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WINTER 2020

THE
Nightwatchman
THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

WISDEN



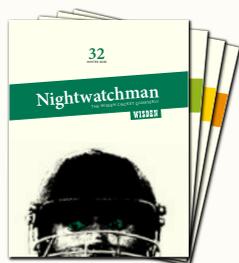
THE Nightwatchman

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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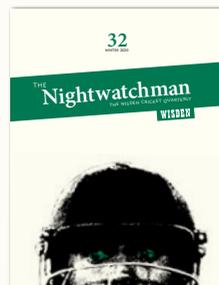
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ISSUE 32 – WINTER 2020

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GET OFF THAT FENCE, LAD

David Hopps on Yorkshire's great divider

So Geoffrey Boycott has reached 80. If his cricketing career is any guide, that means those looking on will be split roughly 50-50 as to whether they want him to reach his century. As for me, I was fortunate enough to cover the last three years of his first-class career. For the sake of an easy story, I wanted him to make either 0, 99 or 100 and more. As nought has long since become an impossibility because of the miracles of childbirth, then naturally I wish him a minimum of 19 hale and hearty years ahead. Let the Ginseng tablets do their work.

An unhealthy number of you will already be wondering: "Yes, but is he for him or ag'in him?" Only Kevin Pietersen, among cricketers, has ever divided opinion to a comparable extent in my lifetime. Boycott is the Brexit of cricket, a tell-it-straight soothsayer for the masses or crass, rude and full of his own self-importance. And now it appears that I have to decide how nicely to sing "Happy Birthday" to the Old Curmudgeon.

My father, 91 now, tells an old army story (post-war, in Nottinghamshire) about how he once gate-crashed the officers' mess for a sergeant major's drinks party. "What are you doing here, laddie?" asked the sergeant major, a brusque Scouser. "You'd better make your mind up what side of the fence you are going to fall on. And when you fall off that fence, woe betide you if you fall off on the wrong side." He never did fall off that fence. He didn't want the hassle. He won't take sides on Boycott either. For what follows, I blame my dad.

A few guidelines I'm trying to follow:

Boycs has occasionally been good to me, so I should value that.

Boycs has appalled me, so I shouldn't really forgive him.

Boycs has also infuriated my daughter, and rightly so, but it did make me laugh.



My daughter, to deal with that one first, had a student job at Costcutter supermarket in Boston Spa, the well-to-do West Yorkshire village where Boycott put his Georgian mansion up for sale last year at a cool £2.85m. Boycs would commonly make a sandwich order at the deli counter and when he was informed one day that regrettably there were no wholemeal baps left, he gestured across the road at a rival bakers and said brusquely: "You'll know where to get 'em then, I'll be back in ten minutes." After a heated internal debate, the manager made the journey my daughter refused to make, remarking, with an obsequiousness of which Uriah Heep would have been proud, that it was not right to offend "Sir Geoffrey" – common terminology in Yorkshire at least 40 years before he was knighted for real. My daughter still doesn't entirely understand why I find that story funny and I tell her it must be some sort of protective mechanism.

In that same village, Boycott made a gesture last year that reveals his capacity for loyalty, duty and community. On 14 July 2019, the day England beat New Zealand to win the World Cup, a day like no other, he forwent the opportunity to go to Lord's because he had made a long-standing commitment to open a park in the village. He turned in an age-old speech about the importance of sport, and the influence of his Uncle Algy who introduced sport to him as a working-class kid, and while I admit to a smirk or two at the hoariest lines, people around me listened with great respect. A quick coffee back at Boycott Towers with local worthies and he settled down to watch the match on the telly. I think that's mightily impressive.

What has been quite a shock to realise is not that Boycott is 80, but that he appears to have entered retirement. It has taken a global pandemic to give BBC executives an excuse – a backbone perhaps – to carry out a cull some have wanted to undertake for several years. Tensions would build up during the year over Boycott's more outrageous outpourings on the airwaves but he knew how to charm whenever a new contract was in the offing.

I'm not as much nuanced about Boycott as conflicted. I slumbered through his most laborious late-career innings but I was captivated by every moment of others, intrigued by the ceaseless desire for perfection from a batsman who did not as much rage against the dying of the light as plan meticulously against it. I've nodded furiously in agreement at the unadorned honesty of his TV and radio analysis, but that's only if I haven't managed to get to the off switch first. I like my cricket commentators (and summarisers) to be mellifluous above all else, possessed of a sonorous, or at least an interesting voice, a voice worthy of a beautiful game. Daniel Norcross appears to me to be the latest holder of that flame. Boycott has been jarring, discordant, seemingly deliberately so. I yearn for Beethoven and he sounds like the Les Dawson piano-player sketch, so much so that the validity of what he says doesn't really come into it. There again, in Yorkshire many of us sound like that so it would be foolish to be too critical.

Test Match Special's most famous commentators were feted upon their departure; its most famous summariser has gone without fanfare. John Arlott made a characteristically

low-key departure in the Centenary Test between England and Australia at Lord's in 1980. Photographers scrambled onto the Lord's pavilion roof to capture the moment. Boycott, coincidentally, played a part in that as the batsman on strike. The words were deliberately commonplace but are held to be famous: "Bright again, going round the wicket to the right-handed Boycott, and they manage to run two. And that's the end of the over, 69 for 2, and after Trevor Bailey it will be Christopher Martin-Jenkins." As Arlott stared into the distance from the old wooden Lord's commentary box, heavy-jowled and rheumy-eyed, Lord's deigned to afford him a PA announcement and applause followed from his colleagues, the crowd and players alike.

By the time Henry Blofeld's final commentary stint died away 27 years later, a more self-indulgent age was upon us and the old ham's final commentary reflected it. There would be no more "Dear Old Things", and buses and pigeons could finally go about their work without comment, but he lapped it up one last time. Phil Tufnell, the summariser alongside him, milked it for all it was worth with a bit of market-stall jack-the-lad, and from the crowd came not just applause but cheers.

Boycott should properly have departed at the end of the 2019 Ashes with a scathing reference about modern batting techniques, preferably fleshed out with a reference to his granny's defensive ability with a stick of rhubarb. But nobody really knew it was the end.

This being Boycott – or perhaps it's more accurate to say, Boycott being

a Yorkshireman – he did not go happily. He initially sought to be noble about his first summer in retirement, explaining that on top of his recovery from throat and tongue cancer he had also recently had a quadruple heart by-pass operation and that a bio-secure Covid-responsive environment was hardly conducive to his recovery. Facing up to the possibility of impending death – and Boycott has known it twice – can have a calming effect. But it couldn't last and when he put his memorabilia up for sale he railed: "It's all about political correctness, gender and race." He departed as we suspected he must, as a fully paid-up poster boy for the besieged, white, elderly, alt-right male.

At times it appears to be a physical impossibility for a Yorkshireman to leave something without a row. It's part character defect, part cultural obligation. Leave something you love and years later a memory flies randomly into your brain and you can find yourself choking up without warning. But leave on a row, imagining all manner of injustices, and when that memory flares up you can fold your arms, dry-eyed, and refuse to countenance any emotional response at all.

It's sad that a global pandemic has retired Boycott in such an empty way. His voluble critics in Yorkshire never thought of that one when they wanted to get rid of him as a player 40 years ago. Imagine the scene: Captain Desmond Bailey, quaffable committee member for North Riding, Boycott-hater, owner of Aldbrough Hall and retiree in Spain until he died four years ago, surreptitiously contacting the Chinese authorities and asking if they had a few laboratory

samples going spare. Is it too soon to joke about Covid? We have to get through it somehow.

In recent years Boycott has been a representative of the illiberal right in the culture war that is now so prominent in British life. He has been so much a product of his generation, so forthright and unchanging in his views that he could go off on a reverie on *TMS* about how he used to love the *Black and White Minstrel Show*, or suggest to a cricket audience in Birmingham in 2017 that he would have to black-up before he got a knighthood on the grounds that they were given to former West Indian greats “like confetti”. He later apologised.

When that knighthood came, courtesy of Theresa May’s resignation honours in 2019, he was ambushed, understandably, on BBC Radio 4. Asked about his conviction in France for assaulting his then-girlfriend Margaret Moore in 1999, he told interviewer Martha Kearney: “I don’t give a toss about her, love. It was 25 years ago so you can take your political nature and do whatever you want with it.” A former Spice Girl then tweeted that he was a “disgrace to Yorkshire”. His inability to counter an understandable line of questioning was so unworldly. He just wanted a nice day, a national show of recognition he had yearned for since his retirement as a player, but instead conflict followed him as it always has. Labour called for his knighthood to be withdrawn, but such are the conflicting forces that circle around Boycott that Ed Miliband, when leader of the Labour Party a few years earlier, had been as set on a knighthood as May.

It is the fact that Boycott is such a one-off that has kept him at the centre

of public attention for so long. I even based my credit-card PIN number on his tally of Test runs, a fact I can confidently reveal on the grounds that, not being one for statistics, I got the figure totally wrong while keying in the numbers.

I first wrote regularly about Boycott in 1984 after joining the *Yorkshire Post*. They were my “war years”. A pro-Boycott rebellion had just fought off an attempt to sack him and the county was ripped asunder. Vicars asked for healing. The first Championship match of the season that year was against Somerset at Taunton. Boycott fell for 6 in the last over of the day, *hooking Ian Botham*, the most unlikely start to a revolution imaginable. Hardened county-cricket journalists immediately filed to copy-takers and trooped off for dinner. It was several hours later before I managed to do the same, but I was in the bar by the early hours of the morning when some of Yorkshire’s newly-elected committeemen were still reeling around drunk in The County Hotel, unable to comprehend what they had just seen. “Boycs playing like that... why did he do it?”

By early June Boycott decided I needed to be pulled into line. It wasn’t surprising because I was out of my depth. We were at Hove for a Benson and Hedges Cup quarter-final against Sussex and, the evening before the match, as I wandered out of the hotel in search of a pint, Boycs pulled up alongside me in his car. “Get in,” he instructed and drove me down the sea front, telling me – like the Tuxford sergeant major to my father immediately after the war – that I had to choose sides.

“I’m not on anyone’s side,” I blurted. “I’m just going to wake up in the morning and write what I think.”

Boycott shook his head in exasperation at my supposed naivety, told me I’d learn and, his point forcefully hammered home, dropped me off somewhere the other side of Brighton Pier. As it started to drizzle I realised that I was left with a lengthier walk back to the hotel than I had anticipated.

From my fence-sitting position I’ve recoiled at Boycott’s crassness and also been immensely grateful for his generosity. Sometimes life is best seen through shades of grey. When I told him 25 years ago that I was raising funds for a pavilion appeal for my local cricket club, and perhaps seeing that I was desperate, he undertook to do “An Evening with Geoffrey Boycott” free of charge at a hotel in Wetherby. His professionalism was exemplary and the way he quizzed me on the minutiae of how I would organise the night was a lesson that stood me in good stead. We had a great night and made, from memory, about £1,000 profit. “A thousand?” lambasted Boycs. “You should have made twice as much.”

I’ve developed a mischievous theory that Geoffrey Boycott is not real at all but actually a prototype Yorkshireman designed in London by the metropolitan elite. The intention was that the robot should largely lack empathy, and be rude and solipsistic. The desired result would be to stereotype Yorkshire and all things in it as negatively as possible and so undermine the influence of so-called “professional Yorkshiremen” in all areas of public life. Only, thanks to a programming error, the robot turned out to be immensely diligent, technically excellent, made more than 8,000 Test runs, and after retirement knew an awful lot about its subject and showed unexpected flashes of thoughtfulness and generosity. To the shock of the scientists, millions fervently admired its strong opinions, honestly expressed, especially in its home county where even incomers could appreciate that life is less complicated and it is OK to say exactly what you think.

Only I’m not entirely convinced that it is. I’ve tried to keep my promise never to fall off that fence. But he hasn’t always made it easy.

• • •



EXTRACTS

This letter has taken longer to write than any other. For months I have made notes, crossed them out and then written about stuffed animals and diggers instead. After my parents and education, cricket – for richer or poorer – has been the most important factor in shaping my character, especially during my more malleable years. Much of who I am is bound to a game I played as a child. There is some shame in that confession, but it’s not easy to explain why.

JUSTIN PAUL

• • •

Early last year, in those blissful pre-Covid days, I got a call asking if I was interested in compiling an anthology of pieces from *Wisden* to follow on from my massive best-sellers *Wisden on India* and *Wisden on Grace*, both of which gave JK Rowling a run for her money a few seasons ago, but I wonder if she had as much fun writing about philosopher’s stones and half-blood princes as I did trawling through 150 or so editions of *Wisden* in search of suitable extracts.

This time I was to make a collection of the “Notes by the Editor”, which are hugely influential and represent the very heart of the little yellow bible each year.

JONATHAN RICE

• • •

The MCC tour party had arrived in the last days of 1929 to take part in the first West Indian home series granted Test status. They had come – and were warmly welcomed – not just as opponents but as ambassadors of the game, to show how it was played or, in the words of MCC captain Freddie Calthorpe, “to teach them in cricket”. It was a pedestal that the English – both within cricket and in wider society – had placed themselves on throughout the Empire. However, as Calthorpe and his team discovered in the third Test of 1930, when you set yourself up as the example to follow, you give yourself a long way to fall.

ROSS ENGLISH

• • •

But there was one major factor that drew me to county cricket like never before: fantasy sport. I’d enjoyed the *Daily Telegraph* fantasy World Cup competition with two friends last summer, so we planned to look for a County Championship equivalent in 2020. Unfortunately, even before COVID, the *Telegraph* announced that they were not running a fantasy cricket competition due to lack of interest. Nor was there anything available from the ECB or the Championship sponsors. All hope was lost until eventually we stumbled across the website cricketxi.com. At first glance it looked like a home-made affair, with what might charitably be described as a stripped-back aesthetic. But it seemed to be working, so we set up a mini-league and dived in.

STEPHEN CONNOR

• • •

At the onset of adolescence I joined a cult. I was not the only one. Many of my contemporaries underwent a similar spiritual awakening. The man we followed, our shaman and guru, was a blue-eyed anchorite. Abstemious, repudiating wedlock, he spoke to us rarely and oft times harshly, preferring to demonstrate his love through his miraculous deeds.

Despite the many wonders he performed, our prophet had a legion of enemies. They denounced him as a false messiah and tried to drive him from the land. This only increased the tenacity with which we clung to him. We were entirely in his thrall. We would have followed him anywhere. Even Kent.

HARRY PEARSON

• • •

Geoffrey Boycott, who turned 80 on 21 October, was my hero when I was a kid, simply because he scored most runs, at the best average. Another reason was that he was hard to get. Get his autograph, that is. He’d sit on the front of pavilion at Headingley next to John Hampshire and say, loud enough for the autograph-hunters to hear: “I’m not signing today.”

Everyone else signed, including Hampshire. We got most of them as they left the ground smelling of Brut on the way to their sponsored saloon cars after the day’s play. They drove off together to the pub. Boycott left on his own, talking to no one.

MATT APPLEBY

• • •

Women may have waited 211 long years to become members of the Marylebone Cricket Club but more recently they have been making their presence felt by chipping away at the red brickwork of the imposing Victorian pavilion at Lord's. But who are these movers and shakers, the rebels and revolutionaries determined to infiltrate this male bastion?

ISABELLE DUNCAN

• • •

A player on a table next to me nods as I sit down to work on my computer, at first there is silence. He's halfway through a BLT and a tall overseas beer while watching whatever generic sport is on the TV screen and monitoring his favourite social-media feed. German tourists and people attending conferences wander around just out of earshot. The player looks around to see if anyone can hear him. He's been waiting for that perfect moment. It starts with chit-chat: what do you think of this player... what have you heard about that league?

Then there is a gap in the conversation. He lowers his voice: "What do you know about match-fixing?"

JARROD KIMBER

• • •

Our father was a cricket-loving dentist, but even we might hesitate if one of our high-school students proposed this as the subject of a research assignment. Yet in the first three decades of the 20th century there were five Australian Test cricketers who were dentists. Not only did the profession have a large effect on their sporting careers but also on Australian cricket itself.

PAT RODGERS

• • •

Scoring had first come to me by way of compensation, as I imagine it might for many. Having shown abundant keenness and perhaps a small measure of talent in my first two years at prep school, I had reasonable hopes of sneaking into the school's colts team a year early. When kindly Mr Everett had placed his hand on my shoulder one morning and advised me that I would not be required, I was silently bereft.

RICHARD WILLMETT

• • •

So much of what I've learned about tolerance and patience, about my own strengths and weaknesses, and how all human beings are born equal – if not with equal talent – I have learned from playing cricket.

Like so many men who love cricket, or at least enough to write about it, I went to school in the late 1970s. My school had been a grammar school, joining the comprehensive revolution three years before I started. The senior teachers, or masters as they still liked to be called, believed in the philosophy and values that cricket had always espoused: fair play, fortitude, and competing rather than winning.

COLIN MACE

• • •

For the best part of the first 40 years of the 20th century, Hampshire supporters only needed to know the answer to the question: "Is Philip still batting?" As likely as not he was. The comfortable sight of Charles Philip Mead rolling to the wicket at No.4 in the batting order, which he did in 814 matches for the county and 17 Test matches for England, was consolation enough.

STEPHEN BATES

• • •

In fact umpires in general are overlooked in cricket's early history. There are few famous umpires of the past. Rarely the focus of the story, they faded from memory. The 1890s were no different; Ranjitsinhji's *Jubilee Book of Cricket* contains a section on umpiring that does not mention a single umpire by name.

GILES WILCOCK

• • •

CLR James's famous question remains enlightening: "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" James posed this at the start of his seminal cricket memoir *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), which argued that the game could not be fully understood and appreciated in isolation of its wider social and cultural context. For James, the great figures of the game like WG Grace, Learie Constantine and Don Bradman could be fully comprehended only when considered alongside such issues as national identity, colonialism and contemporary culture.

DANIEL SEATON

• • •

When Major Douglas Carr, brother of former England captain Donald, was the secretary of Derbyshire County Cricket Club between 1962 and 1975, he found himself in the role of public-address announcer at most home games.

Derbyshire were playing the Australians at Chesterfield in 1968 when, between overs, Major Carr addressed a packed crowd: "Attention please. Would the owner of a Cord Fortina..."

Little is known about what the owner of the vehicle was required to do as the remainder of Carr's words were drowned out by laughter.

DAVID GRIFFIN

...

Before 2020, the start of the Indian Premier League necessitated a glum re-orientation of my working life. It would begin with lowering the volume on the remote, before re-aligning the radar of what constitutes "cricket reporting" and wandering dazed and confused through thickets of data, seeking solitary branches that led to something resembling a publishable "story".

From mid-2013 the IPL also meant unpicking multitudinous orders from the Indian Supreme Court along with explaining "conflict of interest" to cricketers furious at finding their names associated with those three, foul-smelling words.

SHARDA UGRA

...

At 3.15pm on Monday, 27 January 2020, not half an hour after Mark Wood sealed victory for England at the Wanderers, my grandfather declared his innings. He was 103.

DANIEL REY

...

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