

SAMPLE EDITION

28

WINTER 2019

THE
Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

WISDEN



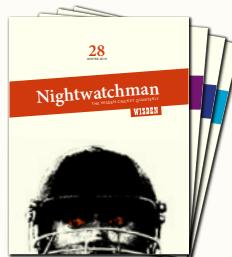
THE Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

Cricket's past has been enriched by great writing and Wisden is making sure its future will be too. *The Nightwatchman* is a quarterly collection of essays and long-form articles and is available in print and e-book formats.

Co-edited by Anjali Doshi and Tanya Aldred, with Matt Thacker as managing editor, *The Nightwatchman* features an array of authors from around the world, writing beautifully and at length about the game and its myriad offshoots. Contributors are given free rein over subject matter and length, escaping the pressures of next-day deadlines and the despair of cramming heart and soul into a few paragraphs.

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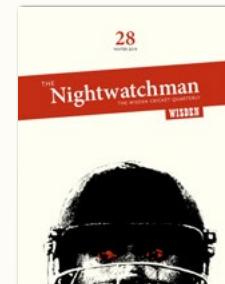
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ISSUE 28 – WINTER 2019

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Tasneem-Summer Khan discusses the wider implications of the Alex Hepburn case

Anthony McGowan wonders whether to walk

Marcus Berkman conducts a freeloading experiment

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Zaffar Kunial was poet-in-residence at the Oval Test





KEEPING

William Fiennes recalls some dreamy bye-less afternoons

My father had been a wicket-keeper, widely admired, playing at Lord's aged 18 in the summer of 1939, maybe good enough for a county trial if war hadn't barged in, and it was still in his bone and muscle memory in his eighties and nineties, throwing an apple up and catching it and nudging the bails off, or just miming a take to one side of the body, his fingers and palms opening into a bowl or cradle, a little give with the elbows as the ball invisibly landed, not "caught" so much as greeted and received, the evidence there when he held his hands up and you could see the fingers all crooked where balls had crocked the joints, corroborated too when old friends of his encountered with Rover tickets in the Warner or Allen stands would look down at me and remember not just my father's batting but his keeping too: "A very good wicket-keeper, your father..."

So when at school they asked for a volunteer, I raised my hand. The gloves in the communal kitbags were huge, cumbersome gauntlets, sweat-soaked leather hardened in the off-season,

the plastic finger guards like burly thimbles, the pimpled catching surface worn smooth and shiny. The chamois inner gloves were hard and creased when you first put them on but would melt and soften with sweat from your hands so that after a short sequence of catches the paraphernalia of inner and outer gloves seemed to meld with your own body and be forgotten. I don't remember any coaching, it was more a matter of imitation, mimicking the squats and nimble sidestep dances of Bob Taylor and Jeff Dujon, relishing not just their diving one-handed catches but the lovely soundless grace of the task done right, understanding from Dad that the point was to go beneath notice, taking each catch so cleanly the ball made no sound in the gloves, the good wicket-keeper dissolving into each passage of play with Zen-like self-effacement. That was my father's ideal, increasingly remote in an era when keepers were expected to lead the psychological attack, being right under the batsman's nose and eyes, mouth in his ears, lips almost brushing the stump mic, expected to chirp and



heckle like Healy, Boucher, Prior, Nixon, Wade, even the ineffably dignified Kumar Sangakkara haranguing Shaun Pollock with some entry-level psychos in the 2003 World Cup: "Lots of pressure for the skipper now, yeah? Gonna let his whole country down if he fails! Oh man, the weight of all these expectations, fellas! The weight of the country, chaps! Forty-two million supporters right here!"

And not just the relentless dreary chiselling at the batsman's sporting and sexual self-esteem - now the keeper had to be chief of geeing-up and morale-boosting too, as if he were the afternoon's host and compère, calling everyone "buddy" and filling the pauses - "Good areas, Frankie!" - like a radio DJ scared of dead air. Of course no one's better placed to jab the needle, but even Paul Nixon must have felt something more complicated than enmity for the batsman standing just across the line. You're so close to the batsman's talents and shortcomings it's hard not to feel solidarity as well as opposition, so that the celebrations of a stumping might simply be a way of disguising the feeling you'd betrayed a friend. You can hear them breathing, hear the mantras of concentration and self-reproach they murmur to themselves, read forearm tattoos and bat labels, see where they take guard and how they mark it, how their feet settle and shuffle. When the ball approaches, keeper and batsman are alone together inside a world of movement and sound - the flurry of backlift and batswing, the faint creaking of leather boots and pads, the fabric swish and rustle, the expulsions of breath, the bat-and-ball percussion all bursting out of the still, silent moment when

you and the batsman waited together in squat and stance.

Baseball has a catcher, cricket has a keeper: you keep wicket, like a diary or a secret, the verb rich with suggestions of ownership and intimacy. The keeper standing up to slow or medium-paced bowling is eye-level with the bails' rolled beads and spigots, breathes woody stump varnish, knows each agricultural minandscape of grooving and abrasion made by bat toes and dragged studs across the batting crease - the guards, guidelines and small August dust bowls. The idea was to stay low and rise with the ball, weight in the balls of your feet, thigh muscles driving out of the squat to spring to left or right. I liked the athletic possibilities of standing back to quick bowlers - at university I took one off the inside edge, a fast Neil Coulson out-swinger that first had me moving slipwards before a drive scrambled the trajectories and I dived full-length down the leg side, the ball landing snug in my left glove, just off the ground. And how about that flier off the outside edge at Burleigh Park, right-handed, slips dispersed to boundaries for a batsman on 99, or that guy trying to cut a wide one at Stonor so I was already moving in front of first slip and could plunge in front of second to land it one-handed inches off the grass... Now approaching 50, I'm aware of those reflexes waning, balls diverted off the edge already yards past me before my nerves convey the message of a chance, and sometimes I watch the YouTube clips - Tim Ludeman's full-stretch zero-gravity left-hander, a Brad Haddin screamer in front of first slip, where in slo-mo you can see Shane Watson raising his hands in awe or prayer at the flying man under his

eyes - and dream of just one more before it's over.

Aged 12 I got Gordon's Gin's *Wicketkeepers of the World* by Godfrey Evans for Christmas, and the author's Dickensian white muttonchops and ritual siesta in the lunch interval seemed part of a strain of eccentricity running through English keepers, via Alan Knott who warmed his hands in hot water before taking the field and reinforced his chamois inners with strips of plasticine, and Jack Russell who drove between games wearing a specially-adapted sleeping bag to keep his back and legs warm, and reportedly used the same tea bag through all five days of an Oval Test against Australia, which Derek Randall estimated amounted to a hundred cups. Dad liked Russell especially for his "tidiness", and I'd absorbed the idea that this was the highest accolade available for keepers, whose mistakes - a drop, a bye, a fumbled stumping chance - could loom so unfairly over hours of quiet, unnoticed competence. This was the goalkeeper's burden too, and both keepers shared that Wim Wenders existential loneliness, the only one of their kind: a handful of batters, a handful of bowlers, only one keeper. And added to this was the way the game continually circulated the ball (and so also the focus of players and spectators) through the keeper like blood through the heart, not just when batters played and missed or let it go, but almost every time fielders gathered and sent it back in, as if the keeper were really the ball's home, the place to which it always returned.

My Godfrey Evans book featured Jeff Dujon - who could go a whole innings

without standing up to the stumps, at home midway between wicket and boundary while Marshall, Holding, Garner and Croft took turns stretching him like a goalie to posts, top corners and crossbar - and Farokh Engineer, who could go a whole day anchored to the stumps by the spin quartet of Bedi, Prasanna, Chandrasekhar and Venkataraghavan. Hard to imagine a book like that now, in the post-Gilchrist era, when keepers earn their place as much for their batting as their glovework, and when keeping is more an interchangeable athletic discipline than an art for which you might have natural gift and style. Admirable sportsmen, of course, but who's talking about "art" or "style" in the keeping of Ramdin, Karthik, Pant, Watling, Bairstow, Wade, Paine? The speed of Dhoni's hands in a stumping off Harbhajan is objectively astonishing, but there's a stiff, machine efficiency to the transaction that leaves me cold. Give me Sarah Taylor standing up to Nat Sciver or Anya Shrubsole, moving to leg as Ellyse Perry or Trisha Chetty or Suné Luus shape for a glance or flick but get nothing on it. Taylor has spoken of "flowing with the line" and it's true there's something silky or liquid in the way her hands and body track the angle to make the catch then spirit the ball back as if through her own slipstream to the bails, batter teetering off-balance, Taylor already rushing towards teammates with arms fully outstretched, beaming.

Standing back, each ball had the glory-potential of a one-handed grab; up close, I could only dream of leg-side stumpings like Taylor's. Maybe you have to have kept wicket yourself to grasp the challenge: you're in a squat outside off, and when the bowler sends it down leg it's not just that you

have a fraction of a second to adjust position, body following the advance party of your hands, but for a large fraction of that fraction the ball will be completely invisible behind the batsman, on the dark side of the moon, your hands moving blind, by dead reckoning. So it's not just an exhibition of physical speed and balance, but a computational miracle that Taylor can "know" where and when the ball will arrive and be there to meet it. Sciver couldn't have been bowling more than 70mph, so think about Jack Russell in early January 1991, the third Test against Australia at Sydney, when Dean Jones on 60 has been batting out of his crease, so Russell is standing up (no helmet!) to Gladstone Small to keep the batsman honest. Small fires it at 80-odd clicks down leg, Jones tries to glance but misses, and in blink-speed Russell has followed his hands blind a couple of yards to his left and the bails are gone, Jones already walking. No way Jack Russell ran out that morning wondering how he was going to "get in the batsman's head". And Russell was dropped for the next Test, replaced by Alec Stewart, the superior batsman...

"Well taken": I must have learned the phrase from my father, and that verb had resonance too - not "caught" but "taken", as if each ball were a criticism or compliment the keeper

had to absorb and process. It was more than catching. You made your broad, webbed hands into a berth or nest, and gave with the elbows to cushion the landing. The technique evolved to protect the palms from repeated heavy impacts - the ball a meat hammer tenderising the fillets - but origin stories didn't matter when you saw or made those cradle shapes in the arms and the ball sank home so naturally you barely felt it. I don't remember when I last really talked about wicket-keeping with my father. Maybe it was around the time Russell faded from view, and Adam Gilchrist's phenomenal impact as a batsman forced everyone to think differently about the keeper's role - who cares about "flowing with the line" when you can score an Ashes century off 57 balls? But the conversation was still there when he lobbed an apple in the kitchen and made the stumping (Mum said he did the same when she threw him a pair of balled-up socks to put in his sock drawer) or held up his hands in silhouette with the window behind them, his fingers crooked like an old oak's staghead branches, and in those dreamy bye-less afternoons when each catch landed true, all the half-volley throws, wides and leg-side surprises, Dad's voice among my teammates' saying: "Well taken, Will. Well taken."

• • •



EXTRACTS

It was only in 2018, in the wake of the Windrush scandal when a Home Office taskforce was set up to examine cases such as Wes's, that he was finally granted British citizenship. His British passport arrived at the start of 2019 but the promised compensation, which would have paid for his long-postponed visit to Jamaica, had still not arrived by the time of his death. Indeed, at the time of writing, over 18 months after Theresa May promised financial compensation to the Windrush victims, not a single payment has been made. Wesley has described how the long years of dealing with the hostile environment administered by the Home Office caused the stress and depression which he believes contributed to his father's sudden death.

ROD EDMOND

• • •

While the panel should be commended for including educational training in its decision, the question remains: what is the sport doing to prevent the next Stat Chat - or indeed the others in existence, normalised from club cricket to the elite game? Instead of sparking an industry-wide conversation, we have sentenced, tutted and moved on without as much as a glancing consideration of the social behaviours and structures which facilitate and exacerbate the problem and are foundational to the routinised dehumanisation of women, reducing them to walking, talking sex dolls.

TASNEEM-SUMMER KHAN

• • •

But walking is different. It isn't cheating to stand your ground. There's nothing in the laws of cricket that says you can't wait for the umpire to make a decision. But that is not to deny that there are moral aspects to this case. On the contrary, the fact that the laws are silent on walking means that it is – almost uniquely in sport – a purely moral issue. One for the philosophers, rather than the third umpire.

Let us imagine that the batter has felt that sickening click. He wants to do the right thing. And he's of a meditative and philosophical frame of mind. So what he does next is quickly review the entire history of Western moral philosophy, trying to find some guidance from the greatest minds ever to ponder the question of right and wrong. And if you want to think of this as a potted history of philosophy, who am I to disagree?

ANTHONY MCGOWAN

...

In 2018 I watched almost no cricket, possibly because I was too busy writing a book about cricket. The irony! This year I decided to take things easier, for to write a book you need some gas in the tank, and I had been sputtering along the road with the needle on EMPTY for several hundred miles. The solution? You guessed it.

I decided, though, that I would conduct a small experiment. I wouldn't actually buy any tickets or do anything exhausting like that. I would just tell all my cricket-loving friends that I was available for days out watching and eating and drinking, and see what happened. I would go anywhere at any time, within reason. This, then, is the tale of my summer.

MARCUS BERKMANN

...

So when Ivo Bligh led his men to Australia in 1882 in a bid to "recover those Ashes", the Colombo Cricket Club (CCC) sniffed an opportunity. Why not invite the English for a game of cricket? It would be easy to organise, since several members of the club maintained close connections to MCC (in true colonial fashion, the CCC was for "Europeans" only). What's more, the cricketers who'd been cooped up on board for weeks were bound to be bursting for a game.

For close to a century it became common for Ashes-bound teams from England and Australia to stretch their legs on the cricket fields of Colombo, playing single-day matches against the best local talent. According to legend, the ships would sound a whistle when it was time for their passengers to stop play and reboard. So the games got their name – "the whistlestops".

NICHOLAS BROOKES

...

Equipped with a theatrical streak, Hansie Cronje could recite reams of Hamlet by heart and seemed to embody the Hamlet line that reads: "One may smile, and smile, and be a villain."

DAVID WILSON

...

I come from sporting stock. My grandfather Bill Ponsford was a good cricketer. So good that a stand at the Melbourne Cricket Ground is emblazoned with his name. Alongside his sporting talent, he also had the most amazing capacity to concentrate. Unassuming and quite ill-prepared, Bill arrived on the world stage in the 1920s and broke numerous records. If Bradman, eight years younger, hadn't subsequently smashed the records my grandfather had broken, Bill would now be a national icon. And some digging through my family tree has unearthed a few other sporty Ponsfords. It appears that Bill wasn't the only cricketer in the family. Me, I can barely catch a ball, and yet I still feel a real part of this lineage, albeit as an informed bystander: watching, interpreting and making sense of largely forgotten events.

MEGAN PONSFORD

...

Bats are special and we have a deep relationship with them. Whether you're a club plinkster or slogger, gnarled county pro or international superstar, you will have probably had a favourite in your lifetime. Maybe you have spent your whole life trying to find "the one"? The feel, the pick-up, the grain, the fabled sweet spot, talked about in hushed tones on boundary edges. It does exist, you just have to know where to look.

JAMES WALLACE

•••

My earliest memory of the place is of Lillee and Thomson in 1982. I was sitting side-on to the pitch with Dad, resplendent in Stubbies, towelling hat and little else, and although the Aussies were well past their prime the ball moved too fast for my nine-year-old eyes. Apparently Greg Chappell scored 176 before succumbing to Jeremy Coney's slower ball.

Today "The Park" – to me it was never Jade or AMI Stadium – is near death.

JUSTIN PAUL

•••

This is the Bull Ring. Not merely a cricket stadium but an ode to the elements. A cathedral that pays homage to the full fury of nature's brilliance. All that is thrilling about this meandering sport is condensed here. This ground has grown up in the City of Gold and now embodies the impatience of its people, never missing a chance to hit the fast-forward button on a stagnant day's play. No other venue in the world can match the firepower of a breathless showstopper at the Wanderers.

DANIEL GALLAN

•••

My mind was fuzzy from the pressure as I tried to remind myself of my options. Which shot should I play? Where would be the most profitable place to aim? For a split second it was as if a lifetime of experience had deserted me and I'd never played the game before. Was I bottling it? I glanced down, regathered, and deliberated. The A button meant "normal shot", I remembered that much. It would produce a clean strike, but that didn't necessarily equate to power or accuracy, and if I was going to find that precious boundary I needed plenty of both. It was certainly the percentage shot, but pressing A would be playing it safe, and what's the point of going for safety when you're playing Russian Roulette in the Last Chance Saloon?

JON HARVEY

•••

After one more practice shot in the middle of the pitch, Gayle turned and slowly walked towards the batting crease. Like Rafael Nadal, who arranges his drink bottles meticulously before taking his position at the back of the court, the game was made to wait for Gayle. He had even turned slowing down, the antithesis of all that T20 represented, into a dramatic act.

It took just 8.5 overs for Gayle to reach his hundred.

TIM WIGMORE

•••

It's April 2019, six minutes past four on a Sunday afternoon at Fun Station USA – an indoor amusement park – on Staten Island, New York. To the left of the entrance, surrounded by black netting, is a baseball tunnel with a heavily corroded blue concrete floor.

Standing at one end of the tunnel is a bespectacled young boy. He sports a helmet, a pair of gloves, and soft, white protective pads that stretch from his ankles all the way up to his skinny lower thighs.

EMAAD AKHTAR

•••

An everyman all-rounder sits, still padded, in the aftermath of an epochal Headingley Test match. His eyes stare into the middle distance, coolly processing what he's just achieved – he's had the definitive word.

Alongside him, split only by a line of ink and 38 years, sits a burly parallel, time's passing perceptible only from the chunky cigar drooping from the sportsman's lips.

OSCAR RATCLIFFE

• • •

"Baseball breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart," wrote a Boston Red Sox fan in one of the most beautiful sports pieces I have encountered. Yet it applies equally to being a Somerset supporter; in fact it applies more to Somerset supporters than those of any other county cricket club.

I am by birth a Somerset man and by quirk of fate a Boston Red Sox fan, making the quote even more apposite to me. However, I have come to the conclusion that, despite the agonising near-misses these two teams have experienced over the last 50 years, I wouldn't have it any other way.

STEVE TANCOCK

• • •

I know for a fact that all the captains that came after me when I resigned in 2005 were offered something by the powers that be to keep quiet about certain issues. I had been offered similar incentives myself. It meant they wouldn't stand up for anything in the future. For Taylor to stand up then made me think that when he was captain he did not take whatever was offered to him from our hierarchy. If you look at everyone else who has taken the captaincy role, a pattern emerges.

TATENDA TAIBU

• • •

Lahore has a rich folklore; it is a city which can take you back in time. When I headed towards "old Lahore" to interview the legendary Abdul Qadir, I got a peep into the past too. As I entered his home-cum-office I couldn't help but notice a big picture of my host with Shane Warne on the staircase. I saw quite a few pictures hung on his office walls and the only players in them were Imran, Qadir and Warne.

SM HUSSAIN

• • •

I forget that cricket grounds exist in winter
seeing-out snow and floating in fog.
I forget that the ground's been there almost forever
and curling around it like a finger
pointing at the wrought iron gasholder, a buried river
leaving a curve, the Effra.
A road like a brooch around an opal.
The Kennington Oval.

ZAFFAR KUNIAL

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