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35

AUTUMN 2021

THE  
**Nightwatchman**  
THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

**WISDEN**



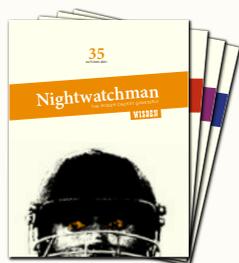
# THE Nightwatchman

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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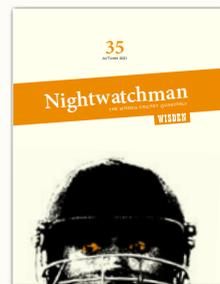
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# JOHN WOODCOCK

*7 August 1926 – 18 July 2021*

Two months after David Foot's death, another revered cricket writer, John Woodcock, passed away at the age of 94. Woodcock was *The Times* cricket correspondent from 1954 until 1988, although it was only in 1967 that his byline appeared in the paper, and he also edited the *Wisden Almanack* for six years from 1980. In this issue we feature appreciations from another *Wisden Almanack* editor, Tim de Lisle, and from the current *Times* cricket correspondent, Mike Atherton. We also reproduce several of Woodcock's match reports from the 1954-55 Ashes tour, a piece he wrote on being the last survivor of that tour, a snapshot of the 1981 Ashes, and the last article he wrote for *The Times*, an appreciation of Ben Stokes' match-winning innings in 2019.



# TEA WITH WOODCOCK

*Tim de Lisle on a tiny colossus*

My first assignment as a cricket writer was going to the West Indies in 1990 to cover Graham Gooch's tour. Every Test was memorable for a different reason - the fairy-tale upset in Jamaica, the five-day washout in Guyana, the blatant time-wasting in Trinidad, the umpire-baiting in Barbados, and then the electric moment in Antigua when, instead of leading his team onto the field, Viv Richards stormed up to the press box to berate Jim Lawton of the *Daily Express*, who had accused him of intimidating the umpire in Barbados. The whole trip lasted 13 weeks, and by this stage in cricket history it was accepted that you couldn't just roll up for a winter tour: you had to prepare. The players were invited to a training camp at Lilleshall. I was invited for tea in Longparish.

"I think you should go and see Woodcock," said the sports editor, Richard Williams. We had joined a new paper, the *Independent on Sunday*. Richard had been my hero in the '70s, editing *Time Out* magazine with fearless flair, and then my boss in 1989,

at *The Times*. He was an assistant editor and I was the arts editor - for two months, until the big boss reneged on a promise not to use the arts page to promote Sky television. I resigned and Williams left soon afterwards for the *Indy on Sunday*, soon to be known as the *Sindy*. Needing a cricket writer, he tried the most erudite voice in the press box, John Woodcock of *The Times*, and the most entertaining, Matthew Engel of the *Guardian*. When they politely declined, he ended up taking a punt on a 27-year-old feature writer, pop critic and short-serving arts editor.

I loved cricket, followed it religiously, and could tell you what Gooch's first four Test scores were (0, 0, 6 and 31). But I had written only a handful of pieces about it, and had never filed a match report. No wonder Richard felt that I could do with some advice.

Woodcock was 63 and a legend, though he would have scoffed if you had said that to his face. Even his home patch in rural Hampshire was

legendary, thanks to Alan Gibson, his *Times* colleague, labelling him the Sage of Longparish. "Sage" was spot-on: Woodcock's currency was wisdom. English cricket was a village then and he knew everyone. One chairman of selectors after another was an England star from his heyday - Alec Bedser, Peter May, Ted Dexter. He was friends with them and had enough charm to remain so even when he criticised them. Above all, he knew the game; his elegant sentences glowed with expertise. They could be old-fashioned, especially compared to Engel's, but they had a classical clarity. I'd been devouring them for 15 years. Of course I wanted to meet him.

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When I rang up, he suggested tea on a Sunday in December. "I don't expect there's anything I can tell you, but I'll happily have a go." I drove down from London and reached Longparish at 4. In the fading light I could see that his house, The Old Curacy, was a thatched cottage. It felt, even then, like venturing into a vanished England.

He opened the door with a spaniel buzzing around his feet. I was surprised to find that he was about 5ft 5: a tiny colossus. "You may have to mind your head!" He was wearing a V-neck and a tie, and I wondered if I should have put a tie on too, but the thought was soon swept away by his warmth. He made self-deprecating noises in a sing-song voice, chastising the dog so fondly that it sounded like praise. "Come into the sitting-room." He led the way, limping, then disappeared to fetch a teapot. There was a fire in the grate and a fruitcake on a tray.

To look at, he was halfway between my old Latin teacher and Bilbo Baggins; to talk to, he was Gandalf. Without appearing to go out of his way, he made all the running. He asked about my experience and chuckled when I confessed that most of it was music reviews. He had some questions, sympathetic but sharp, about my stint at *The Times*. He tried me on fishing, a Test I couldn't pass. He asked if it was my brother who wrote about county cricket for the *Telegraph*. It was: Charlie, the accommodating elder sibling every sports-mad child needs. He wondered if cricket ran in the family. I said yes and no, my father was only mildly interested, but his father, John, had captained Leicestershire. "When?" 1930, I think. "We must look him up!"

He led me into a dining-room wallpapered with *Wisdens*, all chocolate brown and buttery yellow. "Is your grandfather still alive?" No, sadly, he died just before I was born. "Ah, I'm sorry - when was that?" 1961. "Let's see if we can find his obit." He dug out the 1962 and 1963 editions, but the search drew a blank. He looked as if he'd personally let me down, even though he didn't edit *Wisden* until 1981.

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When we went back to the fire, it was my turn to produce a gambit. Did he have any advice? "Oh, you don't need advice from an old fuddy-duddy like me." But, when pressed, he did have one practical tip. "In the Caribbean, when you're on a Sunday paper, it's more about the feature. The time difference makes it so difficult - the match report is really running copy, you have to file at lunch and then keep



updating it. So the piece you write on a Friday is the one that counts.”

This was a crucial point that hadn't occurred to anyone else, least of all me. In the West Indies, five time zones west of the office, English correspondents are up against it; anywhere else, they're fine. "When you go to the subcontinent, you'll have plenty of time. In Australia, you'll have too much – you can waste your whole evening on the match report."

A year later, I thought of Woodcock as I sat in my room at the Sheraton Brisbane with just a club sandwich for company, tinkering with my words till midnight. That lone nugget of wisdom had been worth a lot. But there was something else that stayed with me from Longparish. He had treated me like the equal I clearly wasn't. He was at the top of the tree while I was wondering if I could reach the lowest branch. Driving back up the M3, I felt more confident. The conversation had had the effect of a pep talk without remotely resembling one.

• • •

A month afterwards, I learnt something else from him. It involved going to the library, asking for *The Times* on microfilm and spooling back through the years to find his daily dispatches. Woodcock was famous, or infamous, for not wanting to write anything other than match reports. But that was understandable because his match reports weren't just match reports. Each one was a silent masterclass. I sat in a little room at the library and tried to work out how he did it.

It was partly that gleaming clarity, born of vast experience: he could take the 500 moments that make up a day's cricket, discard nearly all of them, and weave the rest into a pattern. It was partly his voice – calm, fluent, rhythmic, composed. And it was partly a simple trick that he used again and again. He would begin each paragraph with an event, making sure the report was a story, not a think piece. Only at the end of the paragraph would he break free and pass judgment. So the first sentence might be: "After tea Richards accelerated, giving Miller some dreadful punishment." And the last might be: "When he's in this mood, no batsman in the world is more thrilling to watch."

Three facts and a verdict: I used the formula again and again, with not a jot of the same authority. I'm still using it now, about 40 times a day, as an over-by-over writer for the *Guardian*. Those blog posts have a natural running order – give the score, say what happened, add a comment, quote a reader. They're miniature newspapers, moving from news to views and onto the letters page. Woodcock, who had started as a tech pioneer taking a cine-camera to Australia, ended up as a technophobe and probably never even looked at a live blog, but it's a form that bears his fingerprints.

• • •

I never had another conversation with him as long as that first one, yet he was always there in the background, somewhere between a godfather and a guiding light. When I edited *Wisden Cricket Monthly* (WCM), he read it

closely and made encouraging noises, even though he was in the rival camp at the *Cricketer*. When I edited the 2003 *Almanack*, he sent a postcard saying: "You're a proper editor, unlike me." When my brother dropped dead aged 54, his letter was one of the first to land. I read it with a pang of pain and pride, wishing Charlie had lived to see John Woodcock say that he was a good writer.

When Wooders himself died, in July 2021, the press box did him proud. His friends and colleagues captured his wisdom, his elegance, his love of the game, his deep rural roots. But there was one strength that slipped through the net: his emotional intelligence. Frank Keating, profiling him for *WCM* on his 70th birthday,

dug out a piercing sentence from England's 5-0 defeat by West Indies in 1984, when Woodcock was watching England's batsmen go to their doom again. "Tavaré batted like a frightened rabbit," he had written, "Broad like a man terrified of not making a hundred, and Gower like a captain who had lost all urge to lead." It was Gower's first full series as captain.

"Frightened rabbit," by Woodcock's high standards, is a bit hackneyed, but the other two lines are among his best. They are bold strokes of the pen, catering for the reader, and also feats of the imagination, feeling for the player. These days we'd call it empathy. Woodcock, being old-school, probably never uttered that word in his life; he just epitomised it.

• • •



## EXTRACTS

On a shelf in my bedroom is a small picture in a dark wood frame, a 1929 Wills's cigarette card of a cricketer. Head low, eyes focused, striding forward to strike an invisible ball. On his head, a blue cap with the faint outline of the white rose of Yorkshire. Underneath, the name: E Oldroyd.

### ELEANOR OLDROYD

...

You might not think there was much crossover between cricket and comedy beyond an easy joke about England batting collapses, but to a teenage nerd in the 1970s they both offered a golden opportunity to do what we liked best: pointlessly memorise stuff. Ranji Trophy bowling records or sketches about cheese shops, it was all one to us. You'd find us in the kitchen at parties either arguing over whether Northamptonshire's RT Virgin (first-class average 56.94) should be selected ahead of KWR Fletcher of Essex (38.52), or reciting - verbatim - that bit when Jasper Carrott reads the bizarre insurance-claim statements in a strangulated and hilarious accent. No wonder girls never came near us.

Harry Pearson

...

I'm 73  
There's pain in every joint  
Especially each knee.  
So give me the ball  
I really hope I won't embarrass you all.

### RICHARD HELLER

...

We first came across Calvin Symonds's story when researching Football's Black Pioneers, our book about the first black player to represent each of the 92 Football League clubs. Born in Bermuda on 29 March 1932, Symonds was the first black player for Rochdale, making his debut in September 1955 at Barrow - there are probably more romantic places to launch a career!

### BILL HERN & DAVID GLEAVE

...

Woodcock was 63 and a legend, though he would have scoffed if you had said that to his face. Even his home patch in rural Hampshire was legendary, thanks to Alan Gibson, his Times colleague, labelling him the Sage of Longparish. "Sage" was spot-on: Woodcock's currency was wisdom. English cricket was a village then and he knew everyone. One chairman of selectors after another was an England star from his heyday - Alec Bedser, Peter May, Ted Dexter. He was friends with them and had enough charm to remain so even when he criticised them. Above all, he knew the game; his elegant sentences glowed with expertise. They could be old-fashioned, especially compared to Engel's, but they had a classical clarity. I'd been devouring them for 15 years. Of course I wanted to meet him.

### TIM DE LISLE

...

David always said that writing was the only thing he was any good at. It wasn't true - he was the best of friends, warm-hearted and generous, and a most caring family man - but my word, what a special writer he was. He developed a style uniquely his own, a rare gift, and it throbbed with his humane, compassionate values. He was not frightened to look at the darker side of life, but he always did so with sympathy and with wisdom. And, like so few in our fast-moving world, he stayed true to his roots. With his talent he could have become a name in Fleet Street, but he preferred to stay in the West Country which he knew so well and instinctively understood. I admired that about him.

### STEPHEN CHALKE

...

Siegfried Sassoon's almost comically gawky physique and saturnine features should be discounted. He was perhaps at his happiest of all on the cricket field. The childhood innocence, scarred through as it was by the horrors of the trenches and other private torments, was still discernible as he stationed himself at mid-on to miss his catches and think again of Woolley, his imperishable hero.

### DAVID FOOT

...

If you are on form as a preacher, you will pause a lot. You may use fewer words, but this is of no concern because you know that your words matter and are worth listening to. When your message does not make sense, you throw in some extras: an anecdote which is not quite apposite, a visual aid, a phrase that worked in another context three years ago. Essentially, you are just throwing out material in a vain hope that something will stick.

I thought of this when I attended the first-ever men's Hundred match at The Oval this summer. Set up by people who have no confidence that the cricket itself will be sufficiently engaging, it was smothered in a smoke screen of fireworks, beer and intervals in which children in the crowd are encouraged to dance, tell a joke, or say something that has nothing to do with cricket (and which cannot be understood anyway because of the noise).

#### **THE REV ROBERT STANIER**

• • •

It was the stuff of playground nightmares, a moment dragged unwillingly forward from my own schooldays to my current role as an English teacher in a West London comprehensive. Walking through the playground one day and hearing the distinctive tap of cricket bat on asphalt, I installed myself in the vacant extra-cover region of a tape-ball game between some sixth-form students. Jobanpreet, a tall, turbaned physics prodigy, stood twirling a bat in his hands as his classmate Mohamed ran in from the playground fence. The out-swinging half-volley was too inviting for Jobanpreet to resist, and he lunged into a full-blooded drive. The uppish shot arced towards my waiting grasp, laden with the promise of delight or infamy. I felt the ball slap against my palms before it dropped to the ground. The hoots of derision around me told me that these teens weren't going to let me forget it in a hurry.

#### **WILL YATES**

• • •

When we last talked, he told me he was ready to go having long grown weary of the difficulties of getting around, partly due to age, partly due to the septic arthritis he had contracted as a boy that had given rise to numerous hip replacements since.

Between the house and the gurgling, gin-clear waters of the Test, sits St Nicholas Church, a place of worship his family had been connected with for over 250 years. The first Woodcock to run the church was in 1765, and a beautiful stained-glass window at one end of the church celebrates the enduring connection ever since. The Four Seasons is the name of the glass, bringing together all the elements of country life that were dear to him, not the least of which were the trout that were always attracted to his line in his younger days.

#### **MICHAEL ATHERTON**

• • •

With the passing of Tom Graveney it comes as an unwelcome reminder that your increasingly decrepit former correspondent is now the sole survivor from the party of 18 players, the manager (Geoffrey Howard), the baggage-master-cum-scorer (the incomparable George Duckworth), a physio ("Woozer" Dalton), 18 cricket writers and one occasional commentator who sailed out to Australia on the Orsova for the England tour of 1954-55. Of those who made the previous tour to Australia in 1950-51 (my own first, though as a dogsbody) only John Warr is still with us, Brian Close having recently smoked his last cigarette.

#### **JOHN WOODCOCK**

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The idea of a team playing international cricket with a playing pool of less than 40 players seems faintly absurd, but that's just what the Falkland Islands managed to achieve. Braving isolation, terrible weather, bombed-out facilities and international politics, the Falklands' cricketers touched the edge of the game's international firmament only to come crashing back to earth.

With a population of 3,500 people spread across a group of islands the size of Wales, team sport is difficult for the South Atlantic UK dependency, whose existence has been defined in opposition to their nearest neighbours after Argentina's ill-fated invasion in 1982.

#### **STEVE MENARY**

• • •

Ring, ring. Inside a small sports shop with a shamrock-green wooden facade on King Edward's Road in Brynmill – a serene, middle-class suburb of Swansea – an old-fashioned rotary-dial telephone was disturbing the peace. Ring, ring. The man whose name adorned the sign above the shop, Bill Edwards, was reluctant to answer. Ring, ring. As was the norm, he was telling an anecdote about Garry Sobers to a customer over a Welsh cake and a cup of tea. Ring, ring. Bill was poised to deliver the killer line, but instead he made his apologies, turned around and picked up the receiver. He held it to his ear and heard a mellifluous English public-school accent at the other end of the line. It was John Gardiner, chairman of the Associate Members of the International Cricket Conference (ICC). “Bill, I have an interesting and rather urgent proposition for you, old boy,” Gardiner said. Edwards pricked up his ears.

**TIMOTHY ABRAHAM**

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