

Ping-Pong Diplomacy – entertaining but needs a pinch of salt

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Posted On: **May 16, 2014**

 **PING-PONG DIPLOMACY**

Ivor Montagu and the Astonishing Story Behind the Game That Changed the World

*ETTA archivist Diane Webb and General Secretary Rob Sinclair are both included in the author's acknowledgments for the help they gave Nicholas Griffin in providing access the ETTA archives. Here, the book is reviewed by **Steve Leven**.*

New table tennis books don't come along too often, so it was with interest that I started reading this historical volume. Nicholas Griffin has a career as an author and doesn't appear to have been a player of the game, but he has certainly put in many hours of research into what is at times a very detailed account.

The book forms two distinct halves – the first about Ivor Montagu and his crucial part in the development of the modern international game. The second half rarely mentions Montagu, but instead concentrates on the history of the game in China, which is inextricably intertwined with the politics of the ruling Communist Party.

This culminates in the famous table tennis match between the Chinese and American teams in Beijing in 1971. We are all probably aware of this match, but this book provides a detailed account of how it came about and why, who the personalities were and what happened to them afterwards.

Perhaps we should have known from the title, but the book is big on hyperbole. Sure, Montagu was paid by Moscow to pass on information from the British establishment, but in the world of espionage, James Bond he was not. Sure, the 1971 match was an important step towards East/West detente, but it wasn't the only reason for the fall of the Berlin Wall 18 years later, even though after reading the book you could be forgiven for thinking that it was. Ping-pong was used as a political and social tool by the Chinese authorities but it felt as if Griffin was always overstating the case.

Details of the table tennis are scarce. The pen picture of the Japanese world champion Ogimura is very good but the descriptions of his on-the-table career are sketchy. Griffin felt that it was not necessary to mention the names of the 1954 English Swaythling Cup team, despite saying how good they were (for the record, they were Bergmann, Craigie, Leach, Simons and Venner). Scores of the 1971 China v USA matches are not recorded, even though it is noted that the Chinese fixed them to make it look close. And the fact that there were other teams which toured China immediately after the 1971 Osaka world championships (New Zealand, Colombia, Canada, Nigeria) is virtually ignored.

The author was born in London but lives in Florida and the book has a distinctly mid-Atlantic feel about it. The spellings are American. One howler which should have been avoided was the naming of the MCC as the Middlesex Cricket Club, and the Beijing table tennis hall is given variously as holding 18,000 or 20,000 spectators.

Read with interest, there is plenty to keep you informed and entertained, but do apply a pinch of salt and a little perspective.

Steve Leven (May 2014)

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