforth made a duck. And any noise made by any English player would have just made it all the worse. Spofforth told Murdoch, 'I swear to you, England will not win this.'

Australia had a lead of 85 runs. Even in this low-scoring match, they were way behind.

At the change of innings Spofforth went into the English changing rooms and abused Grace. Grace probably saw this as a victory in itself. After much swearing, Spofforth left Grace

with, 'This will lose you the match,' before saying to his own players: 'I'm going to bowl at the old man. I'm going to frighten him out.' And then a cry that Australian bowlers have one way or another believed ever since, 'This thing can be done.'

George Bonnor, Australia's big hitter and the sort of guy who looked like he'd just walked off a farm in Wyoming, walked up to Grace and spoke to him, I'm sure using all of his 6ft 6in height to look down on him. 'If we don't win the match WG, after what you have done, I won't believe there is a God in heaven.'

Monkey Hornby, England's captain, put himself up the order. He had batted at ten in the first innings, and now he was opening.

He would make 9, his highest Test score. Spofforth dismissed Hornby and Dick Barlow with consecutive balls. England were only 15/2 but then there was a partnership, the sort that ends games when you are only chasing 85. Grace was batting with 'Happy Jack' George Ulyett, and they scored easily and hit the ball hard. With only two wickets down, they passed 50. The bookmakers put Australia in as 6/1. And then the demon changed ends.

Something happened to Spofforth at the Vauxhall end. Neville Cardus described it. 'There was the sense of the inimical in his aspect now. He seemed taller than he was half an hour ago, the right arm more sinuous. There was no excitement in him. He was ... cold-blooded.' People often say

that Spofforth went on a rage-fuelled rampage. But actually, what he did was far more sinister. The rage got to him early on, but he couldn't control it. What he did was let all the anger go, and just got cold.

On the boat over, Spofforth had dressed as Mephistopheles. At The Oval, he became him.

Spofforth didn't explode the stumps of Grace's batting partner, he merely removed him. God was spooked at the other end. Maybe he saw the look in the demon's eye, but he was out to Boyle only two runs later. When a team has someone with the gravitational pull of Grace, his dismissal leaves a gaping black hole. They only needed 32 runs with six wickets still in hand when Grace left.

A good bowler smells blood. You can often hear it from their scream at getting the breakthrough wicket. Other times it's in their eyes. You could see it with Shane Warne when he took the wicket of Herschelle Gibbs in the 1999 World Cup. Curtly Ambrose and Fred Trueman had it for their entire careers. It's the ability to take one wicket and turn that wound into a corpse.

Who better for Australia. Who worse for England. The demon.

Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden. Maiden.

That was the 12 successive overs bowled after Grace wast out. Australia deliberately allowed a single so they could

switch which batters they were going for. Had Spofforth taken a shiv out and knifed the player in the abdomen at the end of each maiden, he would have made no more damage. Eventually, it was too much, and Spofforth bowled Alfred Lyttelton. At five wickets down, with England losing blood, Hornby stuffed the batting order more. Spofforth would have known that.

When AG Steel came out ahead of CT Studd, Spofforth's evil genius senses would have felt it. Steel could bat, but Studd had made three hundreds against Australia that summer. CT was the most majestic of the majestic Studd brothers; he'd scored two hundreds against the Australians that summer. And he was being moved down the order, even though it was his hundred that inflicted on Australia their only first-class loss on tour.

Spofforth went through Steel like butter. Then Read. Then Lucas. Still no CT Studd. They said he sat wrapped in a blanket shivering from fear. He said it was cold. It certainly was in Spofforth's eyes.

There is a story that it became so tense at this point that one man expired. Actually, the man died before the innings started, perhaps anticipating the tension. Another chewed through an umbrella. And poor Studd looked like a ghost as he walked out.

Studd started at the non-striker's end as Boyle took the wicket of Barnes. Then Ted Peate came in, took one

look at Studd, and decided that he was in no state to get the runs. Peate was an old left-arm spinner. He never passed 13 in a Test. England only needed nine. Peate had a friendly moustache, the sort a friendly school bus driver would have. Spofforth's upper lip wouldn't spit on a moustache like that. Peate wasn't physically equipped to play Spofforth on a normal day, and Studd looked even less likely. So, Peate swung at Boyle. He hit the first couple, scored two runs, and then missed one. Boyle hit the stumps.

The colonials had beaten the best of the empire. The demon had defeated God.

Australia had been victorious against England for the sixth time, but this was the one that mattered. This changed everything. Spofforth was a Michael Jordan-like sociopathic competitor. All he wanted to do was win. But what he didn't know was that whatever it was that drove him, that made him that way, didn't just light a fire under him and his teammates; it lit a fire in cricket that continues to rage today.

AUSTRALIA

This was what ran in *The Sporting Times* three days later,
written by 'Bloobs' (Reginald Brooks):

In Affectionate Remembrance
of
ENGLISH CRICKET,
which died at The Oval
on
29th August, 1882,
Deeply lamented by a large circle of sorrowing
friends and acquaintances
R.I.P.
N.B.—The body will be cremated and the
ashes taken to Australia.

The urn would follow, but the fire that started it began here.