SAMPLE EDITION

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# THE Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

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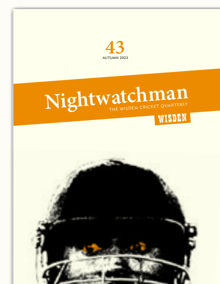


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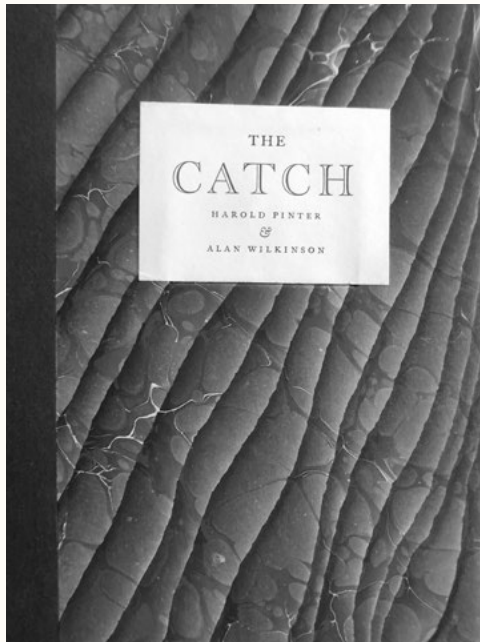
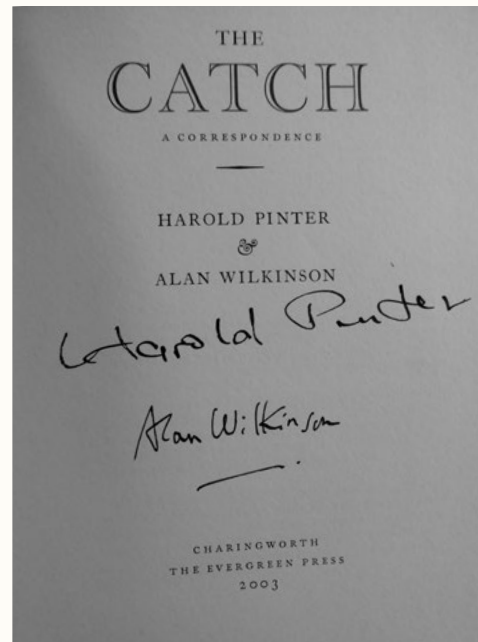
Wilkinson and Pinter



# CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

*Richard Beard savours every word*

In 2003, a short book, a very short book, was published by Evergreen Press entitled *The Catch*. The book's only reviewer Stephen Moss, in *Bodyline Books: Catalogue of Cricket Literature*, says it took him about a minute and a half to read. I'm not sure what took him so long. The main body of text amounts to 266 words, all of which I intend to quote in this piece, with additional commentary on the pauses: *The Catch* is a correspondence between "Alan Wilkinson" and playwright Harold Pinter.

As background, Pinter once took a slip catch while playing for the Gaieties Cricket Club. This event may have been notable in itself. Captain from 1972, chair until his death in 2008, the non-bowling Pinter's highest recorded score for his wandering Sunday side was 39 runs. His catch, however, or this particular catch, he elevated to legendary status. He encouraged his friends to say: "Now, Harold, talk me through that catch," and was quick to spread news of a letter in which his correspondent had never seen "a better catch at any level of cricket".

For Pinter, the subject of this book isn't the catch. It's *the* Catch.

In his plays, from *The Room* in 1957 to *Celebration* in 2000, Pinter's stage characters cherish their personal myths, and there's no more Pinteresque character in Pinter than Harold Pinter on the cricket pitch. His dreams have not come true – his hero: Len Hutton; his highest score: 39 – but he dreams them nonetheless, while honing a curt line in dialogue for his fellow close fielders. The actor Stephen Mangan, making his debut for the Gaieties, remembers encouraging the opening bowler after the first ball of the match, to be asked by Pinter: "Are you going to do that all day?"

*The Catch*, which Moss called "a strange, unclassifiable artefact", was printed in limited editions. I've recently come into possession of 416/500 of the Standard edition, and inside the outfield-green covers are 20 unnumbered pages of high-quality paper the cream-colour of classic cricket flannels. The book is a series of questions and answers – "Wilkinson's" questions in italics, Pinter's answers in bold:

*Who was the bowler when you made that catch?*

**The bowler – Ossie Gooding.**

"Alan Wilkinson" seeks, above all, to preserve an accurate record of Pinter's cricketing miracle, and in a brief letter

included at the end of the book Pinter admits that initially he misremembered the bowler. "It was not Clive Senior but Ossie Gooding. Ossie was very fast in those days."

Of course he was. I'll return to Ossie Gooding, but Pinter's end-pages letter also recalls the location: Stokesley CC in north Yorkshire, where the London-based Gaieties used to tour. In the main text "Wilkinson" doesn't consider it important to ask where the catch happened, and in terms of the memory he's right. The catch was taken at Stokesley, but also and always on any green pitch in the fondly sunlit region of an English summer.

*Who was the batsman?*

**Opposition number 3.**

The dialogue interrogates the detail, and details famously matter to Pinter's stage characters (to Pinter) as they do inside most cricket-mad, cricket-maddened minds. Pinter's catch was significant in the context of the match, as any regular player will recognise. He snaffled his catch off the edge of the opposition's best batter. This is the cricketing subtext, and Pinter had a deep and genuine love for both subtext and cricket. When his personal letters were archived after his death, his earliest correspondence was found to be largely undated. The pre-1960 letters, however, could be placed by their many references to first-class cricket matches.

*How fast was the ball travelling?*

**Quick.**

It probably was. The bowler Ossie Gooding was rumoured to have been a Barbados Colt and once played second XI cricket for Hampshire. In his later years he turned out for the Gaieties, among other nomadic clubs, and against the top order of a Yorkshire league team he may well have been bowling quick. In fact Ossie was the most valuable of ringers – a high-class player who knew when his class was required, which wasn't always, and it seems Ossie could apply this delicate judgement equally in social situations. There's a photo of him at a cricket lunch looking comfortable with his plate of cold buffet standing between Pinter and Salman Rushdie. Pinters, Rushers and Ossie Gooding, somewhere in the post-absurd theatre of an English amateur cricket season.

*Did the ball touch the batsman's glove, or was it an outside edge?*

**Outside edge.**

A glove would have dulled the speed, while off a genuine edge there's no such thing as an easy slip catch. Did Pinter mention the ball was travelling?

*How many slip fielders were there when you made that catch?*

**Two slips.**

The detail is not in doubt: it permanently fixes the event to the memory to the legend. After each clipped response Pinter also implies a pause, I feel, as frequent in his writing as in a cricket match: the pauses between balls, between overs. The pause of the bowler after marking out a run-up, and of the batter before re-setting a stance. Pauses for lunch and tea, and for the weather; cricket's many insistent pauses for reflection.

*Were you first or second slip?*

**I was second slip.**

One of today's specialist amateur ringers, a twenty-first century version of Ossie Gooding, once told me that the most competent slipper should stand on the outside of the cordon, last catcher along. On the other hand, in Sunday cricket the most senior player traditionally has the privilege of first slip, largely safe from the action. As club captain and future Nobel Laureate, Pinter made the decision to place himself at second, the more heroic of the day's two slips. There was life in the old dog yet.

*Was it your favourite fielding position?*

**No.**

Pinter was prepared to make sacrifices, for the team. His favourite fielding position has never been divulged.

*Did the wicket-keeper and/or the other slip fielder also lunge at the ball?*

**No.**

The moment is all about Pinter. Other fielders had nothing to do with it, and Pinter's impatience with this line of questioning begins to make itself felt. He wants to progress to the catch. There he was, crouched at slip, knees aching, hands cupped, waiting for his chance. Here it comes, and Pinter at second slip is ready.

*Did you dive for the ball and fall to the ground as you caught it, or did you catch it standing up?*

**I dived, caught it, fell.**

Here it is, a cricketing memory that will not fade, available ever after in a loop like Pinter's famous cricket poem. *I saw Len Hutton in his prime/ Another time/ Another time.* This catch too is both past and present, repeatable "another time" and another, remembered at will as a reliable source of strong emotion, no less precious because the strong emotion is based on cricket.

Pinter dived, he caught the ball, he fell. Again. He dived, he caught the ball, he fell. "I've never seen a better catch at any level of cricket." I did that, he thought, me, Harold Pinter did that.

*How close to the ground was the ball when you caught it?*

**Very close.**

*Was it a one-handed catch?*

**One-handed catch.**

The best and most unlikely catches are one-handed. It's the only way to be at full-stretch, whereas the double-handed catch suggests a further effort of athleticism was possible, but not on this occasion necessary. Diving, close to the ground, one-handed, "Alan Wilkinson" invites Pinter to relive the detailed excellence of his catch. "Alan" is bowling dollies, he's tossing up pies, and the question/answer form is a good fit for a cricket book, echoing the interaction between bowler and batter, batter and fielder, back to the bowler.

*Did the ball remain firmly in your hand?*

**Ball firmly in right hand.**

But who is this mysterious "Alan Wilkinson"? In his review Stephen Moss was sceptical: "Why do I have a sudden pang of doubt as to whether this person really exists?"

*How many overs had been bowled with that ball before you caught it?*

**4 overs.**

The ball is new, hard, the tactile centre of first the experience and then the memory. "Alan" is asking soft yet perfectly flighted questions, just as Pinter might do if he was choosing the prompts himself.

*Was the ball slightly moist from the wet grass?*

**Ball dry.**

If "Alan Wilkinson" isn't Pinter, he's certainly a cricket lover, attuned to the significant particulars of the game. And let's face it, cricket would be a lot less fun as a solitary pursuit. It's a team game, and a game dependent on partnerships. Alan Wilkinson exists. I know he does. I tracked him down and sent him an email.

*How many runs had the batsman made before you caught the ball?*

**Not many.**

Wilkinson, like Pinter, was a fanatic from an early age. "I was mad about cricket in 1954–55," he tells me, "in the Lower School of (Bishop) Ridley College, St Catherines, ONT. near Niagara Falls". This is not a part of the world associated with cricket, but in those days Ridley College was one of four private schools in southern Ontario where cricket was preferred to baseball, and Wilkinson was captain of the cricket team. He won a Len Hutton bat for the highest batting average, meaning he and Pinter shared the same cricketing hero.

*Was the light good or fading?*

**Light good.**

The light was good, the light of incorruptibly pleasant memory. Wilkinson and Pinter came into sporting contact, as far as I can make out, through tennis with Lady Antonia Fraser, but neither of them want to distract from the cricket. Not now. Not when it comes to the book, the catch, *the* catch.

*Was the batsman in any doubt that he was out?*

**Batsman in no doubt that he was out.**

Pinter confirms the basic facts, for posterity. The fairness of his catch was undeniable and with cricket, right and wrong remains in play as surely as in and out. These are the big subjects of literature, and although by profession Wilkinson is a retired art historian, he tells me that of all his publications – on Moore, Hepworth and others – his favourite among his books is *The Catch.*

*How many spectators saw you make that catch?*

**6 spectators.**

Cricket on Sundays is rarely heroic, worthy of the public record. To be honest it's more often mock-heroic, and Pinter's solemn deadpan becomes increasingly funny. After his death, *A Tribute to Harold Pinter* was staged in the Long Room at Lord's, and *The Catch* was performed by the actors Jeremy Irons and Samuel West in the style of a Pinter two-hander. Of all the performances on the night, Alan Wilkinson writes, "*The Catch* got the most laughs".

*Was the catch a turning point?*

**Turning point.**

As in a Pinter play, a moment that appears ephemeral is in fact enduring, no matter how many people were watching or where it took place. This kind of realisation – creeping up on the audience if not the characters themselves – is what I understand by "Pinteresque", though the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan defined Pinter by his "gratuitous obscurity". Which brings us back to cricket.

*Did you win the match?*

**We won match.**

Is winning a cricket match important? It helps, even on Sundays. To most of the country's recreational players, Sunday cricket is cricket.

*Did anyone capture your catch on film?*

**No.**

Without audio-visual evidence the memory remains pure, a treasure of the inner life. Perhaps the catch didn't happen exactly as represented in *The Catch* – the bowler was not Ossie Gooding and the batter was a tail-ender and the ball was slow and gloved to Pinter alone at slip, a position he loved, though the wicket-keeper lunged as he caught the ball high up with both hands, fumbling it slightly, a soft ball many overs old and wet from being hit into the long grass by a well-set batter who in fading light disputed the catch and was booed by a decent crowd even though Pinter's catch didn't change the match which was lost. Though this wasn't how Pinter remembered it.

*Did anyone "google"?*

**Not a soul googled. But all fielding side applauded & 1st slip said: "Great Catch!"**

Alan Wilkinson's final question, which finds Pinter at his most loquacious, requires some explaining. In those 2003 pre-Google days, Wilkinson's playful "google" came from a cricket-based *entendre* in Pinter's 1975 "memory play" *No Man's Land*. This is arguably the most cricket of his plays, because the four characters are given the names of first-class Golden Age cricketers – Hirst (Yorkshire), Spooner (Lancashire), Foster (Warwickshire) and Briggs (Lancashire) – and they spend their time on stage, not unlike amateur cricketers, swapping "questionable reminiscences" (I Googled).

Pinter's reply – "not a soul googled" – means, I think, that this was a straight catch taken seriously. No messing about. It was a great catch worthy of the memory and of the written record, a sharp chance on a cricket field that stuck in high summer, the ball dry and the light good, a catch that diving, falling, one-handed, sticks always inches above the ground.

Cricket provides equivalent memories to each and every one of us who has taken our place on the field, and each and every one of these exploits deserves its own short book. If only someone could be encouraged to ask.

• • •

*The Catch* is copyright Harold Pinter and Alan Wilkinson, 2003

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# EXTRACTS

*Holding Up a Mirror to Cricket* makes for painful reading, and its ramifications will likely be deep and far-reaching. Whether or not one agrees with it in its entirety, ICEC's report establishes unequivocally that, contrary to the ECB's insistence at the time, "The Carberry Question" expressed legitimate concerns, and *The Nightwatchman* was justified in publishing the article.

**ED WEECH**

• • •

Founded in 1557, Repton School in Derbyshire boasts over 150 first-class cricketers among its alumni, including three England captains and five *Wisden* Cricketers of the Year (answers at the end for those interested). One Old Reptonian cricketer who never got the opportunity to add to that impressive list was John Howell. Yet such was his rare potential, and so tragic was his loss at the age of just 20 in late September 1915, that a room in the Repton School cricket pavilion was named in his memory less than a year after his death.

**MICK POPE**

• • •

I scroll down and one of the featured playlists is "From The Archive", with 15-minute-long highlights of notable games at the ground. Perfect to send me drifting off towards bed. Just long enough to sink into the meditative rhythm of cricket, where you're often not quite sure if that hypnotic effect you're feeling is total concentration or utter boredom. Not long enough to be too much of a commitment. And there it is, uploaded just a few days before: "Stewart & Gough Star for Eng & It's Flower Power for Zim! | Classic ODI | England v Zimbabwe 2000". My first game.

**ETHAN SCHWARTZ**

• • •

There's nothing like an all-time great Ashes series to cement a sense of solidarity and pride into the national populace, and 2023 has, in many ways, been no different. This is an exceptional England team, led by two deeply impressive individuals, playing a highly entertaining brand of the sport and, perhaps in the process, saving Test match cricket.

But there's a critical difference from, say, 2005 to which this series is rightly being compared – outside of the sport, it feels increasingly hard to know what we are meant to feel proud of, and no amount of solidarity can paper over the cracks and divisions fomented by a political class desperately trying to cling on to power at the expense of everything else.

**WILLIAM DOBSON**

• • •

"Len was obviously one of the all-time great batsmen," Graveney continued. "Having said that, I don't think I was ever his cup of tea. I liked an occasional laugh. He didn't." When Hutton was introducing his team to the newly crowned Queen at Lord's, Graveney fondly remembered, "Len walked down the line, looked at me as if he was startled to see me there, and said nothing. Perhaps he just forgot my name. I don't know. After a long pause, the Queen shook my hand and moved on."

**CHRISTOPHER SANDFORD**

• • •

"Could we?" she giggled. She'd had too much champagne, of course she had, but it would have been ridiculous not to have that third glass on a night like this.

"I think it might be rather enjoyable if we did."

"What about my husband?"

"He's having a great time at the bar. No need to disturb him."

"You're one of the cricketers, aren't you?' she murmured as she ran her fingers through his gently Brylcreamed hair. "The England cricketers."

**PHILIP HOOK**

• • •

It wasn't the first tour of England by a West Indies team. Nor, on paper, was it particularly successful. Of 20 first-class matches, only six were won, with seven were lost. Anyone today looking back at the list of players involved might struggle to recognise a single name except for Learie Constantine, who was a very junior member of this particular side.

But the men who represented the West Indies in England one hundred years ago, during the summer of 1923, established a blueprint for success that endured for the rest of the twentieth century. Those forgotten men sent ripples through the cricket world with the result that five years later, the West Indies became cricket's fourth Test-playing team. Although no one talks about the 1923 tour today – and even at the height of the West Indies' dominance in the 1970s and 1980s, few people recalled the events of that distant summer – it was in retrospect one of the most significant of all.

**GILES WILCOCK**

• • •

Over the past few years, more than a hundred copies of *Cricket Samrat* have accumulated in his childhood room at his mother's house, magazines which he has had since the late nineties. "Nowadays there are people who mature in their late twenties or even their thirties. I remember it happened to me at about the age of eight, when it became clear to me – with great sadness – that I would not grow up to be the next wicket-keeper of the Indian national team."

Chaturvedi can't pimpoint the exact moment that he faced this painful insight. He only remembers that when: "the kids would share roles in games around the neighbourhood, I heard the name 'Shantanu' less and less. The guys liked me, but by having me sit on the bench, they were probably trying to tell me that my cricketing skills were not that necessary in the teams they created."

**ITAY GODER**

• • •

Sid was 52 years old, greying at the temples and in his own words, "carrying a bit of timbe". He loved cricket, had done all of his life, but the truth was that he wasn't desperately good at it. He had bags of enthusiasm and loved the social side of the game, but putting bat to ball had always presented something of a challenge to him. Bowling was perhaps marginally better, but the "flighted filth" (Sid's own description) that he sent down seldom presented too much of a challenge to the batters and he tended to "buy" his wickets. When it came to fielding he was something of a liability. But now his moment had come...

**JERRY GEAR**

• • •

"Do you reckon it'll ever break into traditional America?" I asked Usman Rafiq, a US player who moved to the country as a teenager and was representing Washington Freedom in Major League Cricket. He had also taken me to visit the Dallas Youth league due to his ties to the local area.

"How do you mean traditional?" he replied.

"Errr... I guess I mean white," was my answer, said in between applying a big red nose, face paint and a multicoloured wig as my brain whirred working out the sociological connotations of my Donald Trump-style sentence.

**CAMERON PONSONBY**

• • •

The arguments about whether the Alex Carey's stumping of Jonny Bairstow at Lord's was legal (it was) or whether it was in the spirit of cricket (depends who you ask) have rumbled on.

Many batsmen say there is an unwritten rule that when a batsman marks his guard it signals that they are not attempting a run and so the ball should be considered dead. Their belief is that if, at this point, the keeper throws down the wicket, the fielding side is disingenuously interpreting a batsman walking out of the crease as trying to gain advantage.

That's the batsman's view.

**AMEYA TRIPATHI**

• • •

Harold Rhodes, then 22, had played a couple of Tests in the home series against India in 1959 as the selectors, chastened by England's drubbing Down Under, looked for fresh faces. Rhodes made a favourable impression and had every reason to believe that he might become an England regular. All that changed with Paul Gibb's intervention the following year, which effectively consigned Rhodes to Test wilderness. More particularly, Mr Gibb's decision to call Rhodes set in train a period of eight years during which his bowling was subject to constant scrutiny. He was filmed on numerous occasions – sometimes with his knowledge, sometimes without. On one occasion he was filmed bowling with a splint attached to his bowling arm, on another various parts of his arm were painted in different colours prior to filming.

**JOHN STONE**

• • •

Back in July 2021, Ben Stokes told the press that he had been suffering from panic attacks and depression following the death of his father two years earlier. Tom Curran, Alex Hartley, Nat Sciver-Brunt and Meg Lanning have recently spoken about their mental health issues, as in the past have Andrew Flintoff, Sarah Taylor and Marcus Trescothick.

Mental health struggles were part of cricketers' lives long before such things were talked about publicly and viewed with compassion, as they are today. Think Kim Hughes, in tears, resigning as Australian captain in 1984, weighed down by a run of poor results and years of internal wrangling and criticism from senior and former players.

**CRIS ANDREWS**

• • •

All the photos I saw of Tony Greig as a boy seemed to levitate. They radiated ever-so-slightly off the pages of my *Tiger* and *Scorcher* magazine, as they hovered, imperceptibly, above the brochures and programmes and cricket magazines.

I remember a brochure published ahead of the 1977 Ashes, a couple of months after Greig's seven-hour century against India in Kolkata, in which he simply looked bigger than everyone else. Of course he was *bigger* than everyone else I hear you saying, he was six-foot-seven-and-a-half inches tall.

**LUKE ALFRED**

• • •

*"What do you get if you put Krishant in the freezer? Tough shit."*

Solid construction, pithy execution, a punchline that sticks the landing. As racist jokes go? Seven out of ten. What is perhaps more surprising, is that this joke at my expense came not from the vault of Bernard Manning, but a teammate on a county cricket tour when I was 11. There were 13 players on that bus and two coaches. Everybody heard. Most people laughed. Nobody said anything. Cricket was my first great love and, until a back injury curtailed dreams of a professional career at 16, the only thing I wanted to do with my life. It was the scene of some of my proudest moments and fondest memories. It was also the scene of some of my most painful experiences of racism.

**KRIS PATHIRANA**

• • •



The closing day of May 1993, and an *inkling* of reporters mills about outside the pavilion at Grace Road at the conclusion of the Australians' final warm-up game before the Ashes kicks off at Old Trafford three days later, a game usually remembered for a half-decent loosener sent through the soupy Manchester skies by a chubby blond fella from Melbourne. The tourists had been a month in the UK, taking in three ODIs and games against seven counties, and the press corps were eager for some thoughts on their opponents for the first Test. "Who's impressed you so far and who do you think England might pick for Old Trafford?" asks one. "Steve Dean," replies Matthew Hayden to a throng of baffled faces, unavailed of smartphones or a World Wide Web that might have helped Scooby Doo them toward comprehension.

Steve Dean was in fact a schoolteacher at Denstone College in the Staffordshire Moorlands, playing club cricket for Walsall in the Birmingham League and opening the batting for Staffordshire with Dave Cartledge, the pair's penchant for pyrotechnics earning them the sobriquet "Dean and Carnage" on the Minor Counties circuit. Squat and powerful – the sort of physique that might withstand being blindsided by a clumsy, careening staffy – one counter-attacking innings against Cumberland had earned Dean the nickname LFB, henceforth inscribed on his pads and gloves. "We had 'em 50 for four," observed David 'Bumble' Lloyd, in the opposition that day, "then this little fat bastard smashed a hundred."

**SCOTT OLIVER**

• • •

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