

# CJ

## A Remarkable Life

THE LIFE OF CHARLES JAMES OFFORD,  
THE FATHER OF NATAL SCHOOLS' CRICKET.

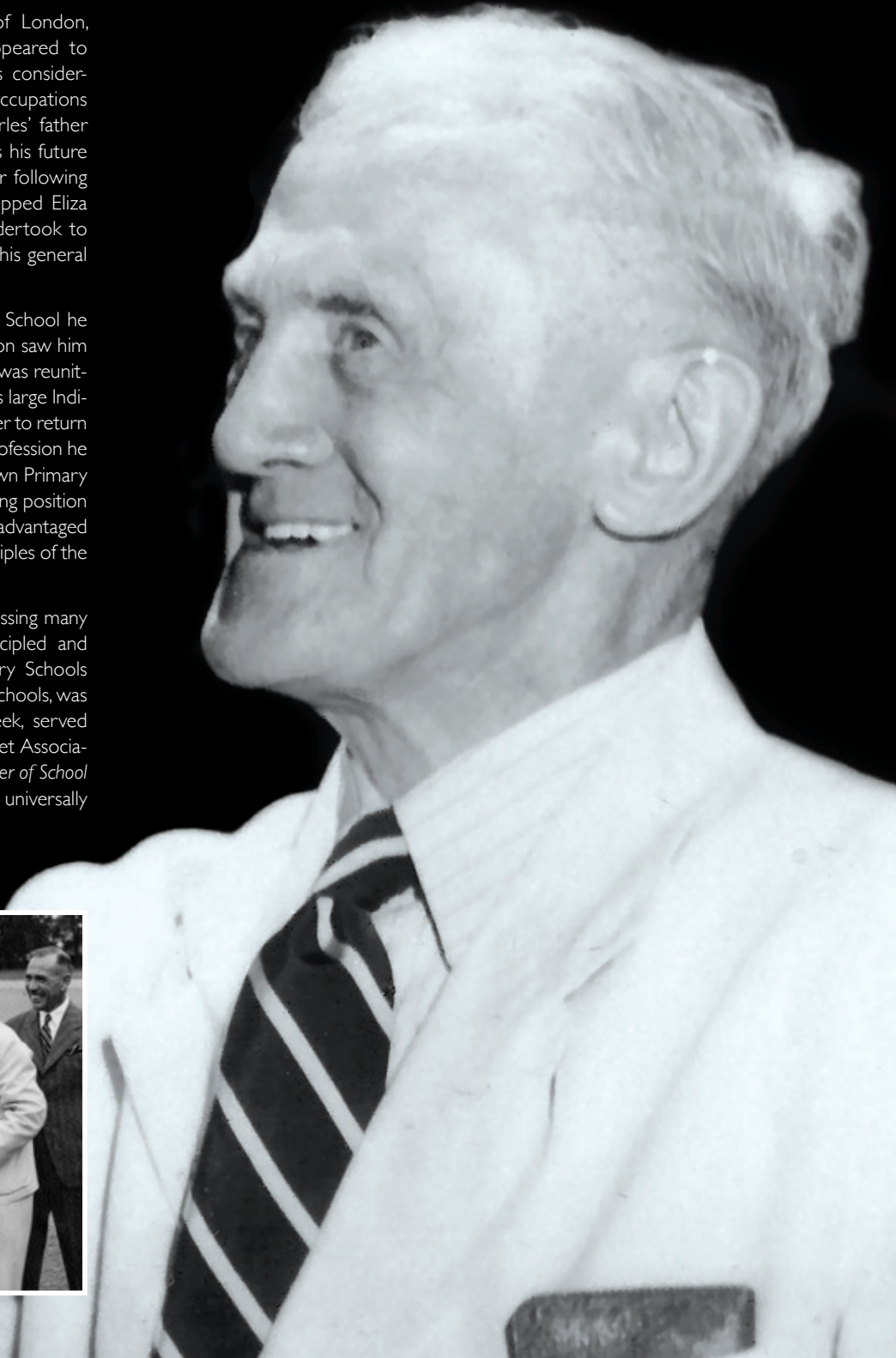
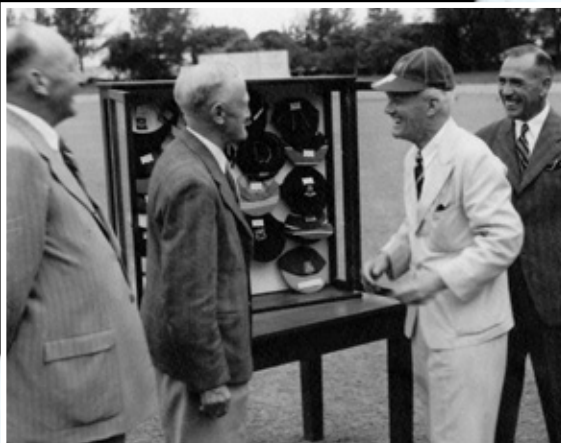
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In 1871 in Somers Town in the north-east of London, Charles James Offord was born into what appeared to be an uncertain future. At the time there was considerable overcrowding in the area with multiple occupations and often families living in a single room. Charles' father was a humble boot-clicker and within four years his future looked even bleaker with the death of his father following the earlier death of his mother. Into his life stepped Eliza Jane Usherwood, a Church Missionary who undertook to be his guardian and to assume responsibility for his general well-being, accommodation and education.

Following a successful career at an English Public School he secured a place at Cambridge but a chest condition saw him sent to South Africa to recuperate. Here Charles was reunited with his guardian now working among Durban's large Indian population and he elected to remain there, never to return to his homeland. Deciding to enter the teaching profession he was soon promoted to be Headmaster of Pinetown Primary School in Natal and later embarked on a challenging position turning around the fortunes of the pupils in a disadvantaged suburb using social upliftment and the ethical principles of the game of cricket allied to formal education.

Cricket was his great love which he saw as possessing many of the attributes required for a balanced, principled and productive life. He established the Natal Primary Schools Cricket Union, the Natal Cricket Week for High Schools, was appointed Organising Secretary of Nuffield Week, served for many years on the council of the Natal Cricket Association and became affectionately known as *The Father of School Cricket*. A man of great personal charm he was universally loved, admired and respected.



# *CJ – A Remarkable Life*

*By David Dallas*

The title of this biography of CJ Offord by his grandson David Dallas is well justified, because CJ (Charles) was born of poor parents in the St Pancras area of London and was orphaned at the age of 4, without known relatives, yet led a very fruitful life. He was rescued from a future in a workhouse by a church worker, Eliza Jane Usherwood who organised care and well-chosen schooling for him. On leaving school in 1890 he was offered a place at Cambridge University.

Before he could go up to Cambridge, he developed a chest condition and was advised to spend some time in South Africa, where Eliza Usherwood was working as a missionary among Durban's Indian population. In the result he never took up his place at Cambridge and never went back to England. He qualified as a teacher, eventually becoming a much respected and highly successful headmaster successively at Pinetown, Estcourt, Howick and Mayville. Mayville was a very mixed community, with many of the children coming from poor and broken homes, and CJ and his wife met this challenge by starting a welfare centre at the school, Mayville Welfare, which enabled them to meet and help the families. CJ stayed at Mayville as headmaster until his compulsory retirement in 1931, despite offers to move to better-equipped schools.

CJ promoted cricket at the schools he headed, believing that it was a good vehicle for teaching teamwork and other character lessons. While at Mayville he took steps to create the Durban Primary Schools Cricket Union, with the primary schools playing against each other on Saturday mornings.

Then he persuaded the leading cricket high schools to participate in a schools week tournament in the December holidays. This was very successful and expanded. It became known as Offord Week. In 1938 Lord Nuffield donated 10 000 pounds to the South African Cricket Association which they used to establish an annual inter-provincial schools cricket week, called Nuffield Week, and CJ ran it almost singlehanded for its first 15 years.

Much of CJ's success lay in the personal interest he took in the boys he taught and the cricketers who took part in the schools weeks. The reviewer of this book had personal experience of that.

Apart from describing a remarkable life, the book is interesting for the picture it gives of settler families in the colony of Natal in the late 19th century. The book is enhanced by the inclusion of some 50 photographs, many of them of historical interest.

Copies may be obtained from the author at [dbdallas@pac.com.au](mailto:dbdallas@pac.com.au) for R180 plus postage

Clive van Ryneveld