



THE
Nightwatchman
THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

WISDEN





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EDITOR'S NOTE

In March 2013, when the first issue of the *Nightwatchman* emerged, blinking into the sunlight, I was worried that any initial enthusiasm would rapidly evaporate. I feared that there would be a lack of submissions, which would put the emphasis on our editorial team to come up with ideas and cajole those authors we admired into writing about them. Not a bit of it.

There has been, and still is, a steady stream of volunteers ready, willing and more than able to write about and around cricket. We've featured priests, and prime ministers, poets and palaeontologists, players and philosophers; welcomed some of the best-known names in cricket writing, along with a host of contributors for whom this venture has been their first time in print. *Nightwatchman* pieces have spawned four books, maybe more. And each issue has been a joy to put together.

In my introduction to the first issue of the *Nightwatchman* I said that our aim was to provide a platform for writers from all over the world to write about cricket-related topics of their choosing. We wanted to encourage contributors who would not normally write about the sport and give them the freedom to cover the

topics they found interesting, to a length the subject matter merited, and in the style of their choosing. All that we were asking from our eclectic bunch was that the results of their labours of love were well-written, original, interesting and touched on cricket to some degree or other, however oblique.

In our first five years – or 20 issues – we published 393 individual essays, equating to nigh on a million words, from writers from every major cricket-playing nation and many more besides. We know that plenty of readers have come late to the *Nightwatchman* so we thought it would be a worthwhile exercise to put together this showcase edition to give them a flavour of what we are all about. Here, we have collected together 28 pieces that we hope will whet readers' appetites and encourage them to subscribe to the *Nightwatchman*.

And meanwhile, as we say each issue, if you would like to write for us or just let us know what you think about the *Nightwatchman*, please do get in touch at editor@thenightwatchman.net.

Matt Thacker, November 2019

THE Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

I'm the nightwatchman
I lie awake
Wondering what's gonna happen when the dawn breaks

I'm the nightwatchman
I take the fall
I'll always be around when you call

'Cause all that I have is yours
I'd give it all and more to be by your side in the morning light

I'm the nightwatchman
Alone in my bed
Fighting the ghosts and the demons inside my head

Morning has broken and I've got to go
How it's gonna end I don't know

But all that I have is yours
I'd give it all and more
When they let you down, call me I'll be around
'Cause all that I have is yours
I'd give it all and more to be by your side
In the morning light
In the morning light

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DON'T THINK OF AN ELEPHANT – THE NIGHTWATCHMAN'S LOT

Jon Hotten delves into the psyche of the nightwatchman, the man who highlights cricket's glorious idiosyncrasies

The first nightwatchman I knew, or at least the first who admitted to being one, was Alf Gover. Alf had taken 1,555 wickets for Surrey and England but he was most famous for his cricket school, a low-level, two-storey building with a whitewashed front halfway up East Hill in Wandsworth. Viv Richards, Barry Richards, Andy Roberts and Sunil Gavaskar are among Alf's alumni, but anyone with the price of a half-hour net – about four quid, from memory – was welcome to try and fit their cricket bag longways through the school's slender side door and up the narrow stairs that opened out onto the snooker room, washed in its murky yellow light, and then past the bar, into the changing rooms and up to the nets via a thin corridor with heavy canvas hung across it at the far end.

I went there every week for five or six winters in my teens; if I have had my

moments when I can play this game (debatable) it's down to Gover's. I must have seen Alf hundreds of times, and he was always dressed identically: immaculate cream flannels, a silk cravat under his stiff collar, white hair swept nobly back and, most impressively, his England sleeveless sweater, the three lions in its centre, now so long it almost reached his knees. Sometimes, in his office, which was behind the snooker room, he would wear a blue England blazer too. Alf was in his seventies then, but he still bowled hundreds of overs in the nets, his arm brought down almost to the horizontal by the years, his pace a distant memory. In retrospect, it was like facing a very slow version of Lasith Malinga. He could put the ball wherever he pleased, and would often call the shot he wanted you to play ("one to drive"). It was traditional that newcomers would have their first lesson with Alf so that he

could make an assessment of their game before he allocated them to one of his coaches. There was a famous story that he'd told Viv Richards that he wouldn't make it if he kept hitting the ball so much on the leg-side – I didn't believe it: Alf would have known genius when it presented itself to him.

All kinds of people met in the bar there. Harold Pinter, who called cricket "God's greatest creation" went sometimes, and Timothy West, the actor, took his son along; Monte Lynch used the nets in the winter, pounding ball after ball from anyone who'd bowl at him; and Alf's coaches, a fluid line-up of travelling pros that washed into south London from across the globe, brought in all sorts of strange, nocturnal characters, most of whom engaged in long snooker matches on Alf's pay-as-you-go table. The barman was a guy called Terry who had another job humping electrical goods into houses. He once told me a brilliant and no doubt greatly exaggerated story about delivering a fridge for Dave Vanian, the lead singer in the Damned. "He slept in a coffin," Terry said mournfully. "He showed me it." Alf would, very occasionally and if the bar was quiet, tell some stories too. One of them was about the time he was nightwatchman at The Oval. He survived for the evening and when play resumed at 11am the following day, he found himself seeing the ball so well he batted for another hour, at which point his partner, having received a signal from the balcony, came down the wicket and said: "Alf, I think you might get out now, we have some very good batsmen waiting to come in." His partner was Jack Hobbs. His captain was *Douglas Jardine*.

• • •

The use of the nightwatchman is one of cricket's implacable enigmas, a tactic that has been employed almost since the game began. Its effectiveness has always been disputed and never been proved. Nonetheless it persists and probably will as long as matches are played over successive days. It is a notion based on human fallibility, a defence of position, a counter-intuitive decision to place a player of lesser ability into a parlous situation that others are better equipped to handle. Beyond that, it is an identifier of the game's greatest single divide: that between batsmen and bowlers, men whose professional lives are consumed by thoughts of how to overcome one another. The very act of needing a nightwatchman, when wickets are falling at the end of a day, is indicative of failure: batsmen who have lounged in the field for hours have been unable to survive at the crease for a few minutes; bowlers who have trooped exhausted from the same arena are now expected to clean up after them. It has a sacrificial element to it. It tells one member of a team that they are more expendable than another, that their abilities are more lightly regarded. It is about rank and position. In a game so finely attuned to psychology, the nightwatchman taunts a player with his mental frailty and displays it to the world and, when it is over for the day, the batsman who has declined to go in must change in the same room as the bowler he has required to do so. Some captains have banned the idea; others have exempted themselves from responsibility for it. In an age where the prevailing mindset is aggression, the nightwatchman is a laying-down of arms, a brief if temporary surrendering of the initiative. It's a move that piles pressure not onto the opposition, but onto the team employing it. And yet it lives.

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Alf had another story about being a nightwatchman, one that spoke about some of the older divisions and allegiances in the game. He had been bowling all day and was enjoying a soak when he was hauled out and sent in to face Harold Larwood. "I was in no state really, so I said 'Easy Harold, they've dragged me from the bath.'" In solidarity with one of his brothers, Harold bowled wide of the stumps so that Alf didn't have to play.

That was the bowlers' lot, and theirs was a fellowship with loyalties that sometimes transcended the requirements of the team. For many decades, most bowlers couldn't really bat. Rather wonderfully, Alf only scored 757 more runs than he took wickets in a 20-year career. It wasn't until 1962 that a nightwatchman made a Test hundred, and it was another 15 years until the next. Of the six ever scored, three have come since 1999. This is a statistic that suggests a growing professionalism, the natural acceptance of Duncan Fletcher's maxim that every player must excel at a minimum of two of the three skills of batting, bowling and fielding, or of Steve Waugh's policy of giving his bowlers "batting buddies" to squeeze every last run out of his team.

Except it doesn't. Instead, examination of the list simply reveals the fluidity of the tactic itself, the ambiguity of its definition. The first Test hundred by a nightwatchman was made by a Pakistani, Nasim-ul-Ghani, against England at Lord's. Nasim was a remarkable cricketer, at 16 years and eight months the youngest Test player ever when he made his debut in Bridgetown, and the first Pakistani to get a Test match hundred in England. He could bowl left-arm spin, medium-pace, and later opened the batting.

Of the remaining five, two were scored by Mark Boucher, who got 5,515 Test runs at

an average of more than 30. The centuries he made at nightwatchman came when he batted at number six instead of his customary seven, and Boucher was never going to get a nosebleed that high in the order - in total he made more than 900 runs from six, and played around a tenth of his innings from there. In 2006 he struck the second fastest one-day ton of all time, in 44 balls against Zimbabwe in Potchefstroom. Syed Kirmani, who got 101 for India against England at the Wankhede in 1979, made one other Test ton, another 11 in first-class cricket and, like Boucher, kept wicket.

That leaves two. One is perhaps the most famous nightwatchman's innings of them all, Jason Gillespie's 201 not out against Bangladesh in Chittagong in 2006. It remains an extraordinary outlier of an innings that will stand forever, but there can be no doubt that these teams were mismatched: Australia won the game by an innings and 80 runs after losing the toss. After a punch-up between the press and the police and a storm that blew the scoreboard apart, Gillespie's double-hundred spread itself like a fever dream over three days, the last of them his birthday, and ended with him walking from the field poking out his tongue at the cameras and looking baffled by the sheer unlikelihood of what had just happened. It was his 93rd (and, as it turned out, final) Test knock, the longest ever wait for a debut ton, and it beat his previous highest first-class score by 143 runs. So inspired was he that Dizzy went on to make two more first-class hundreds.

Perhaps only Australia's leg-spinner Tony Mann was genuinely out of his comfort zone, not that he would have recognised that buzz-phrase back in 1977, when he was required to bat at three against Pakistan, and made 105 of his 189 Test match runs

in that single innings, played for the most part on the last morning of the game.

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These men then, are our champion nightwatchmen: two wicket-keepers, an opening bat and a couple of men playing innings that came, like Ballard's wind, from nowhere. There are others that fall into their company: Alex Tudor's 99 not out, Harold Larwood's 98, Jack Russell's 94, to offer entry to those who came within ten of the magic number, but such scores are not the nightwatchman's purpose, merely a comet's tail, rare and spectacular. The power of their ability to skew the perception of the job is evident in the case of Tudor, a cricketer of great talent whose default reference point in every mention of his career is that innings. He is the man who made 99 not out, just once, with all of its suggestions of non-fulfilment, of wasted promise. There is an argument that Tudor's innings would be regarded differently had he made exactly the same score batting in his normal position. It's the fact that it is by a nightwatchman that sticks it in the mind.

No, glory for the nightwatchman is double-edged, because it is not his primary function, or even close to it. Instead it is his lot to strap on the pads, tighten the thigh guard and the chin strap, carefully locate the box, and then rummage through the dressing-room for any other kind of available padding that the lower-order man might not always think to pack; an arm guard, perhaps, or a chest protector, before striding down the steps to the inevitable disappointment of a crowd wanting to see a big name further discomfited. Nathan Lyon walked out to a rapturous standing ovation, his face a picture of joy beneath his visor until he realised that

the SCG thought he was Ricky Ponting. But the more usual noise goes one of two ways: ironic beery cheers or a low disillusioned hum combined with dutiful applause. This is what the crowd thinks of the nightwatchman.

Our man, though, might barely hear the crowd. He takes guard to face a team with confidence surging through it, his very presence serving them notice of the timorous state of their opponents. He knows that the batsman he is protecting doesn't fancy it, and if an accomplished batsman feels that the chances of being dismissed quickly are higher than usual, then what chance does he, as an acknowledged lesser player, have? He knows that if he fails, that man will have to bat anyway, in even more parlous circumstances. And he knows that he cannot play with any freedom, cannot dispel those nerves with a full swing of the arms. The game has narrowed itself down to this: the cut strip, the constricting field, the pressing bowler. All around him is aggression, and yet he cannot meet like with like.

There is an old psychological experiment that consists of a single sentence: "Don't think of an elephant." Everyone reading it does. This is the mental realm of the nightwatchman, whose brief is similarly singular: "Don't get out." It's a negative thought, a negative state that any sports mind-doctor would tell you to avoid, and yet it is unavoidable because it is true. Don't get out. Don't think of the elephant.

And there's a further twist. Just as those people who yearn to own fast cars are exactly the people that shouldn't be driving them, those temperamentally best suited to a job like nightwatchman, the extroverts, the happy-go-lucky, the glass-half-full merchants, are most likely

to play a big shot to “relieve the pressure” (read “get that beery, end-of-the-day cheer from the crowd”). It is a job for the spiky, the introverted, the cussed, a job for the men who don’t want it. England’s most successful nightwatchman of recent times, Jimmy Anderson, who survived on 26 of 28 occasions, is proof of the character required. He has a highest Test score of 34, a highest first-class score of 37 not out, an average of 10. His repertoire of shots is limited, his demeanour at the crease stoic. He is quite clearly not a batsman, and furthermore, he will never approach those distant foothills of a bowling all-rounder. At the first opportunity, he handed the job over to someone else, feeling, apparently, that his seniority as a cricketer was being impinged upon. In all of these ways, Jimmy was a perfect nightwatchman.

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Perhaps the position persists because it is so equivocal, so unprovably right or wrong. One study, which looked at 113 instances, found that the collective nightwatchmen had a mean career average of 15 in their usual position, and an average of 15 as nightwatchmen too. The effect of a nightwatchman on subsequent partnerships is examined, as is its effect on the final score. But what the data cannot provide is an answer to what would have happened without one

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in those precise circumstances. The study is called *The myth of the nightwatchman*, a title intended to be conclusive but that instead carries more weight when read another way. Nightwatchmanship eludes statistical clarity because its truth is very simple: it works when it works.

The word itself is a beautiful and evocative one, redolent of safety. Someone to watch over us, to take away that angst and fear, just for a short time while it’s at its worst and as darkness draws near. A long career in professional cricket is in part an accrual of scar tissue, of mental wounds that must be constantly overcome. For batsmen it is the psychology of the game that is its real key, and for all of the notions that cricket is a team sport, each man stands at the crease alone. Perhaps the act of being a nightwatchman can be seen as a gift too.

John Arlott once said to Mike Brearley: “You know Mike, you’re the only one who realises it doesn’t matter.” All of us – players, coaches, followers, fans – are in the business of taking cricket seriously, and there’s a marvellous absurdity to that. The game does things to us. Here’s a story that might be the best nightwatchman yarn of them all. In a match against the touring New Zealanders, Nottinghamshire’s Kevin Saxelby dislocated his shoulder swinging at a wide. That is the nightwatchman, and that is cricket, in all of its mad glory.





TWO YORKSHIREMEN

Tanya Aldred uncovers a little more of her father when she goes in search of his hero, Fred Trueman

When I was small, we had shelves of cricket books crawling up the walls. I ate my way through most during my bookworm years, a greedy, speedy reader. But one I didn't pull out. A small volume with a green cover: *Fast Fury* by Freddie Trueman.

The pages were off-white with funny textured paper; the cover was slightly ripped about the spine: there was something just off-putting about it. So there it stayed on the bottom shelf, tight to the left, increasingly a prisoner of time.

I should have picked it out, am ashamed not to have done so. Freddie Trueman was, is, the absolute hero of my dad, Anthony, who bought the book, complete with FS Trueman scrawled in blue biro on an inside page, from the Ilkley branch of WHSmith when he was 14. It cost him 12s 6d, and there was a little about the way he would deliberately tuck it back into place, like a stray hair firmly returned behind an ear, that said this, children, this really is something.

Why Trueman? Just how good was he? Where did he come from? Why did the raging fast bowler with 307 Test wickets turn into a grumbling old man of the radio? And why had he inspired such devotion in my father, a quiet man with a very different upbringing? I didn't know the answer to any of these questions.

Then in late 2011 Chris Waters, a friend from the days when he would disgruntledly follow Kevin Pietersen around as cricket correspondent of the *Nottingham Evening Post*, published a Trueman biography. It had fantastic reviews, winning a mantelpiece of awards.

Here was the chance to make up for 39 years of determinedly not reading something that I definitely ought to have read. Who was Fred? Who, for that matter, was Ant?

My dad was born in Leeds at the Tower Wood Nursing Home on 23 June 1947. It cost my grandmother Jeanne seven guineas for board and lodging and five

pence for laundry. Her husband, Bob, was away working in Africa and Jeanne named her bouncing boy Anthony Hugh. A telegram came back: call him Robert. So she did, on paper, but won the war – Anthony he remained.

Jeanne's mother was French, short of temper, with a liking for Craven cigarettes, and had come to Yorkshire from Paris around 1910. When her husband died young, the family were left sophisticated but broke. Bob was the son of an electrical engineer, Leeds born and bred, and qualified as a quantity surveyor by studying at night school. There are amusing sepia pictures of him wandering the moors in a tweed suit. They were very different, Bob and Jeanne, but they married in a registry office off the Euston Road in 1938 and had three children – Christine, Susan and Anthony.

The family were happy in the Leeds suburb of Roundhay, but in 1951 moved to north Harrow in Middlesex – the beginning of a journey of bettering themselves. They ended up living on St George's Hill in Weybridge, an exclusive estate in London's commuter belt made famous when John Lennon and Ringo Starr moved in and which the Diggers had tried to turn into common land in revolutionary 1649. My poor dad, fuzzy-haired, who cried at the slightest provocation, was sent to prep school in Watford to board from 10 and then onto Milton Abbey in Dorset – a boarding school of cold showers, early-morning runs and common minor cruelties.

So the Aldreds of Weybridge embraced the south, but prick the surface and the white rose ran thick. They went "back home" every year, holidaying in Ilkley and Wharfedale and York. My grandfather might have joined the golf club and held court in the boardroom, but his accent stayed proper Horsforth. My grandmother

baked Yorkshire pudding for lunch and parkin for sticky fingers in mid-afternoon. High tea was served with thick sticks of celery in a glass on the table and bread and butter in a basket. And young Anthony wanted to play not at Lord's or The Oval but Headingley. He followed Yorkshire's scores in the family copy of the *Daily Telegraph*; and in particular the progress of that big-bottomed and jet-haired lummo from the mines.

Sixteen years before my father, Trueman had been born near Maltby, eight miles from Rotherham, 10 from Sheffield and just four north of the Nottinghamshire border. I wanted to go and see the spot that Waters describes so evocatively in his book, to breathe the air. It took two trains, a bus and a false trail when a smart woman in red wearing a hat pin touched my shoulder, directed me off the bus and in the direction of Fred's sister's house, only for her not to be in. A mini-cab drove a couple of miles into the countryside and I started looking for Scotch Springs and the miners' cottages now scorched from the earth. As I clambered up scrubland in four inches of thick January snow, armed with a text of directions from Chris, I found – at least I think I found – the right place.

Maltby colliery dominates the view. The last coal mine left in the Rother valley, it is running down and due to close for good. The towers of the pit, reflected in the slurry of water to my left, are evocative of a landscape Trueman grew up in and my dad knew, but which is alien to me and most people born south of the 1984 miners' strike. Little trucks rumble by in the distance, dark with coal. The sky is smoker's breath, the hills brilliant white. The odd car goes past and the pylons buzz but it is quiet save for the drip, drip of the melting snow and the call of the crow. A buzzard flies past and sits on a telephone pole. The soaring birds look black against the pale clouds. All is monochrome apart



from the scarlet hips on the hedgerows. Even now, when Maltby has grown to a town of over 16,000 inhabitants, this feels isolated.

So it was here where Trueman was born, in an outside toilet, so fast he was caught by his grandma Elizabeth Stimpson, whose reward was to have her new grandson take her maiden name as his middle: Swards.

Of course young Anthony knew little of this. He was reluctant at school, found his lessons difficult, but loved cricket. He was the only boy in his form who supported Yorkshire, who hero-worshipped Trueman. Was there a class thing going on? He says not. Was there a north-south thing going on? He says not. He was in the playground: he wanted to be Trueman. Others didn't. As simple and as easy as that.

There was no boarding school for Trueman – Waters meticulously plots his uncompromising life growing up beside the smell and sounds of the pit yard. There was little money but a lot of love. Trueman may have grown up coarse but he grew up close with his parents and siblings, especially his beloved older brother Arthur. It was tough: his father burnt his clothes at the end of the garden when he finished working and was in despair when Arthur followed him underground. But there wasn't much choice: it was the mine or the forces. Unless you were Fred, where raw talent led to Yorkshire CCC, England and a different sort of life.

But it never was quite the young boy's dream. Waters describes an awkward bugger, thrust into the Yorkshire and England teams at a time when class and seniority had a huge bearing on the way that you were supposed to behave. There were some difficult men around, and

just about the worst man-management of a young, extremely talented, eager, if uncouth and socially all-at-sea young bowler it is possible to imagine. Patronised, ignored, fobbed off, laughed at – Trueman never forgave Yorkshire for their behaviour, which culminated in them asking him to pay £120 towards the cost of his own retirement present: a £220 silver cruet. They didn't even manage to engrave it.

I was unaware of quite how Boys' Own Trueman's first international series was. My dad must have told us but by quite early on in our childhood his "when I were a lad in Yorkshire" stories had lost their gilt. We laughed at them, and their sackcloth undertones, and slowly he stopped telling.

Of course the England debut came at Headingley – 5 June 1952, against India. It included a spell of three wickets for nought in eight balls and terrified the visiting batsmen whilst wolf-whistling the crammed stands. Eight wickets followed at Lord's, and at Old Trafford he took 8 for 31 in the first innings – then the best return by a genuinely fast bowler. England had in their hands raw dynamite.

They blew it, of course – their handling almost as inept as Yorkshire's. After the 1953-54 West Indies tour, a diplomatic disaster for which Trueman took much of the blame, he missed 23 of England's next 26 Tests. And all the while he bowled and bowled for Yorkshire in a talented team with a dismal camaraderie – at least until Ronnie Burnet took over in 1958.

Eventually Trueman found men who knew how to handle him and became what he was in his pomp – magnificence. YouTube shows a wide-paced, rhythmic run-up, a left shoulder forward, majestic side-on action, a flurry of rolled-up sleeves, an uncontrollable head of

hair. A swagger. A foot drag. A black-and-white superstar.

Ardent royalist, churchgoer, Tory: Trueman was nothing if not surprising. If he grew cantankerous on air with age, in person he was, mostly, incredibly generous – giving money to a stranger who knocked on the door on Christmas Day, raising funds for good causes, organising a tribute dinner for his old mucker Brian Statham who had fallen on hard times. He was the one who brokered a peace with Geoffrey Boycott when Boycott was diagnosed with cancer. He also had a deep passion for dogs, one of whom, William, caused carnage in the *Test Match Special* box, eating two microphones.

His second wife Veronica told Waters a story of Fred's terrible anxiety that a new dog they were going to fetch wouldn't like him. "When we arrived at the kennels, Fred started pacing around the office while the staff went off to fetch the dog, then he went to the toilet, then he came back out again, then he started fidgiting around in his chair... Eventually they brought this dog through and of course the first thing it did was bound over to Fred and lick his face, and the relief on Fred's face just had to be seen."

Ant loves dogs too. He still mourns the last one, a daft brown thing – in tears as he dug the grave in the garden: deeper and deeper he went as if in shifting the earth he could restore the wag to the still tail.

Water's book hangs together beautifully – the questioning, the research, the unpicking of a life lived rumbustiously, all this paints a vivid picture of Trueman. From the young Fred who loved bird-nesting with friends to the old man of

the Dales who would reach for the bird book from the comfort of his armchair to identify something colourful in the garden. A flawed man, a sometimes bitter man, but mischievous, quick-witted, kind.

To my dad though, all this was by the by. It was the young, fit Trueman who was everything. He saw him play only three times: at Lord's in 1961 against Australia, when Trueman hung about for 25 in the first innings and my dad collected Tizer bottles from the grass to earn pennies at the shop; at Headingley in 1963, when he went with his cousin Christopher to all five days and saw a slightly under-par Trueman take six wickets; and at the Gillette Cup Final of 1965 when Yorkshire thrashed Surrey and Trueman took three wickets in an over. Not much to feed off, but enough for dad.

"The sheer excitement of watching him, this seemingly large man starting his run and just getting faster and faster and then that perfect action and the anticipation of wondering, would he get a wicket? Childhood heroes are magic and that's what Fred was."

Cricket wasn't everywhere then. *Test Match Special* only started in 1957, and not many had televisions: heroes were in the head, imitated in the garden, not captured on the computer, ready to call up day or night.

Trueman was a link to the place Anthony called home but would never live in again. He needed that. Because the boy who moved from Leeds when he was only four, who has not a single memory of living in the place, and who has the voice of a Surrey commuter, considers himself, still, a true Yorkshireman.

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VERITY'S WAR

James Holland sets off for Sicily, where he pieces together the last days of one of Yorkshire and England's greatest spin bowlers

The Plain of Catania in Sicily, and a pilgrimage of sorts. It is one of the most fertile parts of the island, largely flat and low-lying, bisected by rivers and dominated by the towering presence of Mount Etna. Hedley Verity would have seen Etna from the moment he landed at first light on Saturday, 10 July 1943, as part of the biggest seaborne invasion the world has ever known. There's always a halo of cloud surrounding the summit; there would have been when Verity was here and there is when I visit the place nearly 70 years on. Cloud, or is it smoke? I am not sure but it hangs there, a contrast to the deep and cloudless blue of the sky.

Working out precisely where the 1st Battalion, the Green Howards made their attack on the night of 21 July, 11 days after landing, takes a while. I am armed with a copy of an original hand-drawn map, found in the battalion war diary, but one that is remarkably accurate. At any rate, I have managed to marry it up easily enough with an image from Google Maps: the tracks running down from the railway line, the curving dykes that were such a feature of this part of the plain, and even the buildings that had once been battalion headquarters.

Getting there, however, is another matter. New roads run to the south and north of the site, there is now a large factory to the

east of the map, roughly where D Company began their attack. It is difficult getting off the main road and down to the rough lane that leads under the railway embankment, but eventually we manage it, and suddenly we are driving down the very same track marked on the hand-drawn map back in July 1943.

And there are the remains of an old barn or farmhouse, also shown on the map. The roof has gone and inside it is wild and overgrown, but we are now at the point where Captain Verity led his B Company into battle. The start line, to use the parlance of the day. We park up and walk along another rough track, also marked on the map, climb a dyke and look north. Up ahead was where Verity walked, behind the creeping barrage of artillery fire. It's where the enemy were dug in: the railway embankment and the curving dyke, the Massa Carnazza, was where the Germans had their forward machine-guns, each set up with interlocking fire. These were expensive in ammunition, and not the most accurate weapons, but in any initial assault, there was nothing to beat the MG42 for weight of fire. These beasts could pump out 12 bullets per second, enough to slice a man in half.

We walk on, over water meadows in which creamy cattle with bells around their necks



peacefully munch grass. We are nearing the site where Verity and his B Company had been left in the open, the barrage suddenly lifted, but still with more than 200 yards to the curving dyke and the enemy positions.

A high fence bars our way. Beyond, orange groves with large ripe fruit dangling from branches now stand where 70 years before had been cornfields. We retrace our steps, and eventually manage to approach the old battleground from the side. Some farm workers spot us and ask me what we are doing. A poor explanation in pidgin Italian ensues. They let us walk on, so that we are now behind the old German lines. But the place where Verity made his charge is hidden; those same orange groves, protected by more high fencing, now cover the spot. Later, I mention this to an Italian friend. "Ah," he says, "Mafia estates."

What is striking is how completely the din and violence of war has gone from this quiet corner of the world. But for many of the same features remaining, it is hard to imagine that it ever happened at all. I feel wistful, standing there beneath the oranges, their sweet scent heavy on the air, thinking of one of the greatest of English bowlers, lying out there, bleeding, gasping for breath, on this patch of Sicilian soil, knowing he would most probably die.

The Second World War affected the lives of every man, woman and child who lived through it, and that included sportsmen. Hard though it may be to imagine Kevin Pietersen or Graeme Swann being packed off to war, that is exactly what happened to the vast majority of first-class cricketers between 1939 and 1945. In Britain, conscription had been reinstated in May 1939 for men between the ages of 20 and 21, and on the first day of the war, 3 September 1939, Parliament passed the National Service Act, under which all men between 18 and 41 were made liable for conscription into the Armed Forces.

There were, of course, exceptions – those with skills or jobs that would benefit the war effort, such as farmers, physicists, even trade union officials and lighthouse-keepers. But not cricketers. They had to put away the whites and the bat, and put on battle dress and pick up a rifle instead, and like every other Tom, Dick, and Harry, go off and fight for King and Country.

The County Championship was suspended, as were Test matches. For many, the war robbed them of what should have been the finest years of their playing careers. For others, it robbed them of their lives. Nine Test cricketers, five of them English, were killed during the Second World War.

The 1939 season was almost over when war was declared – the West Indies had already gone home and Yorkshire had won the Championship for the third time in a row, the sixth that decade, so it wasn't so important that the remaining few matches were cancelled immediately.

During the so-called "Phoney War" of the winter and spring, there was talk of holding a limited county season, but the Blitzkrieg that began in May 1940 put paid to that. In any case, quite apart from the logistical difficulties of holding a regular first-class season in a time of war, many of the country's leading cricketers were already in uniform.

One of those was Hedley Verity. That Yorkshire had won the Championship so regularly was in no small part due to Verity, who took an astonishing 1,956 first-class wickets in just 10 seasons at an average of 14.87. Not only did he top the English averages five times – including the 1939 season – he also took 10 wickets in an innings twice – including 10 for 10 against Notts. His record also included nine wickets in an innings seven times, eight wickets in an innings 13 times and an extraordinary 34 seven-fers. In 1934, he took 15 for 104

against Australia at Lord's, including 14 wickets in a day – a record never to be bettered. Included among his victims was the great Sir Donald Bradman, dismissed for 36 and 13. It was England's biggest victory over Australia at Lord's, by an innings and 38 runs.

Hedley Verity was, without question, one of *the* great spin bowlers, arguably England's best ever spinner. Who else compares? Laker perhaps? Swann is not in his league, for all his flair. But more than that Verity was, by all accounts, a lovely fellow. His face strongly suggests this – there is determination there, but a gentleness too. Quiet, unassuming and always generous towards others, Verity volunteered for the army out of conviction. He believed that Hitler and the Nazis were an evil that had to be stopped.

He first considered joining in the autumn of 1938, during the Munich Crisis. Meeting with an old friend, Colonel Arnold Shaw, of the Green Howards, whom he had first met during the India Tour of 1933–34, he asked his advice. Shaw suggested he read some military textbooks and told him to get in touch again should war break out. The Colonel sent him a number of books about military tactics during the South African tour of 1938–39, which he read avidly.

When war was declared he got in touch with Colonel Shaw, who now commanded the 1st Battalion, Green Howards and arranged for him to go to Officer Cadet Training Unit. It seems Verity quickly showed a natural aptitude for military tactics. The best spin bowlers have sharp intelligence and a tactical mind, and Verity brought these skills to soldiering. The 1st Green Howards remained in Britain until the autumn of 1941, by which time he had become a captain and a company commander.

He was also still playing plenty of cricket, mostly for the Green Howards' XI. In fact,

there was still plenty of cricket being played all around the country, albeit not officially first-class, and especially so at Lord's. The ground was looking rather sorry for itself by the second winter of the war, and had already suffered badly – a bomb had damaged the Nursery Ground and a number of incendiaries hit the grandstand and pavilion roofs. But despite this, and the fact that the ground was being used as an RAF recruitment depot, cricket continued. Sir Pelham Warner, former England captain of the Golden Age, manager on the Bodyline Tour and knighted in 1937 for services to cricket, had become acting Secretary of the MCC for the duration of the war and devoted enormous energy to ensuring that cricket continued. It was considered essential for morale that sport was played and so a number of matches were laid on – MCC versus the Public Schools and also lots of inter-service matches, which included a host of well-known pre-war names. There was a British Empire XI and a London Counties XI, for example. As Warner pointed out: "If Goebbels had been able to broadcast that the war had stopped cricket at Lord's, it would have been valuable propaganda for the Germans."

And there were, of course, the regimental sides as well. Most of these games – whether regimental or otherwise – were one-day affairs, a format that had been, until then, strictly the preserve of the village and league sides only – but they proved incredibly popular.

Verity played his last game on British soil in Northern Ireland in September 1941. Soon after, the Battalion was posted to Ranchi in India and then to Persia and Syria, before finally arriving in Egypt in March 1943. By this time, the war in North Africa was almost over. Alamein had been won, Rommel chased back into Tunisia and an Anglo-US force had landed in north-west Africa. Soon, the Allies would be masters of the North African shores, and then they

would turn to Sicily. It was the obvious next step and a move that was hoped would hasten Italy's exit from the war.

The 1st Green Howards were to be part of the Allied assault on Sicily, attached to 15th Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, in Eighth Army. While the Americans of Patton's Seventh Army were given the western flank of southern Sicily, Eighth Army had the task of capturing the south-east, with its key airfields and ports. All seemed to go to plan initially with the Italian defences swept aside. Resistance, however, stiffened as they encountered the better trained, equipped and motivated German forces who had set up a blocking position, known as the Hauptkampf Line, to isolate the north-east of the island.

Suddenly, Eighth Army found itself up against the veteran 1st Fallschirmjäger Division, newly arrived in Sicily from the Eastern Front, and the Fallschirm Panzerkorps Hermann Göring, barely less formidable. The immediate British targets were the port and airfields of Catania, but what was worrying General Alexander, the Allied Commander-in-Chief, was that if the Allies were held up for too long, then more and more German troops could pour in as reinforcements across the Straits of Messina, the narrow channel of sea that linked Sicily to the mainland.

The Plain of Catania is an easy place to defend and a difficult one over which to attack. Beyond lie the hills around Misterbianco, in which enemy guns could be easily concealed, while in the plain itself any attacker had to negotiate horrible amounts of water channels and ditches as well as the major River Simeto. All along were teams of machine guns and mortars. Yes, the Allies had big reserves of artillery and air power, but these could only support the attackers. Ultimately, it was the job of the men on the ground to get the task done.

There is a misconception that those fighting through the Second World War got off lightly compared with those battling it out on the Western Front. In fact, for a front-line infantryman in the Second World War the chances of survival were as bad, if not worse, as they were a generation earlier. And in many ways, there was not a huge amount of difference in the method of attack. Enemy positions were usually softened up with air and artillery barrages, and then the infantry advanced out across the open.

So it was that 5th Division were ordered to continue the push towards Misterbianco. On the night of 18/19 July 1943, 13th Brigade managed to gain a shallow bridgehead across the River Simeto, but the following night it was the turn of 15th Brigade – and the 1st Green Howards.

There were two schools of thought about how to conduct night-time attacks. The first was to infiltrate as silently as possible in the first glimmer of dawn. The other was a night attack with artillery support – a heavy bombardment of enemy positions followed by a creeping barrage behind which the infantry would advance. The advantage of the latter was that it meant the enemy were cowering – or better, being blown to bits – while the infantry began moving forward. One major disadvantage, however, was that the enemy knew an attack was coming. Another was that invariably, the reality didn't live up to the plan. Successfully following a creeping barrage was all about timing – and being able to stick to timings that had been carefully worked out on paper, in daylight. The trouble was that at night, walking over unfamiliar ground and with little means of communicating with the companies either side, and with the noise of battle all around, it could be very difficult to stick to those timings.

B Company was to lead the Green Howards' attack, and Verity was B

Company Commander. In effect, he was leading the entire battalion assault. One can only imagine what must have been going through his mind. As Company Commander, he would have had around 100 men – ten per cent were always left out of battle – made up from three platoons and his own company headquarters. He was responsible for them, for leading them, for getting them to the right positions, and for urging them into potentially lethal enemy fire. It was an incredible responsibility, one that he was no doubt equipped to handle, but which must, nonetheless, have weighed heavily upon him.

They had been moved up to their start position by lorry at around 10pm, then before the attack the barrage had opened up. In any attack, officers had to lead by example, and especially so company commanders. The noise would have been deafening. Shells hurtling over, screaming as they sped through the air. Explosions up ahead, the flashes of light blinding in the darkness. This was Verity's first taste of combat. Nearly four years of training had come to this moment. His heart would have been pounding – adrenaline coursing through him.

They crossed the road behind the barrage at around 2am on the morning of 20 July, but were still struggling across the open ground, lined with ditches and water courses.

When the barrage finally ended, it must have been apparent to Verity that already the attack was far from going to plan. His B Company had done well. They were well ahead of the other companies, but still some distance from the enemy, which meant they were both exposed and isolated, with no support on their flanks. Without the deafening barrage, the abruptness of artillery silence would have been alarming. Ahead were fields

of corn which gave comparatively good cover, but night attacks – especially the first experienced – were incredibly confusing and disorientating. Machine guns would now have been rattling, bullets hissing and zipping all around, and flares rising into the sky with a hiss, then a crack as they burst, and a crackle as they slowly descended, lighting up the ground like the floodlights at a day/night match.

As they approached a curving dyke, at first mistakenly thinking it was the railway line, they began crawling under withering machine-gun fire. It was now around 4am. The Germans used tracers in their machine guns, which would have been arcing towards them at knee height, little stabs of light, fizzing over their heads. Then mortars began falling around them too. They pressed on and managed to push the enemy in front of them back across a dyke, the Massa Carnazza. Behind them, the corn and few trees were catching fire, which silhouetted the Yorkshiremen as they tried to advance.

Captain Verity, desperately trying to take stock and think clearly, recognised that with their limited resources – a few light machine guns, grenades, sub-machine guns and rifles – the key immediate objective was the farmhouse. He therefore ordered one platoon round towards the farmhouse and another to give covering fire. No sooner had he done so than he was hit in the chest by a piece of flying shrapnel. Still leading his men, he continued to shout: "Keep going! Get them out of the farmhouse and me into it!"

A moment later, Lieutenant Laurie Hesmondhalgh, who was Verity's second-in-command, was also hit and killed outright. Beside the wounded Verity was his batman, Private Tom Rennoldson. The Company was still

struggling to make headway and it was clear that, unless they were quickly relieved by A and D Companies, they were going to remain trapped. In fact, A and D Companies were desperately trying to help their stranded colleagues, but were being pegged back by the same withering machine-gun and mortar fire that was decimating B Company.

By 4.30am it was all over. The attack had failed. B Company, without their commander and second-in-command, began to fall back, as did A and D Companies, so that by the time dawn broke Verity, with Rennoldson still beside him, was stuck firmly behind enemy lines.

Smoke hung over the battlefield while the dead and wounded lay where they had fallen as the sun slowly began to rise. Verity and Rennoldson were soon captured. The Germans brought a broken mortar carrier from the farm, packed it with sheaves of corn, lifted Verity onto it and took him, with Rennoldson still in tow, to their field hospital a mile or so to the north. It was a farmhouse, nothing more.

That afternoon, Verity underwent an emergency operation in a stable at the farm. As he was lifted onto a table, a grenade fell from his shirt. After a moment of panic, Rennoldson was ordered to unprime it, which he did. He remained with Verity until that evening, when he was taken away. It was the last time he saw him.

As darkness began to fall again, the makeshift hospital came under British artillery fire. It had clearly already been hit – there were holes in the roof and the windows were glassless. As Verity was recovering from his operation, a German ambulance was hit and exploded, killing all on board. Two doctors worked ceaselessly through the night.

He and the other wounded – British and German alike – survived the night and the next day were taken to Misterbianco and put onto open railway trucks, ferried up through Sicily and then transferred onto a ship and across the Straits of Messina to Reggio on the southern tip of Italy. Bundled off again, put into trucks, Verity and his fellow wounded were taken to a hospital and then the next day placed on another goods train, on straw, to begin a slow journey north to Naples. It is a journey of less than 300 miles but it took two whole days. All this travel, and being lifted on and off trains with little water or food, was not helping the wounded man. His bandages were filthy and he had been given no relief for the pain. By the time he reached Naples he was very ill indeed. Fever gripped him and his wound was now infected.

Nor was this hell-journey over. From Naples he was taken by truck to the Italian military hospital at Caserta. There Corporal Henty, another wounded Yorkshireman, recognised him. Word soon spread amongst the wounded British troops that the great English bowler was there with them. Verity talked to Henty, showing him photographs of his wife and sons, Douglas and Wilfred. He was in increasingly terrible pain; the wound was festering badly, and part of a rib was broken and pressing against his lung. Eventually, three days later, on 31 July, he was operated on again, and had part of his rib removed. Only a local anaesthetic was used.

At first, the operation appeared to have been a success, but then he suffered the first of three haemorrhages. He remained conscious to the end, talking about his repatriation and getting home again once the war was over. But he was in a bad way. The fever already suggested his wound was infected. The haemorrhage could have caused a Curling's ulcer – a gastric condition brought on by extreme stress – or the break in one of the blood vessels

caused by the operation could have resulted in bleeding into his lung; either way it would have been very distressing and frightening indeed. In any case, one of English cricket's great bowlers finally died later that night. He was just 38.

Bill Bowes, his great friend and Yorkshire bowling partner, was in a nearby POW camp when he heard of Verity's death from some Canadians. Bowes had been a gunner when captured in North Africa, and was dumbstruck by the news. Verity was buried in Caserta with full military honours, and now rests in the military cemetery in the town. It's a beautiful place – a real corner of England. But it's not Yorkshire...

Tragically, the attack on the Plain of Catania was to have been Verity's first and last action. Before they had left Egypt, Verity had played in a cricket match with Lieutenant-General Miles Dempsey, commander of XIII Corps. Dempsey, a keen cricketer, was anxious to have Verity on his staff. Verity initially declined; he did not want to abandon the men he had trained with and commanded before experiencing any action. However, he had agreed to leave the Green Howards and join Dempsey's staff following the attack on the Plain of Catania, and so he would have done had he not been wounded that night. Dempsey later commanded Second Army in Normandy and beyond; Verity could have finished the war as a colonel or higher, playing an important role as a witness to the high command of the Allied war effort. It was not to be.

It is hard to find anyone who had a bad word to say about him. Comrades and cricketing foes alike lined up to sing his praises, not

just as one of the finest English bowlers ever to play the game, but as a person too. Perhaps one of the most touching stories, however, came from Douglas Jardine. Despite their very different backgrounds, Verity and Jardine had become firm friends during their playing days together with England. Verity had even named his elder child Douglas in Jardine's honour.

They hadn't played together for years, and before the war Jardine had joined the Territorial Army and been sent to France with the 1st Royal Berkshire Regiment, part of the British Expeditionary Force. His battalion fought well, first along the River Dyle and then shoring up the southern line near St Omer as much of the rest of the BEF retreated to the coast. Eventually, with the Germans pressing hard from the south and having been shelled incessantly and bombed from the air, the Berkshires had been given the order to fall back too.

Exhausted and hungry, they had eventually reached the beaches. Dunkirk had been hard to miss: thick, acrid smoke shrouded the town from where the oil depot at the port had been bombed and set ablaze. Along the beaches, the scene was one of desperation: half-sunken ships lying off the shore, abandoned or ruined vehicles, upturned boxes of rations and ammunition, and thousands upon thousands of men, all waiting to be evacuated home.

Somehow, Jardine became separated from his men, but was spotted in the nick of time and ushered aboard a waiting destroyer.

"We're bound to be all right, sir," said one of his men. "She's named after your favourite bowler." The ship was HMS *Verity*.

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CRICKET AS COMPLEX NARRATIVE (OR HOW KP LOVES HIMSELF)

Patrick Neate draws on his experience of reading and writing novels to claim that cricket is not so much character-building as character-revealing

I am currently working on a feature film script. A novelist by trade and instinct, I am finding it a testing process; a tricky exercise of discipline and concision. The opening line, for now at least, is: "You can learn everything you need to know about life from the game of cricket: the old man told me that."

The script is an adaptation of one of my own novels, *City of Tiny Lights*, a gumshoe I once believed would presage a whole new genre of suburban thriller. I even had a name for it: Chiswick Noir. Good, eh? Almost a decade later, my novel remains, so far as I know, its only exemplar.

The protagonist of *City of Tiny Lights* is a Ugandan Indian private eye called Tommy Akhtar. He's a hard-drinking, hard-smoking hard man with a fine line in repartee. Tommy and I have

little in common but cricket-mad fathers. That opening line is borrowed directly from mine.

Dad was a much better sportsman than I ever was. (Funny, I originally completed that sentence as "than I'll ever be" but, in my forties, perhaps it's finally time to concede defeat.) He played first-class cricket for Oxford alongside the rare talent of Abbas Ali Baig and under the captaincy of the great "Tiger" Pataudi, once taking 78 off a touring Australian attack that included the likes of Garth McKenzie and Richie Benaud. He went on to captain Berkshire and play good club cricket for Richmond for many years.

In, I think, 1987, we played side by side in a scratch team that he organised. Chasing around 250, I opened and was out to the first ball of the innings. Our batting soon

collapsed and I remember Dad walking out at number seven or eight, saying: "I'll just have to do it myself." And he did, returning a couple of hours later with an unbeaten hundred to his name.

Afterwards, in the bar, he enjoyed his moment in the evening sun and we stayed much later than he'd planned. He then had to drive me to Taunton, you see, where my school team was playing the next day. We arrived not much before midnight and then he turned straight round and drove all the way back to London.

On the way to Somerset, he'd told me (in no little detail) how to score a century and, the next afternoon, I duly did, the first of my cricketing life (which makes it sound like many followed – let's leave it like that). I was sorry he was not there to see my innings, but I rang him from a payphone in the evening and he listened while I talked him through every run. I'm not sure what part of this story I find most revealing.

The father-son relationship expressed through sport is a complex thing. We all know the archetype of the competitive dad who loves humiliating his boy at everything from three-and-in to Connect 4. It's not quite equivalent to pinning the kid's feet together and abandoning him on a mountainside, but surely every father of sons has a touch of Laius about him. My old man was certainly no more competitive than most and would never have enjoyed my humiliation, but he never let me win either.

A couple of years later, I was captain of my school first XI. We were an average team led by an average captain, struggling for form. I had never been an expansive batsman, the strongest part of my game a kind of bloody-minded obduracy; but by the time I was 18 I'd stopped moving my feet altogether and just poked at

the ball like a tramp at a rubbish bin. I'd turned into some kind of cricketing mollusc: I want to say a schoolboy Chris Tavaré, but I think Jimmy Anderson (the batsman) would be a better comparison. If any captain had set a field with nine arranged in an arc from first slip to point, I'd have never scored a run.

The climax to our season was always the match against the MCC and that year Dad was their captain. They took first knock and racked up a bucket-load of runs.

When we batted, I was determined to do well and I was at my most crustacean. I left a lot and limped (or limpeted) to 30 in about an hour and a half. Then, Dad took the ball himself. I had faced him countless times in the nets and we both knew he was no bowler, a slow-dobbing mixture of leg-breaks that didn't break and in-duckers that didn't duck. He arranged his field carefully and at great length – a short leg, slip, gully and the rest in a ring. "Well," he announced to one and all, "we've got to see if they'll go for it."

I left the first delivery and played down the wrong line to the second. To the third, I launched myself up the wicket and swung my bat with, the mythology tells me, "all my might" – Oedipus the King! The King!

Unfortunately, I made no kind of contact and a thick outside edge lobbed a dolly to backward point. Dad declined celebration, like a footballer returning to a much-loved former club. As I walked past, he said: "Bad luck." Then: "This is a very character-building game."

You can learn everything you need to know about life from cricket and when Dad and I now watch we agree on much – for example, that Kevin Pietersen is a genius for our times (i.e. he has made a



virtue of stupidity), and that, while Ian Bell must never be asked to bat for our lives, there'd be no better man to arrange flowers prettily at the funeral should Steve Waugh be dismissed. However, Dad's assertion that cricket is "character-building" is, if not wrong, certainly meaningless. Isn't everything character-building? Sitting in a pub, drinking your life away; sitting in a garret, writing your life away; sitting in an armchair, spectating your life away - they're all as character-building as each other. Of course what Dad meant is that cricket builds good character. But I'm not sure there's much evidence for that either. Dad will often say of an acquaintance: "Well, he's a cricketer. Must be all right." But I assume he's joking because, while I've made many friends through cricket, I've met my fair share of tossers too.

Cricket is "the gentleman's game" and the motto "it's just not cricket" spread throughout the Victorian Empire. But, for me, these just bring to mind Oscar Wilde's description of a gentleman as "one who never hurts anyone's feelings unintentionally". After all, the "gentlemen" who decided what was or wasn't cricket were a limited bunch who were, at the time, part of a culture engaged in some of the most rapacious pillaging of other people's resources the world has seen. Cricket was their game and, like the great swathes of pink across the globe, it was played by their esoteric rules. WG Grace may have been the first cricketing genius, but he was also renowned for his gamesmanship and/or cheating (depending on who you believe). And the subsequent century and a half of cricketing history is a litany of nefarious tactics, ball-tampering, match-fixing, surreptitiously effected run-outs, catches claimed and disputed, and so on.

But, perhaps the most telling example of the bizarre hypocrisies of cricket is "walking". Walking (or not) is an issue as

old as the game itself. Walking is regarded as the height of gentlemanly conduct, a kind of sporting *hara-kiri*. And yet, let's face it, the term would never have come into existence were it not for the fact that some (including, of course, the great WG) didn't. Walking is the game's Hippocratic oath and its hypocritical taboo. I remember being given out caught behind at school. When I reached the pavilion, our cricket master chastised me for a full five minutes - cricket is a gentleman's game, he pronounced. If we don't play it like gentlemen, we may as well all give up now. Why didn't you walk? "Because I didn't hit it," I said.

So, I no longer believe that cricket builds character (in any meaningful sense). Instead, I have come to see that cricket reveals it; and isn't that a whole lot more interesting?

All sport is narrative: its central appeal to spectators being the highs and lows, the struggles overcome, that signify a story. But most sports are plot-driven pulp, built on archetypes of heroism and villainy with little of the nuance of truly great storytelling. I don't think it's any coincidence, for example, that football lasts 90 minutes (or 120, with extra time). After all, between 90 and 120 minutes demarcates the ideal Hollywood structure: a formula in which the surprises are necessarily unsurprising since the key purpose of the medium is to reaffirm and reassure. Of course, Bradford City occasionally beat Arsenal and Verbal may or may not be Keyser Söze. But these are the exceptions that confirm the core principles of a limited-narrative medium.

Cricket is, I think, different. If most sport is driven by plot, cricket is driven by character, and the nuances to be found therein are, if not limitless, as diverse as humanity itself. This idea fascinates me.

I sometimes teach novel writing - such is the fate of novelists of a certain stature (writers of *Chiswick Noir*, for example). On such courses, my opening gambit generally goes like this: "What is a story? We meet our protagonist at point A. We follow him or her through to point Z. Typically, that protagonist will be faced with a personal flaw or external problem which he or she will have to overcome in the other letters of the alphabet. Enough said."

It is a facetious little speech, but it does the job, more or less, and it allows me then to go on and explain why I consider the novel the premier narrative form.

Allow me to give, say, *Middlemarch*, George Eliot's masterpiece, the A-to-Z treatment by way of illustration. Dorothea, an idealistic do-gooder, makes an ill-starred marriage to a crusty, deluded intellectual in the mistaken belief that personal and social fulfilment can be found in academic pursuit. After her husband's death, she eventually marries his young cousin, giving up material security and highfalutin ideals for love and, we are left to hope, some degree of redemption.

I haven't read *Middlemarch* for a while but, from memory, this is an adequate summary. But, it is also ridiculously reductive. Aside from ignoring the other great strands of plot and theme, it denudes our protagonist of all the subtleties of her character that conjure our empathy even as she infuriates and delights us in equal measure.

Put simply, while the 90-minute screenplay is necessarily built on character tropes of assumed common values and expectations, the novel form affords the storyteller space to build complex people who can be by turns comic and tragic, heroic and villainous,

idealistic and cynical. My point? At its best, cricket, in its revelation of character, is the sporting equivalent of the novel.

I remember watching a Test match with Dad as a kid. I can't be sure, but I want to say it was during England's home series against Pakistan in 1982. That summer, England dominated the first Test before threatening implosion against the seemingly innocuous swing bowling of Pakistan's opening batsman, Mudassar Nazar. England lost the second Test by ten wickets before scraping home in the third for a series win.

I remember David Gower was particularly bamboozled by Mudassar's gentle hoopers and, after one dismissal, the commentator described his shot as "careless". This was, of course, one of three adjectives most used to characterise Gower throughout his career, the others being "elegant" and "laid-back". In fact, so powerful was this critical stereotyping that Gower has become a triangulation point for all left-handed batsmen and, indeed, "careless" dismissals since.

But, on this occasion, Dad took issue. "Careless?" he said. "He's not careless. You don't get to play Test cricket if you don't care."

It's a comment that's stuck with me.

Let us briefly imagine *David Gower: The Movie* - create its "beat sheet", as the movie business likes to call it. The screenplay would undoubtedly identify "carelessness" as our hero's fatal flaw within the first ten pages, probably illustrated by some anecdote of schoolboy insouciance. Act One would culminate with him striking his first ball in Test cricket to the boundary, before a decline in Gower's fortunes to the Midpoint (say, the time he was dropped

for the Oval Test in Ian Botham's great summer of 1981). Our hero would then fight his way back to the end of Act Two where he would ascend to the captaincy for... well, let's make it the "blackwash" series of 1984. He would show renewed mettle in defeat, which would then lead to a grand series win in India, before the glorious summer following culminates in Ashes triumph and a glut of runs for the man himself – the golden boy all grown up. This is the feature film version. I'm not suggesting it's a particularly good feature film, but it pushes the necessary buttons.

David Gower the Novel, on the other hand, would be a very different undertaking. I won't try to plot it here, but I know that we couldn't simply signify our protagonist with "carelessness". In fact, there is no need to plot the novel here since it already exists in the person of Gower himself. And it is a subtle tale that can only be précised to 117 matches, 8,231 runs at an average of 44.25 – greatness by anyone's standards. And that is why Dad took offence to that single careless adjective.

All spectators are, of course, guilty of careless description. I have already been so myself, characterising Ian Bell as a flower-arranger. So, by way of contrition, I will use a moment from Bell's career as one of my examples for the comparison of two sports instead of two narrative media.

In 2008, John Terry, Chelsea captain, stepped up to take a penalty in the shoot-out which could win his club the Champions League for the first time. As he struck the ball, he slipped and sent his shot wide. It was a moment of high sporting drama, certainly; if you were a Chelsea fan, some tragedy; if you were one of Terry's many detractors, an instant of glorious *schadenfreude*. But I challenge anyone to claim it revealed much meaningful about his character. No

doubt in Chelsea-hating pubs across the country, JT was derided as a "bottler", but does that even approximate to a truth we believe? The fact is he missed a penalty kick he'd have scored nine times out of ten. He slipped. Shit happens.

Now, let us look at Ian Bell's dismissal in the first innings of the first Test against India at Ahmedabad in 2012. India had scored 521 and England were struggling at 69 for 4 when Bell walked to the wicket. Then, he tried to hit the very first delivery he received back over the bowler's head to the boundary and spooned a simple catch to mid-off. I'm sure commentators used the word "careless", though I don't actually remember the invocation of Gower. It was an extraordinary shot, no doubt, but it also seemed more than that – in some way a summation of Bell as cricketer and man. In no particular order, Bell was batting at number six, a kind of ongoing reminder of a perceived weakness – we all know (and he knows) that he has the talent and technique to bat at three, but isn't trusted to do so. We all know his reputation for scoring easy runs – even the game in which he hit his 199 against South Africa in 2008 eventually petered out into a high-scoring draw, while his double-century against India in 2011 was milked from a beaten team at the end of a long summer. The former young maestro was one of three senior pros in the England top six, the go-to men to bat their team out of a crisis. His place in the team was under pressure from the next generation of tyros and he was due to return home after the game for the birth of his first child. Lastly, we all know that cricket is a game in which you have to trust your judgement and, to Bell's credit, he trusted his. Unfortunately, that judgement was terribly flawed, but would we have preferred him to poke forward nervously and nick to the keeper? Perhaps we would. The incident reminded me of

something else I tell would-be novelists: when you're writing well, you can reveal more about a character in one moment than in 20 pages of exposition.

Of course I recognise that the oppositions I describe between cricket and other sports, and the novel and other narrative media, are false. There are plenty of unremarkable cricket matches and careers, plenty of epic examples from any other sport you can think of; innumerable bad, unsophisticated novels and many great films of considerable complexity. Nonetheless, I would maintain that the observations underlying these false oppositions ring true. There is something about cricket at its best that sets it apart – the space and time that allow for character development, the empathy and identification between player and spectator, the struggles of an individual against the backdrop of an interwoven narrative of a wider war for ascendancy (or, if you will, a "team game"). There is something about the novel form which, at its best, is exactly the same. Or, to put it another way, in the words of Tommy Akhtar, private eye, in the last scene of my film: "The Yanks will never get cricket. They'll never understand a five-day Test match that ends in a draw. They like victory and defeat. But victory and defeat are generally nursery rhymes, while a draw can be epic." Cricket, like a novel, like life, often ends in moral stalemate. And it's all the better for it.

If describing Ian Bell as a florist smacks of carelessness, then describing KP as some kind of idiot savant is unfortunate (see the KP Genius Twitter account) so, by way of conclusion, let me rectify that here. After all, the idea for this little

essay came about while re-reading *Anna Karenina* against the backdrop of Pietersen's recent conflict with his teammates, his captain, his coach, and the ECB.

Pietersen was, I began to consider, rather like poor, doomed Anna. He was regarded as self-serving, his judgement fatally flawed, seemingly hell-bent on alienating himself from his peers. He was characterised as a mercenary, and certainly he had no desire to live in anything but the considerable style to which he was accustomed. But, like Anna, his true tragedy was an ill-starred love: a love that could not be condoned by polite society, but would not be contained by its strictures either. But who did KP love?

As I read on, I slowly came to conclude that KP also resembled Count Vronsky; as Leo Tolstoy describes him, "a perfect specimen of Pietermaritzburg's [sorry, 'Petersburg's'] gilded youth". Vronsky is a brave soldier raised for derring-do and impressive in the regulated environment of his regiment. But he is a man of limited imagination whose bravery derives not from moral courage but the whims of his own desires. Indeed, when Vronsky resigns his commission, it is not from principle but to pursue the self-gratification of his love for Anna, a love that can never fulfil either of them.

And so it dawned on me: KP is neither Anna nor Vronsky, he is both of them – the cricketing manifestation of Tolstoy's epic of doomed love.

Is this taking things a step too far? Certainly. But fun, nonetheless...

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THE MAN I ONCE KNEW

Matthew Engel on his complex relationship with Peter Roebuck

One of my favourite newspaper writers is a man called Dan Savage, who runs advice columns that appear mainly in the American underground press. Savage's work will not easily be mistaken for that of the traditional agony aunt: it deals, frankly and very explicitly, with sex. Indeed, it often deals with sexual practices I have never heard of, let alone attempted.

But Savage's responses are humane and sensitive. His general approach is that anything goes between consenting adults, and that if you can find a partner who shares your tastes, however *outré*, that is a form of Nirvana. Sex is Savage's business, and most of us might try to find a somewhat broader definition of happiness. "Something to do, someone to love and something to hope for" (attributed to various writers) is one I find very helpful.

All of which may seem a long way from the normal concerns of a cricket publication. But I couldn't help musing on these matters while I was reading *Chasing Shadows*, the new brave, fair-

minded and compelling biography of Peter Roebuck by Tim Lane and Elliot Cartledge. At times it reads like a thriller. In their introduction, the authors offer a quote from me as one of their justifications for a book about a cricketer who never even played a Test match. "I think Roebuck was the most unusual character I've ever come across," I had told them. Having read the finished work, I would like to amend that: "unusual" is far too weak a word.

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Peter Roebuck was born in 1956 and died, aged 55, when his body was found outside a Cape Town hotel. The official version is that he jumped from a sixth-floor window, where he was being interviewed by the police over an allegation of sexual assault on a young black man. It is possible that he was pushed, though there is no firm evidence of that, nor an obvious motive.

No life should be defined by the way it ended. In Roebuck's case though, understanding his death is fundamental

to an understanding of his life. But it is all beyond comprehension. If suicide, why? How did it come to this? "You'll be chasing shadows," Lane and Cartledge were warned by someone as they embarked on their task. That someone was Peter's mother, and she was right.

However, there were certain obvious moments that defined her son's life. The first came when he walked diffidently into the headmaster's study at Millfield in 1969 to be thrown an orange, hard. Most of us would have just been startled; this boy caught it, which was the idea. It was his introduction to RJO "Boss" Meyer, Somerset captain (1947) and pedagogue, a man perhaps about three-parts genius and one-part rogue, who remained ever after Roebuck's hero and role model.

Five years later, on April Fool's Day, Peter arrived in the Somerset dressing-room along with several other unknowns: they included Viv Richards, Ian Botham and Vic Marks, and the lives of the four of them would become inextricably interlinked. The first two became world-famous; Marks played a few times for England and later built a solid career as a cricket writer and broadcaster, apparently without falling out with anyone.

Unlike the other three. The great fall-out came in 1986, by which time Roebuck was Somerset captain, the early thrilling glories of Beefy and Viv were starting to fade and the atmosphere was becoming a little acrid. The captain was party to, but not responsible for, the committee decision to get rid of Richards and his fellow West Indian Joel Garner and replace them with the New Zealander Martin Crowe. In

the convulsion that followed, Botham walked out of the club.

Cricket is a forgiving game. The England careers of Jim Laker and Tom Graveney ended in acrimony but they died garlanded with honours. It is hard now even to remember which Englishmen defected during the Kerry Packer schism and which stayed loyal. Graham Gooch, David Graveney (Tom's nephew), and Mike Gatting all led rebel tours to white-run South Africa when it was a pariah state. They later became, respectively, England captain, chairman of selectors and president of MCC.

But Botham never forgave and Roebuck never forgot: indeed the fear/paranoia of Botham's vengeance was with him always. The committee of 1986 survived a members' revolt and their decision stood. But for Roebuck's life, as well as his cricketing career, this event fits Thomas Hardy's description of Napoleon's victory at the Battle of Austerlitz: he had his successes after that "but his courses had not been upward".

In 1989, a desperate year for English cricket, Roebuck – a batsman of comparatively limited gifts but considerable technical skill, concentration and determination – came close to Test selection against Australia. And, having avoided guilt by association with a 4-0 Ashes debacle, he was widely proclaimed in the press as the next England captain, the new Mike Brearley. This was wrong, as both a prediction and a judgment.

By this time Roebuck was already making his name as a cricket writer on the *Sunday Times* but growing disillusioned with everything English.



He retired from Somerset in 1991 and gradually spent more time in Australia, as a teacher and then as a writer and broadcaster.

He continued to spend summers in England to write, play Minor Counties (he was an inspirational captain of Devon) and coach young boys from the colonies, who would stay in his bungalow outside Taunton. And there, as he admitted to the Crown Court in 2001, he sometimes caned them. This case was another defining moment.

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I first met Peter in the early 1980s when I was cricket correspondent of the *Guardian*. Somerset were hot, and I was a regular visitor to Taunton. We became friendly and I sometimes stayed at his place: the typical pad of a busy but sloppy bachelor, much like my own. He was a ridiculously polymathic figure: a first in law from Cambridge; a vital cog in the country's most vibrant cricket team; and his invigoratingly fresh early books – *Slices of Cricket* and *It Never Rains* – were hinting that he could be a cricket writer of Cardusian status, if that was what he wanted. At that point the undertone of despair in his writing seemed wholly related to the pressure of county cricket.

He made his debut as a press-box regular on the 1986–87 Ashes tour, which produced another fine book, *Ashes to Ashes*. We would occasionally spend days off together having adventures in the bush. His book included accounts of these, only lightly fictionalised.

I enjoyed his company, and I think it was mutual, partly because we had broader interests than was the norm on the cricket circuit. We laughed a lot and he was a useful cricketing contact: a source of insights rather than stories – though I believe I was the only journalist to know in advance about the sacking of Richards and Garner, a story I was unable to write because my source would have been all too guessable. Mostly, though, we talked about anything and everything, not least what mountain he might conquer next. The law? Politics? Maybe brain surgery was in the mix. Cricket seemed way too trivial.

For me, I had done five years as a *Guardian* correspondent; I had had the time of my life, but I knew I needed to write about subjects beyond cricket. And I did, but later combined that with editing *Wisden*, a job that involved regular appearances on cricket grounds but not constant attendance.

For others, cricket can be a tender trap. One or two of my 1980s colleagues are still in the press box, their other ambitions long ago put aside. For players, the gravitational pull of this happy, cloistered, protected, time-devouring game is even greater. It affects most of all those who have the greatest choice. If you can make decent, or even big, money from writing or commentating, it takes immense determination to break out and emulate Mike Brearley, England captain and psychotherapist, or Roebuck's own Somerset teammate Nigel Popplewell, now a successful tax lawyer.

Roebuck broke loose from all his old moorings – his family, his country,

most of his old friends – without ever forging the solid new relationships that might have replaced them. Yet cricket was always with him. It was as though, Lane and Cartledge theorise, the game became his family.

If so, the family was hardly a big happy one. Far from seeking protection against his existing enemies, he insisted on creating new ones. I was amongst them. In the 1990s our paths would still cross during Ashes Tests, but he just stopped speaking to me, for reasons I never discovered. I asked him to write for *Wisden*: he refused brusquely (I did not get many refusals, even polite ones); when I had ceased editing, he accepted.

By this time he was largely forgotten in England but was becoming huge in Australia. He took over from Bill O'Reilly as cricket columnist of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which was a heck of a platform. I felt – and I was not alone in this – that his writing started to decline in Australia: he was often slapdash; he insisted in adopting a staccato style that was neither necessary nor appropriate; and he would indulge in psychological speculation, which was not his forte. But he was also ABC Radio's star summariser. He was brilliant at that – funny, incisive, warm-sounding. And he knew it.

I remember one ghastly night in Sydney – a media dinner where I found myself trapped on a table which comprised him holding forth with self-conscious sparkle to a group of his admiring acolytes, and taking great pleasure in cutting me out of conversation with anyone. Only his accent hinted at the underlying insecurity: it would waver, as it did on air, between a phoney Strine

and his normal tones, honed at Millfield and Cambridge. Pre-pubescent kids always change their voices when they emigrate; well-rounded adults do not.

And then he became an all-too-public figure in Britain again. After he was charged in the caning case – it must have been 2001 – I glimpsed Peter sitting in the Lord's press box, looking as forlorn as I felt that night in Sydney. I crossed the room to shake his hand, nothing more. So for the rest of that Ashes tour I was back in favour.

After that I left the country to achieve one of my lingering ambitions, to write from Washington. The timing was terrible: my family and I arrived in late August. On 11 September something happened in America. I spent the next two years dealing day after day with the erratic behaviour of George W Bush. Frankly, the erratic behaviour of Peter Roebuck barely crossed my mind. In 2003 I returned to England and *Wisden*, and then flew to Sydney for the New Year Test against India: Steve Waugh's absurdly overblown farewell. Roebuck ignored me throughout. Our paths crossed once, perhaps in the gents'. "Why aren't you speaking to me, Peter?" "You've been plotting against me," he replied. He must have imagined I spent two years in Washington with a hotline to Botham.

I had far too little trouble putting this loopy remark out of my mind. Three months later my son Laurie was diagnosed with cancer. He died in September 2005, aged 13. My wife and I experienced an outpouring of universal affection and support, from family, neighbours, colleagues, friends, long-lost schoolfriends, ex-friends and, after

I told the story in the *Guardian*, many hundreds of strangers who supported our charity, the Laurie Engel Fund.

Well, almost universal. It would have been the 2006-07 Ashes before Roebuck had the chance to ignore me again. I had by now admittedly given him cause for offence: I had reviewed his bitter and ill-judged 2004 autobiography *Sometimes I Forgot to Laugh* and done so honestly. Even so, finally I could take no more. "You do know what happened to me, don't you, Peter?" I remarked one day. "You mean your son?" he replied airily. "Oh, yes, I know." And that was that, for ever.

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But still Roebuck's fate haunts me. One effect of my family tragedy, I think, was to make me a much less efficient hater. And the violent death of someone who came to hate me for reasons I do not understand does prey on my mind. In those last years of zero contact between us he devoted increasing time to his own charitable endeavours: supporting young black Africans through university in the homes he created in Natal. It is this venture, for the men he rather creepily called his sons, that is at the heart of the Roebuck mystery.

Was he a saint, a holy innocent traduced by chancers who invented allegations of abuse for their own base reasons? Or was the whole venture an elaborate front for his own sexual gratification? Or something in between? A bit of both, but more good than bad, one might imagine. But where precisely does the truth

lie? Lane and Cartledge ask the right questions but they cannot provide the answers. Probably no one ever will.

It is strange now to think that in 1989 Roebuck was perceived as the new Brearley: a player not quite good enough to justify an England place but whose leadership would galvanise the other ten. The essence of Brearley's captaincy was empathy, a quality Peter spectacularly lacked. He did not listen enough; in the end, hardly at all.

I think everyone senses that sex must be at the heart of the mystery. It is very rare to know someone for 30-plus years without having an inkling of some attachment or other. The cricketing community largely assumed he was homosexual and attracted to young men, but also very, very repressed. "Why can't he just come out and be done with it?" said one contented out-gay Australian, a friend of us both. "He'd be so much happier." Indeed, what's the point of moving 12,000 miles from home, to Sydney of all places, if you can't take the chance to shed your inhibitions and follow Dan Savage's philosophy?

The book reveals the assumption not to be the whole truth. In the early 1980s Peter did have a relationship with Julia Horne, the daughter of the Australian writer Donald who coined the phrase "The Lucky Country". She sounds an absolute smasher, who saw in him precisely the qualities of wit, breadth and erudition that had appealed to me in the early days. And something more besides. Their time together was evidently bedevilled, not by his lack of enthusiasm for sex but by the opposite: premature ejaculation.

This is hardly an uncommon problem among young men, nor an incurable one. He wouldn't have needed Dan Savage to make suggestions: he just needed someone he could confide in; heaven knows, there would have been enough sexual experience available in the Somerset dressing-room. But I for one never heard him discuss sex at all, except in disapproving terms. And it was not Julia who ended it; it was Peter.

There was an alternative scenario, and it seems to have been what she wanted. A life filled with little Roebucks - English or Aussie - in which she told him regularly but lovingly to change his shirt; listen to other people; tear up the stupid autobiography; and also that no, you can NOT, in the 21st century, cane teenage boys. Peter and Julia might have been the most welcome guests and the most welcoming hosts. That's not how it went, though.

Sexuality is not binary: you are not either gay or straight the way schoolchildren used to be forced to choose between arts and science. Perhaps none of us are precisely up

and down the wicket; everyone has their quirks and fancies; maybe there is always just a hint of turn.

Roebuck's only known relationship recalls the story of the fated wedding night in Ian McEwan's novella *On Chesil Beach*. And looking at Peter's life as a whole we seem to be back to Thomas Hardy: the combinations of minor mishaps that lead inexorably to tragedy. In this story, there is an antagonist as well as a protagonist. At its heart is the conflict between Roebuck and Botham, the school swot and the playground bully, improbable friends for more than a decade; implacable enemies ever after.

One night, just after Botham began doing his charity walks and raising prodigious amounts of money, I remember Roebuck musing on his motives: "You know, Botham thinks that if he does one great good thing, that cancels out all the little shitty ones." Sometimes now I wonder about Peter's undoubted generosity to his "sons". Was he trying to expiate his own feelings of guilt - real or imaginary?

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THE SOUND OF COMPOSURE

Tim de Lisle remembers Christopher Martin-Jenkins

In cricket, more than any other sport, voices count. It's partly a matter of time - the sheer length of the day, the hundreds of pauses to be filled between the flurries of action, the breaks for lunch and tea and rain and bad light. And it's partly a matter of depth - the long history of the game, the rich vocabulary, the endless possibilities. A Test match is the Moroccan lamb of sport, slow-cooked, simmering, marinated in language. The captain is coaxing the bowler, the bowler is cursing the batsman, the keeper is cajoling the ring, the slips are planning a round of golf, the batting side are bantering on the balcony, and the crowd is humming or buzzing, while, in many cases, catching the commentary on headphones. Only some of the fans can play, but nearly all of us can talk a good game.

The longer a match takes, the more it exists in words and pictures. Each new medium that comes along, cricket calmly

colonises: radio, television, the web, even Twitter and Snapchat. Around the world, people sit in offices, silently following the live blogs, crafting emails that can be as polished as the professional paragraphs they bounce off.

This springs from the way we go about things as kids, not just playing the game but playing a role within it - often two roles at once. A boy or girl picks up a bat, and in no time they've announced that they are Joe Root or Ellyse Perry. But they don't stay in character when they open their mouths: they turn into tiny commentators, reporting on themselves and their siblings or schoolfriends. It may be the only palatable way to refer to yourself in the third person. The real commentators are forever observing that young players copy the stars, and that's true; but the commentators themselves are templates too. We grow up seeing the game through their eyes, reading it through their words.



The first voice of cricket that I can remember came easing out of a car radio on a hot July day in 1973. I must have listened to *Test Match Special* many times because I'd been cricket-mad for a year, but this was the moment that would stick: a schools tennis tournament, my brother Charlie playing, me tagging along half-reluctantly, my mum letting me have her keys so I could trot back to the car park and catch the score. I turned the dial to Radio 3, and there was the voice of Christopher Martin-Jenkins, crisp, vivid, making you feel you were there. If anyone had asked why I liked him, I might have said he was like one of the better young teachers at school – switched-on, easy-going, on your side. Later, I might have said that his enthusiasm, and his equilibrium, were greater than his ego.

Half of commentary is mood music: the sound of a voice, the sense of a presence. Listening in the car or the kitchen, or watching from the sofa, we need the commentators to be good company. On the telly, Richie Benaud had this quality, and Mike Atherton has it now. On the radio, many have had it, and most of all CMJ. He wasn't comical like Johnners, lyrical like Arlott or blimpish like Blowers, but he was a vital member of that cast, radiating courtesy, clarity, decency, and – the attribute so valued by players and coaches – composure. In the classic *TMS* line-up, he was not so much second fiddle as the bass player. He wasn't short of opinions, but he was a reporter first, giving the score, setting the scene, engaging the agnostic. When he did pass judgment, he would do it in a way that was eminently humane, balanced without being

bland. In the days when the Test team was announced only four days ahead, Sunday lunchtime in the shires was defined by two things: the smell of a roast, and the sound of CMJ trying to make sense of the selectors' whims.

It didn't have much to do with being posh – Henry Blofeld, from a similar background, settled on a very different style. It was about being a class act, with the knack of striking the right note. If Johnners was the master of comedy and Arlott of poetry, CMJ was the master of tone.

The gods of commentary are closet egalitarians: they don't believe in granting anyone an outstanding voice in more than one medium. Arlott's poetic tendencies, made for radio, could turn to tin in print. The people in the press box whose sentences sang most sweetly – in my time, John Woodcock and Matthew Engel – were never regulars at the microphone. As a writer, CMJ was always reasonable and readable, and tirelessly prolific (he filed his final piece, on the death of Tony Greig from cancer, only two days before suffering the same fate himself). But when *The Times* set about prising him away from the *Telegraph*, it was for his good name more than his prose. Those grounded thoughts needed his vocal cords to give them wings; and the phrases flowed more naturally when he had less time to think about them. A performer's make-up is a complex compound that often includes an element of shyness, something CMJ had more of than most. Being live on air, sitting in the hot seat that somehow fitted that angular frame so well, had the effect of liberating him. It was like hearing a person with a stutter make a speech.

There's a question that lingers in media centres: do you need to have played the game for a living in order to capture it? The answer, of course, is no, a point made nearly a century ago by Neville Cardus, pressed home by Scyld Berry and Gideon Haigh, reiterated lately by Jonathan Liew and Rob Smyth. But it does help, as Trevor Bailey would have said, to know the game from the inside up to a point. CMJ, a good enough off-spinner to have played for Surrey Seconds, spoke from the sweet spot on the Venn diagram, steeped in the game yet standing outside it. When he died, Scyld argued that this was the secret of his success. "Nobody broadcast on cricket for so long and so lucidly... What made him so good, apart from his precise and unforced diction, was that he came closer than anyone to combining the knowledge of an expert with the enthusiasm of a student."

Sixteen years after that moment with the car radio, I landed a jammy job as cricket correspondent of the *Independent on Sunday* (it was new, so the big names had said no). The launch came in 1990, as Graham Gooch's England squad were in the West Indies, preparing a surprise for Viv Richards. I turned up for a pre-tour reception at Lord's, feeling out of place, and immediately heard a soothing sound behind me: "Mr de Lisle...!" It was that voice: unmistakable, unchanged, still for me the voice of cricket. We had met only once before, with my brother, but in the Caribbean CMJ took me under his wing to just the right extent, going for dinner, sharing his knowledge, playing hard-fought tennis ("Fiddlesticks!"), offering a word of well-aimed praise rather than the volley of advice that must have been tempting. When the other halves flew out to join

us for the end of the tour, my girlfriend, Amanda, felt similarly included by his wife, Judy. Their marriage always seemed strong: by the standards of sports people in the days of the three-month tour, it was miraculous.

In 1998–99 he wrote an Ashes tour book with my brother, CMJ covering the action and CdL the travelling circus. Charlie had just finished a bruising stint working as head of research (ie chief ghostwriter) for Ted Heath. Heath was every bit as tricky an employer as his grouchy public persona might have led you to expect, and Charlie was in what we later realised were the early days of depression. CMJ was sympathetic and patient: his own love of cricket had arisen as a coping mechanism, to see off homesickness at boarding school (his first commentaries, on imaginary matches, had an audience of none). *An Australian Summer*, one of umpteen books by CMJ, was a first for CdL, a proud moment and a source of lasting satisfaction.

When CMJ died, Ian Botham called him "a true gentleman", which was right on several levels – he was genial, paternalistic, instinctively old-fashioned, the acceptable face of square. On air at the Benson & Hedges Cup final in 1994, Andy Lloyd, who was summarising, mentioned that Paul Smith of Warwickshire, with his rock-star hair, was a fan of Jim Morrison of The Doors. CMJ, for once, was stumped. "If you're listening, Mr Morrison," he said, "I apologise for my ignorance." By then, Mr Morrison had been lying in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris for decades. But CMJ's conservatism – which went too far, as he later acknowledged,

when he opposed the ostracising of apartheid South Africa – was free from the snobbery that was apt to sneak into cricket. It wasn't disdain for anyone less fortunate (he knew a charmed life when he'd lived one), so much as a steady belief in Queen and country, and family, and cricket. He loved the game both wisely and too well.

On tour, he would slip away to church when he could. I can see him now, heading off to evensong at close of play in 1990-91 in Adelaide, where the

cathedral stands at deep fine leg, as if waiting for a top edge. About 22 years later, his loving family and countless friends filled St Paul's in London for his memorial service. There were warm and well-judged tributes from Tim Rice and Jonathan Agnew, who did the simple thing that we often don't think to do at these mournful moments: he played a few clips of CMJ's commentary. It turned out that those cool, calm, collected tones, so companionable in the car and the kitchen, were also made to ring out in a cathedral.

...



LOVE LETTERS

Rahul Bhattacharya on two Indian legends bound together by themes of love and exile

One day at work I received a handwritten letter from a dashing Test cricketer. I cannot be sure now of the spill or strictness of its hand, whether rendered in ink or ball-point and in what colour, nor the sound of its words or the choice of its phrases. I cannot be sure because like a fool I lost the letter. I remember only that Budhi Kunderan had written to say he would be coming to Bombay and be happy to meet, and that was enough for me.

This was nine years ago. We met at his friend's home in Versova on Mumbai's north coast, not far from the office of the magazine I worked at, *Wisden Asia Cricket*. Budhi Kunderan wore jeans with a full-sleeve shirt, tucked in, sleeves rolled up. He wasn't ill or weak. He was slim and strong and good-looking, hair white, skin rich brown, eyes soaked in reflection. He was 64. Over half of his years he had lived in Scotland, and there he would die in two years. This seemed to be on his mind. The arc of his life. "I get the feeling," he said, "that this is my last trip to India. I am here to bid farewell to my homeland."

In the sticky mangrove air Budhi Kunderan told magical tales with distant contemplation. His father was against his playing cricket; when he was selected for his school team, his mother secretly altered her husband's clothes to make him his first set of whites. Because he hit 219, his "first time on a cricket pitch", the father saw his photo in the newspaper. The Test selection out of nowhere. Twenty and poor, he didn't own wicket-keeping gloves, and he went around to Naren Tamhane on match eve to borrow a pair: Tamhane was the man whose place he had taken in the side. And then he found it too noisy to sleep at home. So – I include detail from a conversation with his younger brother, Bharat Kunderan: Bazaar Gate Street in Fort, the thrum of the great city; their father, a clerk in Voltas Airconditioners, a migrant from Mangalore, from the Mogaveera community of fishermen; four sisters and three brothers. Budhi the second, a one-room-kitchen house, shared bathrooms – from there he walked down to the immense triangular maidan where he



played for Fort Vijay. If you have played cricket in Azad Maidan, you might know Fort Vijay and the National Health Gym on the eastern side, near Sterling Cinema. There, on a parapet beside the gymnasium, Budhi Kunderan made his bed as he sometimes did. 1959–60, India v Australia at the Brabourne, five nights wicket-keeper Kunderan beneath the stars in Azad Maidan.

I felt such wonder and warmth towards him, his days. Towards the end of our meeting, when I felt confident enough, I asked how he came to write to me. Because he was here to say goodbye, he had contacted two journalists, me and Clayton Murzello of *Mid-Day*, through Bharat. As for me, he was a reader of our magazine. He thought it was smarter, he chuckled, to write to the assistant editor than the editor, who might have too much on his plate. I found that moving then and I find it more so now.

We ran the interview under the “Gleanings” feature of our magazine, a concept stolen faithfully from *Esquire’s* “What I’ve Learnt”, meant to present the distilled wisdom and experience of a life. This is how Budhi Kunderan’s gleanings began:

Cricket’s been my love. It’s been my life. It’s how I met my wife.

And elsewhere:

My family is my biggest happiness. My wife is my greatest joy.

I met my wife on the England tour of 1967. In those days we’d save our allowance of a pound a day so after two weeks we could afford a new bat.

She was Linda Pullar. He was a cricketer with the Indian team; she was a

receptionist at the team hotel in Leeds. When I look at the unedited file of the interview I am appalled to find how I had privileged the life of the cricketer over the life of the person. The price of bats and the pay of cricketers had felt to me the essential thing. I had omitted the most beautiful detail of his recollection. *We wrote to each other for 18 months. Our affection grew through our letters.*

• • •

Hello. Is that Linda Kunderan?

Yes, it is.

I’m calling from India. I am doing a piece of remembrance on Mr Kunderan. Would you mind . . .

A clear, kind northern voice. It feels like she has family over and afterwards she says she is a grandmother of two. We speak for 15 minutes. The Great Northern, that was the name of the hotel. What were her first impressions? *Oh, he was very charming. I took him to a discotheque.* I ask about the letters and she frames it exactly as he had. *We wrote to each other for 18 months.* She had every letter he wrote her. Did he ask you to marry him in a letter? *Oh no, he asked me right then.* And you said yes right then? *Yes, I did.*

• • •

In February 1969 Linda married Budhi Kunderan in Bombay. They lived in Bandra, in the housing colony of his employer, State Bank of India. But his career was fading. He had a serious falling-out with the captain, Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, for reasons that remain rumour. “I thought Pat was out of order and told him off,” he would tell Murzello.

“Then I knew I would never play for India again.” He was dropped from the squad to Australia. Linda was not keeping well. And the bank refused him leave to play the leagues in Britain. Budhi Kunderan was, as he put it that afternoon, “disgusted with the cricket politics here so I quit at 30.” In an angry interview at the time he said, “players are made to feel they exist at the mercy of the officials. Sirring is a must for players” – words which would be held against him.

The biggest challenge of my life was establishing myself in a strange country. You land up there with nothing in your pocket and you got to start your life again with a wife and a kid.

They spent a winter at Linda’s family’s home in Wetherby, Yorkshire. Budhi Kunderan helped out at the pub they ran, The Angel. From there they moved to Coatbridge in Lanarkshire, Scotland where they remained. Kunderan played in the Scottish League for Drumpellier, and worked for the technical department of British Roadmakers. In 1980, when he wasn’t invited, pettily, to attend the Jubilee Test in Bombay, he felt so “disillusioned and disappointed” not to be able to stand proud with the community of Indian Test players that he wrote the board a letter of apology. At 41 he debuted for the Scotland national team. The *Daily Telegraph* would note in his obituary: “Kunderan was still turning out for Drumpellier in 1995, at the age of 56, which probably makes him the longest-serving cricket professional in Scottish history.”

In October 2005, 18 months after his final trip to India, Budhi Kunderan was diagnosed with lung cancer. “When he gave up smoking,” Linda tells me on the phone, “he coughed so much he

lost his voice. He couldn’t speak.” At the hospital they found a tumour in his chest. It was germ-cell tumour. They couldn’t treat it surgically. He took chemotherapy and radiation. But the cancer spread to his brain.

In his final months, Nari Contractor, his senior at the Bharda High School, Railways and India, would try and speak to him every few weeks. What were the conversations like? “It was something like what he said about his trip, ‘a last phone conversation kind of thing’.” As the medication grew stronger, he was sometimes confused and could not always recognise people. He found it difficult to speak and impossible to write. Bharat says the brothers used to exchange letters of up to ten or 15 pages, always by hand, and he never forgot a birthday, but now Budhi couldn’t write.

“I think he really did know,” Linda said. “Before he was diagnosed we sold the house and he moved us into a smaller house which I would be able to manage by myself. He worked very hard to make that happen. He was a very thoughtful, very caring man. Yes, I really think he did know.”

Did he miss India in any particular way? “He felt proud to be Indian. He missed his family, the movies, the food. We subscribed to the Indian TV channels. He got *Wisden Asia* every month. He told me that if I died before him he would probably move back to India.”

• • •

Budhi Kunderan was a wicket-keeper who nevertheless once opened the bowling and batting in the same Test match. He played a Test match before he played a Ranji match, and when

he played a Ranji match he smacked a double-century. In his second Test he carted 16 runs from the first over. Seventy-one in no time, Davidson and Meckiff and Benaud and Kline taken to the cleaners. In 1964-65 he hit 192 against England in Madras and 525 in the series, a record for a keeper. Between 1959 and 1967 Budhi Kunderan played 18 Tests for India, and then he left. He died on June 23, 2006.

Some careers burst like the glitter of magic tricks, not frequently but unforgettably. Every now and then there is proof. N Manu Chakravarthy in the *Hindu*:

The news that Budhisagar Krishnappa Kunderan passed away in a distant land is much more than a piece of information for many of my generation. It is, in fact, a reminder of a great tragedy that struck an exceptional individual nearly four decades ago, and it, also, transports many of us back to the 1960s evoking extraordinarily strong memories of a daring, blazingly brilliant spirit that was a great inspiration to a generation that celebrated virtues of courage, innovation and native talent.

Recently, in the inaugural *Wisden India Almanack*, Shashi Tharoor describing falling in love with cricket, aged six. Brabourne Stadium, 1964:

I watched enthralled as Budhi Kunderan, India's opening batsman and wicket-keeper, who looked like a West Indian and played like one, pulled John Price, England's fastest bowler, for six over square leg, the ball landing practically at my feet. He almost instantly repeated the shot, this time just failing to clear the rope. In less time than the difference between

a four and a six could be explained to me, Kunderan was 16; but he tried it too often, sending up a skyer that swirled up in a gigantic loop over mid-on. As the ball spiralled upward, Kunderan began running; when it was caught by a relieved Titmus in the deep, Kunderan continued running, hurled his bat skywards with an exuberant war-whoop, caught it by the handle as it came down and ran on to the pavilion. It was exhilarating stuff, and I was hooked for life.

"Looked like a West Indian and played like one," wrote Tharoor, and when I read news of the death, I thought back to a West Indian occasion.

• • •

Day two, second Test, India versus West Indies at the Queen's Park Oval, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 2002. We leave the press-box, Ehtesham Hasan of *Mid-Day* and I, and take a taxi to San Fernando, covering half the length of the island in an hour. We leave because we want to meet Subhash Gupte, a leg-spinner so fine that Garfield Sobers rated him more highly than anyone he had played against or seen, a bowler whose exploits inspired Bishan Singh Bedi to become a spinner.

Subhash Gupte is 72 and on a walker, having fallen and injured his hip while walking his dog years ago. He even looks like a genius: brilliant bright eyes, a big intelligent forehead. His accent is not Trinidadian, but he has adopted Caribbean formulations: "pelt" for chuck or the word "blooming", as in: "When it used to get dark, the beers and rums used to come out and the Bengalis would do *maara-maari* [shout and fight] every blooming night." So many recollections, such superb detail. He remembers the

name of the girl Rohan Kanhai, his great friend and nemesis, had fallen for in Bombay (Chhaya, from Khar), observes that unlike Vasant Ranjane, "Vinoob Mankad would have tossed it wide" to allow him all ten against West Indies at Kanpur, notes that he is pulled up for wearing shorts by an official but Pataudi the Nawab gets away with it even at a toss, and casts his doubts on Vijay Manjrekar's singing skills. He is as happy to turn the joke on himself. When the radio announces that Ajay Ratra is out for duck on debut, he adds, quick as a flash: "Like me. Against Statham in 1951."

It is a beautiful morning, the warmth of his wife Carol and their daughter Carolyn - Indian name Anita - the peach bungalow in San Fernando, the hiss and shout of the radio. Subhash Gupte's life and memories and mischief, his double hat-trick in league cricket, the 3pm practice with Madhav Mantri on the Elphinstone pitch in Oval Maidan and the nine o'clock train back to Dadar. What a proud smile when Carol brings out a morphed team photograph of an all-time Indian Test XI put together by a panel of journalists. Gavaskar, Merchant, Hazare, Tendulkar, Nayudu, Mankad, Kapil, Kirmani, Prasanna, Nissar, Gupte. Afterwards I write in the article:

Gupte moved to Trinidad 40 years ago on his wife's persuasion and because a gentleman named Frank Blackburn who was "mad after cricket" offered him a job with the sugar manufacturer, Caroni. Gupte had met Carol on the 1952-53 tour of the West Indies, a time that he had spun his way to 50 first-class wickets,

and according to one fan, "was all the talk in town." Carol's father had arranged for a match to be played at San Fernando. Subhash saw Carol at an official function, and was smitten. A long flirtation via post followed. When Subhash proposed in a letter, he was asked to redirect it to Carol's father. It all worked out.

Love on tour, romance by post, marriage, and the departure too, years before Kunderan. During a rainy Test in Delhi, 1961-62, Kripal Singh, a team-mate, calls the hotel receptionist on the house phone and makes a pass at her. Along with Kripal, Gupte is suspended for the crime of sharing his room. In fact, says Contractor, then captain, "he was playing cards in my room at the time with six or seven others." Subhash Gupte, the wrist-spinner of impeccable discipline, is "disciplined". The great bowler emigrates in bitterness. At 32, he has played his last Test match.

Five weeks after we met, Subhash Gupte passed away. The Indians were in Trinidad for the one-dayers, and Carol said to the captain: "Maybe Subhash's spirit wanted to return to his home country along with the Indian team."

What does a cricketer think of before he dies? The roar of fans, the thrill of a hook or a break, where do they go? The king of the gully, the hero of the maidan, the toast of the country. The sadness of cricketers, their gloriousness. Missing home. Wife, children, letters and friends. The arced deliveries and drives, the years of mental replay. Did the stars above Azad Maidan blaze bright in Budhi Kunderan's last dreams?

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MY POSTER BOYS

Emma John recalls a team held together with Blu-tack and glue, and wonders whether success and empathy can co-exist

A little boy in a black tracksuit wailed to his dad: "They haven't looked like taking a wicket for a couple of overs."

Son, they've hardly looked like taking a wicket for a couple of years; they haven't looked like taking that many since before you were born.

Matthew Engel, *The Guardian*, 24 August 1993

Every home has its corner of shame. An attic space, a cellar or a cupboard, full of the stuff that will play no further part in your life, and that you can't bear to throw out: obsolete electricals, schoolbooks kept for sentimentality's sake, the lampshade that you'd repair if you just bought some damn superglue, the box files of family photos you never got round to putting in albums. In my parents' house it used to be the loft, but then they moved to a thatched cottage. The only things there's room for up in the thatch are some confused birds, a couple of nesting squirrels and the occasional rat that burrows noisily above everyone's heads for weeks before getting trapped and dying, pungently.

So now it's the basement. A cold, concreted space that frequently floods and smells almost as bad as a dead rat, packed floor to impossibly low ceiling with crates and boxes that are immovable, utterly unidentifiable, and guarded by ferocious spiders. It's like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* down there. The only person brave enough to venture to the basement is my dad, but even he has given up pretending to know what it contains, or why.

Last summer my sister and I were visiting one weekend and he emerged from the basement dragging something huge and dusty behind him.

"Look what I found down there!"

Two gigantic sheets of cardboard, hinged together in imitation of an artist's portfolio, sealed at the edges with parcel tape and bulging pregnantly from its contents. I knew what they were. I'd made the cardboard folder, just like I'd made everything it contained.

"Oh god," my sister groaned. "Is that what I think it is?"

We slit the tape and opened it up on the floor. Dozens of sheets of coloured card spilled out, each covered in cuttings from the sports pages and photographs cut out of magazines. Neatly arranged and mounted, the newsprint had been laminated with the fastidious care of a *Blue-Peter*-watching Girl Guide. Little dry balls of Blu-tack, some with flakes of white paint and wallpaper still clinging to them, dotted their obverse sides.

"Oh, it's your cricket posters!" said mum. "You used to sit up in your room for hours making those!" she sighed nostalgically. "You were such an industrious teenager."

"She was such a nerd," snorted my sister.

From the floor, Angus Fraser looked up at me with a typically hangdog expression. He seemed resigned, as if spending the last 15 years wedged in between two pieces of cardboard, in a forgotten corner of a mouldering basement, was no less than he'd expected. Above him was a banner headline: "England lose again".

The posters, if they deserved the name, were the outworkings of four seasons of fanaticism. It started at 14 when, in the joyous aftermath of the 1993 Oval Test, I had bought every broadsheet so I could read about England's victory four times over. Some latent scrapbooking gene had stirred, and suddenly the reports were cut out and stuck up on my wall (having first been mounted on card: I wasn't a savage) where I could enjoy the words "England win, at last!" even as I fell asleep.

My little project turned into a habit, and soon my collages had become

my primary expression of devotion to the England team's cause. While my school friends were decorating their rooms with the glowering faces of the Gallagher brothers, I was gluing the back of Graeme Hick's head to a piece of A1. Tour previews, Test reports, interviews with my favourite players – once, for reasons I cannot remember, a profile of Alan Mullally – all made it under the preservative skin of sticky-back plastic.

My parents were blithely tolerant of my behaviour, something they must have regretted as my bedroom walls disappeared under the posters (when there was no more space, I moved onto the ceiling). It probably seemed a harmless enough pursuit (even if it did blunt my mum's best pair of kitchen scissors): after all, I couldn't afford illicit booze if all my pocket money was going to WHSmith's. It was only when I'd packed up for college, and my paper shrine remained baldly behind, that my pastime suddenly smacked of Kathy Bates in *Misery*.

Still, the posters had cost far too much effort for me to bear throwing them out. And so the makeshift cardboard folder, which bore the large insignia "Emma's Cricket Posters", remained, along with what I'd clearly thought were witty annotations:

Contents:

44 x Michael Atherton

35 x Angus Fraser

12 x Alec Stewart

1 x Very Angry Illingworth (Ray, not Richard)

Caution: this pack includes 3 Brian Laras. Strictly no wayward bowling.

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.



As we spread the posters out to get a better look, their confectionery colours transforming the floor into a giant jigsaw puzzle, I noticed for the first time what bizarre images I'd lived in such close proximity to during my teens. Grim-faced men wearing striped blue pyjamas that did nothing for their dignity and even less for their figures; blazered men on crutches, waiting for a flight home; a fancy-dress Christmas party that included Phil DeFreitas dressed as Batman.

My sister looked over my shoulder, and captured the mood with her usual pith.

"You really were a loser."

• • •

A few months after the discovery, I am at home in London. England are in India, at the start of their winter tour. The first Test is taking place, somewhere. I'm not sure where exactly, as the build-up's passed me by. I wake up, reach a sleepy arm out to the radio. Garry Richardson tells me that India have scored over 500 and someone called Pujara has got a double-century. I switch over to longwave. There's a distant thunk, the sound of Nick Compton losing his bails four thousand miles away.

Fifteen minutes later, England are 30 for 3, needing 322 to avoid the follow-on. And I feel... nothing. For possibly the first time in my life, I am completely blasé about the result of an England game.

And I wonder: what has happened to me?

• • •

It was my mother who introduced me to cricket. She'd grown up the second youngest in a family of four brothers,

so as well as loving sport, she fiercely defended her opinions on it. She and my dad met playing hockey – they were as competitive as each other – but Dad's never had much time for spectator sports unless they involve motor oil and Ferraris. Mum loved to watch football and rugby, but cricket was her favourite. She used to commandeer the television during England's matches by doing the ironing. If she saved up enough laundry she could hold the living room hostage for a full five-day Test.

Botham, Gattling, Gower and Gooch. My mother's heroes read like the opening credits of *Trumpton*, although the names meant nothing to my sister and me; we merely resented the interruption to our usual programming. From the '81 Ashes to the Tiger Moth incident, not to mention both Blackwashes, Mum could remember where she'd been for them all. Although, to be fair, she'd mostly been ironing.

I showed no interest until the Ashes summer of '93. I didn't even mean to then. I was just transfixed by the little box in the corner of the screen in which two tiny people dashed up and down; and Mum's explanation of it raised more questions than it answered. Wasn't it unfair that two of them had to play against 11 other people? Why didn't the guy in the white coat have to run too? What was a wicket? By the fourth Test, we'd moved onto the lbw law. By the fifth, I was hooked.

I still understood little of cricket, and knew next to nothing about the England team. But I picked up, from my mother's sighs, that we were not very good. By the Edgbaston Test, we had already lost the Ashes, and our captain had resigned.

(Our captain! I'd been inculcated quicker than a Scientology convert.) And now there was a new man, and he was young, but looked even younger, and he lost his first game in charge, but then he went and won the very next one, and everyone said it's a miracle, and really, what's a 14-year-old girl to think, except that he's her hero?

Thus I fell in love with cricket at a time of profound, and utterly misplaced, optimism. My coming-of-age Test was one in which David defeated Goliath, and a 25-year-old baby-faced captain prevailed against a mustachioed veteran leading our most ancient enemy. I was an impressionable teenager with no other allegiances (being an utter swot, Britpop and body piercings had passed me by). My relationship with England was forged in the purest flames of adolescent hope. And like most teenage romances, it was doomed.

Do you remember the West Indies tour that followed up that Ashes summer? England were taking Devon Malcolm, a quick to rival Ambrose and Walsh; Atherton and Stewart were opening the batting. It felt that anything was possible. And it was. In the third Test at Trinidad, 2-0 down in the series, England needed only 194 to win. Instead they achieved something even more unlikely; they got themselves out for a record low of 46.

I had an entire poster devoted to that result. "PORT OF PAIN" was the headline given top billing on its moody magenta background. I also included "Requiem for Atherton's Army" which probably captured my own elegiac mood at the time – although looking back, it's pretty creepy – and underneath ran a colour photograph of the England team lined

up at the post-match ceremony, arms uniformly folded, staring at the ground like chastised schoolboys.

Even at 20 years' remove, I can look at that picture and feel it all. The adrenaline shock at the lbw yell on Atherton's first ball, and knowing from that sound alone – as it travelled tremulously through my radio set – that he was out. The nausea that accompanied Ramprakash's run-out, just a few minutes later. The dawning horror, as batsmen hurried each other back to the pavilion, that no one was coming to save the day. I remember falling asleep with an empathic ache for my fallen soldiers, and the gut-deep dread of knowing that Chris Lewis was all that stood between England and their worst-ever score.

My bedroom was a museum, a mausoleum really. A historical record of England's doldrums; *Wisden* writ large, in Pritt Stick and pastels. "Thorpe and Emburey postpone defeat." "In the still of the nightmare." "The point of no return." "From Bad to Worse" – this one accompanied by a picture of Ray Illingworth and Mike Atherton looking sulkily at each other across a patchy bit of wicket.

It's odd to think I spent all that time, painstakingly recording defeat and disaster. Why didn't I edit out the worst moments – who bothers with the humiliations? Why not just capture the happy times, the one-off victories, the home series wins against the Kiwis, the glorious rain-affected draws in South Africa? Perhaps my gloomy room was an adolescent outpouring, a cry of angst and self-indulgent misery. But I wasn't a particularly mopey teen. I didn't own any Sylvia Plath, and I had plenty of constructive thoughts on how to strengthen England's middle order.

After all, I didn't know any better. My mum could compare Atherton's England unfavourably to the Brearley years, or bemoan the loss of Boycott's bloody-mindedness, but I didn't have that luxury. I celebrated England's Pyrrhic victories like they were the real thing. Andy Caddick smiling. Phil Tufnell taking a catch. Angus Fraser routing West Indians on greentops, that funny little flannel flapping at his crotch as he ran down the wicket, finger wagging at the sky.

• • •

Someone tells me that England are all out for 191 in Ahmedabad. Twenty years ago, I would have sat in front of the TV, watching their innings dismantling on Ceefax. These days I'm a grown-up with my own Sky subscription. I can watch the game in bed on my laptop or on the bus on my mobile or, if I fix my face into an industrious frown, on the computer in the corner of my office while I'm allegedly working. I don't though. England's last wicket falls like a tree in the forest. Soundlessly.

What's the problem here? Am I sulking? England haven't had a great year, to be sure; you couldn't pay me to revisit the Tests against Pakistan in the UAE. The Pietersen texting debacle was depressing on such a profound level the ECB should have offered us *all* reintegrative counselling. And I've been missing Andrew Strauss' cheeky little face since the moment he left us.

I've grown accustomed to England winning, perhaps. Got lazy with it. This must be how Australians used to feel.

• • •

I don't know how old you were during the 1990s. Perhaps you were mature enough to put England's dismal years in context, to appreciate their place on the carousel of Test history. There are certainly easier things to be than a teenager who's obsessed with a team on their longest losing streak in history. "Such a weirdo," was the kindest epithet, and that came from my best friend Verity. Friends, boys, uncles who should have known better - they all taunted me with England's failings, not because any of them cared two hoots about cricket, but because they liked to watch me turn puce and start spluttering about Alec Stewart's average, or Ray Illingworth's selection policy.

That's how I spent my character-forming years: defending my corner, battling for my team, convincing myself, if no one else, that that they would, one day, be winners. Following England was an education in adulthood itself. Here's where I discovered pathos: pasting an adulatory piece from the *Sun* ("Thank Gough for Darren! Brave new hero has England grinning again") opposite a picture of the bowler being carried off by a physio. When did I first grasp irony? When I twinned the headline: "Aussies won't walk all over us again - Athers" with "Aussie twins blow apart Mike's hopes".

Most of all, though, it was a primer in perseverance. Atherton's 185 not out in Johannesburg may not have been the prettiest or most fascinating innings in history, but it was my totem: if the captain refused to give up, then so would I. (Some youths dream of success, independence and fame; I longed to be stoic in adversity.) My naive brand of enthusiasm may have

driven my far more urbane friends to despair but it was an ideal characteristic for supporting England, a team which demanded a particularly imperishable sense of loyalty.

And what happens, in the fairy tales and the fables and the religious texts, to the young acolyte whose faith never wavers? That's right. They're rewarded with an epic win against the Australians.

When the umpires took the bails off on the final day of the 2005 Oval Test, confirming, in their silent way, that England had won the Ashes - the utterly anticlimactic end to the most significant moment of my cricket-watching career - it was, for me at least, the culmination of a cosmic life lesson. It was Cinderella slipping on the shoe, Prince Charming's kiss, Brer Rabbit's revenge. Emma, the gods seemed to intone, we have seen your sacrifice. It is pleasing.

Anyway, it was a significant moment, OK? It was a big deal. And when England went on to achieve even better things - barring the odd Flintoff-captained blip - it felt like they'd finally climbed the mountain. They were standing on the summit, looking at the meadow grasses and the goats and whatever else you get up there, and then they were marching on, finding new peaks to ascend. And my once-teenage self was wheezing behind at the back, possibly suffering from altitude sickness, and watching them leave.

I'd struggled to adulthood alongside a team that seemed to understand my

experience of over-reaching, toiling to prove myself, of being, in my sister's words, a bit of a loser. I'd spent 20 years defining myself with individuals who kept promising as they failed - even when, together, they proved less than the sum of their parts. But now they were world-beaters. Did they even need me any more?

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Alastair Cook is batting. And batting. And batting. He's standing at the crease, his jaw as rigid as a set square, and singlehandedly saving England from an innings defeat. I've put him on the TV, in the corner of the room. He's a calming, constant presence. He reminds me of someone I used to know.

My mind flits to a picture in that cardboard folder. Two batsmen crouch mid-pitch, a small, scruffy guy in a helmet leaning into the ear of a taller man. The taller man is propping himself up with his bat and he is grinning. It was my favourite picture of my favourite innings - Jack Russell barking encouragement in Jo'burg - and I far preferred it to the pictures of Atherton triumphant, arms raised, or running from the field, swamped by supporters. Somehow, it captured the captain in his element

England can't save this Test, I know that. But they're trying. I watch, willing them to hold out, my stomach tensing in a manner which would make my pilates teacher proud. But it's not an unpleasant sensation. It's nostalgic. I welcome it as I would an old friend.

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WHEN TIME RUNS OUT

After ailing knees forced him to call time on his playing days, John Crace looks back on a 30-year career spent yearning for mediocrity

For the best players, retirement is something meticulously planned and announced with gravitas. A tipping point when fatigue outweighs enjoyment; when the slowing of the reflexes combined with persistent pains in almost every joint makes each game a trial rather than a Test; when you wake up in the morning and realise that the answer to the question “Do I really need to have my every failing picked over in slow-motion by a bunch of old blokes sitting in the commentary box?” is a resounding “No”.

It wasn't really like that for me. There was no moment of self-awareness that my performances on the cricket pitch had slipped to a level I found unacceptable. If only. Mediocrity was a standard to which I constantly aspired throughout what – for want of

a better term – I call my playing career. To have been the kind of middle-order stalwart who could be relied on to get a neat 17 or so every time I went out to bat; or the third-change bowler who could deliver a steady five overs in the second half of a 35-overs-a-side game. That would have been enough for me. But it was almost invariably worse, much worse.

Not that I never tried to improve my skill levels. Especially in the past few seasons, when the Hemmingford Hermits, the particularly useless team for which I have played for the past 30 years, suddenly became alive to the idea that one of the reasons we were so hopeless might be that we never practised. So one of the more enthusiastic players – not the captain, obviously – booked a series of nets

at Lord's during the winter months, at which I made an appearance from time to time. It's not for me to say if these nets were a waste of time for all of us; it's possible that one or two of the Hermits may have noticed a subtle improvement in their game that has escaped my eye. But they were a waste of time for me. I was every bit as bad a cricketer at the end of a net session as I had been at the start. Only more aware of my inadequacies.

There was the odd career highlight. I once caught a slip-catch low down to my left off one of our quicker bowlers; I've no idea how I did it as I've never come close to repeating it. All I remember is seeing the ball coming towards me and just knowing I was going to catch it. It didn't feel at all difficult. I once took three wickets in two overs; two of the batsmen got themselves out by swiping at straight balls that pitched on middle and hit middle. But the third batsman was bowled by a ball that pitched three inches outside off and hit the top of the off stump. This isn't impressive for most bowlers; they do this kind of thing the whole time. I don't.

I also once hit a six. I was batting in my usual number nine slot for the Hermits at Turville Heath, a lovely ground on the edge of the Chilterns, and I hit a slow bowler high into the large chestnut tree – I think it's a chestnut – on the edge of the boundary. It was the only six I've ever hit in my career. I was reminded of this fact recently when I read the historian Tom Holland's account of the only six he had ever scored in the lovely book about the revival of the Authors XI. There is a difference between Tom and me, though. Tom remembers exactly how he hit his. I don't. I

remember where it went, but not how I did it. I certainly wasn't intending to hit a six. My only intention usually when I'm at the wicket is not to get out. But somewhere between thinking, “watch the ball, block it, don't get out”, my bat must have acquired a mind of its own, connected sweetly and sent the ball soaring over deep mid-wicket.

And that's it. Those aren't just some of the highlights. They are the highlights. Thirty years of cricket condensed into less than five minutes of worthwhile accomplishment. Even in a team as poor as the Hermits, there is a body of players with a substantial memory bank of career highlights. The 50s, the quick-fire match-winning 20s, the four- or five-wicket spells. I can remember most of them myself, though not necessarily with the same affection as those who accomplished them. I still have nightmares about our captain and – need you ask – opening batsman making a match-losing 50 in 28 overs at West Ilsley in Oxfordshire and raising his bat when he reached the landmark. I was sitting on the boundary's edge thinking, “Why the fuck don't you just get yourself out? None of us drove 60 miles down the M4 just to watch you be so boring. And, to make it worse, at least half of us aren't even going to get a bat, thanks to you.” Team spirit has always been written into the Hermits' DNA.

At this point, you might be asking why I bothered. Why turn out year after year when your main distinguishing purpose is to improve the opposition's batting and bowling averages? There are several answers, the first of which is hope. The hope that the next game will somehow be different, that I will get



to bat when the other team is letting their wicket-keeper's 12-year-old son – who has been drafted in because someone didn't turn up – have a bowl. The hope that I don't get overexcited, try a massive heave and get bowled. The second is rather more complex. Namely, that I actually enjoy playing cricket. Quite why I am so perverse as to get such pleasure from something at which I am so bad is something neither I, nor my therapist, have ever quite understood. But there you are. That's the way it is. I look forward to my seven or eight games a season. I don't even mind that much if it's overcast or a bit rainy as long as the game isn't washed out completely. Most of all, I love spending the day with friends with whom I've grown older and wider on a cricket pitch, engaged in an activity that means both everything and nothing.

The other reason I keep playing are the numbers. It's often said cricket is game of numbers and that the statistics don't lie. Perhaps not, but there are any number of ways of interpreting them. Take my batting average. Four seasons ago it was 6.25. Two seasons ago it was 4.75. A cold, forensic eye would detect a falling-off. That I had become about 20% worse. But here's the thing. When you are quite as bad as me, it's not always that easy to detect the decline. Scoring four really doesn't feel any worse than scoring six. Trust me.

Much the same applies to my bowling. Even in my prime – I must have had one, surely? – I was never a quick seam bowler, but as I've got older I've undoubtedly got slower. I like to think that greater accuracy and mastery of length has compensated for this

deceleration, but that's perhaps open to debate. What's not up for grabs is that my effectiveness as a bowler was only ever minimal at best, so losing another yard of pace and becoming easier to hit isn't quite the disadvantage it is for the more able cricketer. Besides which, with one careless shot from an over-confident batsman or an unnoticed divot on the pitch, a terrible spell of bowling can be transformed into one that is merely a bit below par.

I'd imagined my cricket playing days continuing like this until enough of the Hermits had died that we could no longer raise even a team quorum. As I got slower and slower, so would the rest of the Hermits. Just as in Zeno's dichotomy paradox where the pursuer never reaches his goal, none of us would ever actually slow down so much that we came to a complete stop. Though it sometimes might appear that way when watching the Hermits in the field these days.

But it turns out I have stopped. It just took me the best part of a year to notice. My retirement didn't just go unremarked by the wider cricketing world; it passed me by as well. It happened like this. I've had problems with my knees for decades and every time I played they would swell up and be sore for several days afterwards. In a cricketer of greater talent, the discomfort might have counted as a slight handicap; for me it didn't really make much difference to my performance one way or the other and so I put up with it as a price worth paying.

Until I went to see a specialist who advised me to have another knee

operation. I'd had several in the past so I wasn't that bothered. This one was more serious, but not something that seemed likely to prevent a fairly immobile, not very good cricketer from continuing to be a fairly immobile, not very good cricketer. Only it has. The surgeon's forecast for my recovery was hopelessly optimistic. I would have settled for very little. Honestly. The ability to meander in to bowl off just a few paces. The licence to bat with a runner. But I can't even manage that. I could, at a push, field at slip all day, though that prospect seems too futile even for me. Our bowlers never get an edge. And if they did, I wouldn't catch it.

It was only recently I came to accept I had indeed retired. Before then I had kept telling everyone that maybe it would be OK in another or month or so. Now, no one even bothers to enquire

after my availability. My last appearance on a cricket pitch was over a year ago; oddly enough, just four months after my operation and when I still believed I had a cricketing future. The Hermits were playing Cuddington. Cuddington had made something like 237 for 3 in their 35 overs. The Hermits had made 123 when we lost our eighth wicket with just one ball to go of the last over. We didn't have an 11th batsman, so I offered to pad up in my civvies to take the last ball.

Some cricket careers end in a blaze of glory. Mine ended with a gentle nudge to deep mid-on off a full toss that enabled me to walk through for a single. One not out off one ball. A strike rate of 100. Given everything that had happened over the previous 30 years of my Hermits career, it was a far more satisfying sign-off than I had any right to expect.

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GREAT SCOT

Alex Massie looks north to reveal the upbringing and influence that helped shape Douglas Jardine's character

Late October, 1932 and England's cricketers are travelling from Perth to Adelaide. The journey across the red, desolate, vast expanse of the Nullarbor Plain is long and tiring. Three times the party has to change trains. Boredom is an ever-present danger.

No wonder discussion turns – as it so often does when cricket-minded folk are cloistered together – to the favoured parlour game of selecting mythical all-time XIs to take on visitors from other lands or, even, other worlds.

A Greatest Englishmen squad is agreed upon – after much argument – captained by Horatio Nelson. The great hero of Trafalgar will lead a team chosen from the Duke of Wellington, Cecil Rhodes, William Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Shaftesbury, Lord Kelvin, Charles Dickens, Joseph Lister, James Simpson,

James Watt and George Bernard Shaw. An impressive selection even if picking Shaw ahead of, say, Shakespeare remains a hard-to-defend wildcard.

It is a selection notable, too, for what it tells us about Englishness. Because many of those chosen are not English at all. Watt and Simpson are Scots, Kelvin a Belfast-born Glaswegian and Shaw a Dubliner. Even the Iron Duke was born in Ireland. No fewer than five of the 12 selected were born beyond England's borders and two of the remaining seven (Rhodes and Lister) made their mark outside England too (in Africa and at the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow).

In one sense, the selection merely reflects a common, even traditional, conflation of Englishness and Britishness; an elision that in these nationalistic times

is guaranteed to irritate even the most staunchly Unionist Scot. But it also reminds us that cricket – even when concerned with artificial selections such as this – has long allowed for a generous definition of Englishness.

This cosmopolitan fantasy XI is, in any case, quite appropriate. Why would it not be, given that the man leading the Perth-bound cricketers, the most divisive and controversial cricketer who ever played for England, is not much of an Englishman at all?

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Douglas Robert Jardine was, as is widely known, born in Bombay on 23 October 1900. It is reasonably well-known, too, that his parents, Malcolm and Alison, were Scots. Malcolm, though born in India, had been educated at Fettes (later the alma mater of Tony Blair) in Edinburgh and then at Oxford. His own first-class career, which included a century in the Varsity match, was curtailed by the opportunities offered by his legal career in India. If we are to understand Jardine we must, I think, understand his Scottishness.

It is less well-known, for instance, that until he went to Oxford himself, Douglas Jardine's exposure to life in England was limited to term-time at Horris Hill and latterly Winchester. From the age of nine, school holidays were spent with his Aunt Kitty in St Andrews. Though he claimed to have been happy in that grey and sometimes forbidding town, it is difficult to avoid the thought that the young Jardine, so far removed from his parents, must have known lonely times. Hard too, not to suppose that this contributed to the reserve, the

shyness, that would become such a notable feature of his character.

At St Andrews, Jardine found a stand-in father figure in the form of the poet, novelist, folklorist and essayist Andrew Lang. If Malcolm Jardine had bestowed a love of cricket upon his son, Lang deepened the young Douglas' commitment to the game. Though no great performer himself, Lang had learned the game in his home town of Selkirk in the Scottish Borders and forever remained entranced by it.

"Cricket," he wrote in an introduction to Richard Daft's *Kings of Cricket*, "is a very humanising game. It appeals to the emotions of local patriotism and pride. It is eminently unselfish; the love of it never leaves us, and binds all the brethren together, whatever their politics and rank may be. There is nothing like it in the sports of mankind." It must be admitted that his devoted protégé would go on to test this theory almost to the point of its utter destruction.

Nevertheless, Lang passed on his romanticism to Jardine. "The choice between clicking turnstiles and the village green," Jardine later opined, "is in reality no choice at all: the village has it every time." The true spirit of cricket lay not at Lord's or the Sydney Cricket Ground but in the enthusiasm of amateur cricketers wherever they gathered to play the ancient and noble game.

The contrast between the innocence of the village green game and the granite-hewn approach Jardine would bring to the international arena is only one of Douglas Jardine's many contradictions.



Like Walt Whitman, he contained multitudes. Years later Jardine's daughter Fianach would observe that her father was "a terribly gentle man with a strict sense of fair play who wouldn't dream of stretching the rules during a family game of Ludo, never mind on the cricket pitch." A sentiment, frankly, that could scarcely be bettered. If, that is, your aim was to leave Australians in a state of silent, indignant, stupefied astonishment.

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When it was confirmed that Jardine would captain England in Australia, Rockley Wilson, his old cricket master at Winchester, quipped: "We may well win the Ashes, but we may very well lose a dominion". Even if meant jocularly, there is a hint here that Jardine's appointment was a risk, a sense that there was something not wholly right, not quite "on", about the skipper. Here was an amateur who played and thought about the game like a professional. Wilson was not the only man to view the tour with some trepidation.

Addressing a gaggle of Australian pressmen in Perth, Plum Warner, the tour manager, issued a declaration that now seems a grim premonition of the storms ahead. "The very word 'cricket' has become a synonym for all that is true and honest," he said. "To say 'that is not cricket' implies something underhand, something not in keeping with the best ideals. There is no game which calls forth so many fine attributes, which makes so many demands on its votaries, and, that being so, all who love it as players, as officials or spectators must be careful lest anything they do should do it

harm. An incautious attitude or gesture in the field, a lack of consideration in the committee room and a failure to see the other side's point of view, a hasty judgement by an onlooker and a misconstruction of an incident may cause trouble and misunderstanding which could and should be avoided. This is the aim of the Marylebone Cricket Club, of which I am a humble if devoted servant, in sending teams to all parts of the world to spread the gospel of British fair play as developed in its national sport."

Be that as it may, something had to be done to solve the Bradman Problem. In 1930 the Don had played England's bowlers, compiling 974 runs at an average of 139. All across England, bowlers were left broken men. The following Australian summer Bradman plundered the South African bowling for a further 806 runs at an average of 201. "Something new will have to be introduced to curb Bradman," said Percy Fender. He was right.

The stakes were high. National pride demanded a response. Bradman's supremacy was such that unless he could be tamed the Australians would effectively be playing with a man advantage. With the possible exception of WG Grace in his best years, no other player in the history of the game has, by his mere presence, so stacked the deck in favour of his side. England's goal was simultaneously modest and daunting: could Jardine and Larwood cut Bradman down to size so that, in weight of runs and average, he merely matched Wally Hammond? Reducing Bradman to the level of England's greatest batsman would be considered a great success.

For Neville Cardus, the suggestion Jardine was some kind of "Prussian Junker" was as irrelevant as it was dubious. In any case, he suggested in the *Observer*, "if the Australians are to be tackled, give me a captain who smiles only when the enemy are being rubbed into the dust". Such was Bradman's impact, he made flinty realists of even inveterate idealists such as Cardus.

Bradman saw the gathering storms too, telling colleagues: "You fellas have no idea what sort of summer this is going to be."

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Thrawn is a fine Scots word with no exact equivalent in standard English. It means twisted, stubborn and bloody-minded, often to the point of perversity. It connotes a kind of obstinacy on steroids. It could have been invented for Douglas Jardine. No cricketer in the history of the game has spawned more controversy; none has so demanded that the game be considered as a moral or philosophical matter. Even if there has been a thawing in recent years, Jardine remains the most divisive captain the game has known. The rehabilitation of his reputation is far from complete; it may never be finished.

The paradox of Bodyline was efficiently summarised by Jonathan Agnew recently: "Bowling short with as many men as you wanted on the leg side was a legitimate tactic, but not what cricket was meant to be, or the way cricket should be played." That is, Jardine's tactics might simultaneously be legal and immoral. Could the means be justified by the ends? Could England

defeat Australia at cricket without abandoning cricket itself? It remains a metaphysical question.

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In 1919 the literary critic G Gregory Smith published *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*. Smith averred that the Scottish psyche was "a zigzag of contradictions". He dubbed this the "Caledonian antisyzygy", arguing that Scotland's history and literature were marked by the struggle between rival "polar twins". Oxymoron and irony abound and the canonical texts exemplifying the duality at the heart of Scottish literature - and character - are James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

In passing let it be noted that *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* would have been an excellent title for Douglas Jardine's memoirs. "Justified" not simply in the modern sense of being proved correct but in the Calvinist meaning of expiating sin and easing the righteous man's path to heaven. Indeed, the righteous, justified man is predestined to enter heaven, regardless of the wickedness of his actions on earth. Though he was not a man of great religious faith, it is hard to suppress the thought that Douglas Jardine's cricket was imbued with a forbidding Calvinist rectitude inherited from his Scottish ancestors. Just as there was little room for frippery or entertainment in Calvinist Scotland, so Jardine approached the business of batting with a stern and solemn seriousness.

As a batsman you might even consider Jardine repressed. His friend and Oxford contemporary RC Robertson-Glasgow felt that “something of iron in his temperament would not let him play free and full in the greater matches”. As the “task grew greater, the strokes grew fewer” and he only rarely allowed himself the freedom to express himself. It was as if the gaiety and merry abandon with which he might bat in the nets was a kind of self-indulgence that could not be tolerated, indeed must be suppressed, in the heat of battle. Impressive as this severe self-control might be, it made Jardine a lesser batsman than he might have been, just as Calvinist Scotland was a dour and often joyless country. Like Jardine, its many achievements came at a price.

Principles, in any case, could not be abandoned. For G Gregory Smith: “The Scot is not a quarrelsome man, but he has a fine sense of the value of provocation, and in the clash of things and words has often found a spiritual tonic.” It might be objected that this is a mighty broad generalisation and that these qualities are, in any case, scarcely the exclusive preserve of Scotsmen. Nevertheless, it might also be noted that Smith’s sweeping verdict – typical of his work and style – fits Douglas Jardine admirably.

The duality of man, the dominant recurring theme in Scottish literature, also helps to illuminate Jardine’s contradictions. Robertson-Glasgow allowed that though Jardine could be “a fierce enemy” he was also “a wonderful friend”. Few cricketers have provoked opinions so extravagantly dissenting. Gubby Allen felt like killing him; Hedley Verity was sufficiently

devoted to his skipper to name his own son Douglas. Then again, being disliked by Gubby Allen – as great a snob as any who ever played for England – might be considered a badge to be sported with pride.

In the tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Jekyll reflects that it was “rather the exacting nature of my aspirations than any particular degradation in my faults that made me what I was and, with even a deeper trench than in the majority of men, severed in me those provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man’s dual nature”. As with Jekyll so with Jardine. “Though so profound a double-dealer,” Jekyll continued, “I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest.” Again, we may make a similar point about Jardine. Jekyll comes to the realisation that “of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness” – his ordinary life as Jekyll and his extraordinary existence as Hyde – “even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both”.

Nor is it absurd to compare Jardine with Hyde. His detractors – of whom there has never been any shortage – have long portrayed Jardine as a monstrous figure. Even Bob Wyatt, loyal Bob Wyatt, admitted Jardine could be “insufferably offensive”, treating anyone who had wronged or disappointed him with an “air of cold disdain”. Worse even than his monstrosity, however, was his apparent fanaticism.

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Never was this better displayed than during the third Test at Adelaide.

There is Larwood roaring in to hurl down his thunderbolts. There is Bill Woodfull, the stoic Australian captain, so upstanding and cloaked in rectitude that his conscientious objection to the English tactics leaves one wondering if he actually craves martyrdom (and is Woodfull’s unforgiving moral superiority not also a form of pious and preening vanity?). The atmosphere is febrile and pregnant with foreboding. And now Larwood hits Woodfull a heavy blow above the heart. The Australian skipper drops his bat and clutches his chest, reeling in pain. That Larwood’s bouncer was bowled to an orthodox field matters not at all. That the ball might have passed over middle stump, not leg, is even less relevant. This is not cricket, at least not cricket as she has been known and loved. This is something different.

And then the English skipper makes everything worse, so much worse. Up pipes Jardine with a piercing cry: “Well bowled, Harold.” Later it will be said that this was only a ploy designed to unsettle Bradman who was watching from the non-striker’s end but, whatever the truth of that, there’s something chilling about Jardine’s reaction. And the English captain is not finished yet. For the first ball of Larwood’s next over, with a barely perceptible nod of his head, he motions his fielders to move to the leg side. As always they cross from off to leg, says Arthur Mailey, like a school of “hungry sharks”. It is the action of a captain with ice in his heart and iron in his soul.

More than 80 years on it may still be the most famous change of field in the history of the game. It will be argued later that Jardine came to regret the

timing of this manoeuvre but, whatever the truth, this was the moment the Ashes were won. The series was not over but from this point on there was no way back for Australia. They had been broken. Not just physically but, much more importantly, mentally. If this is what it takes to win, the Australians will say, there is no honour and still less glory in it.

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They would say that, wouldn’t they? Bodyline – or, rather, fast leg theory – was a response to a particular problem at a particular moment in cricket’s history. Eight decades on it is easy to forget that it was also a gamble. There was no certainty that fast leg theory could wreck Australia’s batting in timeless Tests played on feather-bedded wickets built to last for days. Indeed, if Bodyline contravened the “spirit of the game” so, it can be argued, did the prevailing conditions in Australian cricket. As Jack Fingleton put it, timeless Tests ensured a “war of attrition” in which “the batsman who gets out taking a risk is considered either a national rogue or a fool”. There is more than one way to ruin a Test match and the Australian Board’s approach privileged gate money above the wider interests of the game.

Also, Bodyline bowling was neither as common nor always as destructive as is sometimes supposed. England bowled 825 overs in the series of which Larwood accounted for 220, Voce 133 and Bill Bowes, in his only Test, a mere 23. Not all of these overs, as the injuries to Woodfull and Oldfield testify, were delivered to Bodyline fields. And when Bowes bowled Bradman for a first ball

duck at Melbourne, he did so with an ordinary long-hop and an orthodox field. I have not been able to find an exact record of how many overs were bowled with the stacked leg-trap in place but a reasonable estimate might be that no more than 250 overs – or a little more than 25 per cent of the total. Even then, 16 of Larwood's 33 wickets were bowled and a further brace were lbw, figures which make it reasonable to surmise that the short ball – or even the threat of the short ball – often set up fuller wicket-taking deliveries.

Since Allen refused to bowl leg theory and Verity and Hammond, of course, did not bowl it, most of the English bowling was not Bodyline. Lurking at the rear of every Australian mind, however, was the certain knowledge that spells of non-Bodyline bowling were a kind of lull and that soon enough Larwood would roar back into the fray. It seems reasonable that the promise that Larwood would be bowling soon helped England's other bowlers take wickets. Few fast bowlers in the history of the game have managed to take wickets without even bowling but one fancy Larwood accomplished that trick in the winter of 1932–33. Despite all that, it is worth recalling that, at least in their first innings, Australia were able to occupy the crease reasonably effectively. First innings lasting 102, 86, 95, 121 and 108 overs demonstrate that pretty clearly. Batting against Larwood and co was extremely difficult and often perilous; it was not quite impossible.

Despite what Australians claimed, Larwood was hardly the first bowler to target the batsman (we can, I think, discard Larwood's insistent protestations of innocence on that score). But bumpers delivered at

express velocity were one thing; accompanying them with a packed leg-side field quite another. However, what really horrified the Australians was the dawning realisation that all this had been planned with cold, calculating intent. Nor would there be any let-up. Never. Not while Harold Larwood remained even half-fit to bowl. Not with Douglas Robert Jardine in command.

All these decades later there remains something breath-taking, something chilling, about Jardine's ruthlessness. Even his admirers – of which you may have gathered I am one – might not wish everyone to play the game the Jardine way. And yet cricket would be the poorer without its Jardines. Some Australians – among them Archie Jackson and, at least initially Monty Noble – recognised this. Fingleton, admittedly no great friend of Bradman, did so too. Battered and bruised by Bodyline, Fingleton still recognised "there was something indefinably magnificent and courageous in the resolute manner in which he [Jardine] stuck to his Bodyline guns".

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Bodyline and the controversy that followed exhausted Jardine and Larwood. They would be the series' final victims. Larwood, infamously, shamefully, never played for England again. But if the establishment cast the Nottinghamshire miner into the wilderness, it was little more sympathetic to Jardine. By the time the Australians arrived in 1934 it was clear to all parties that there could be no room for Jardine in the England XI. Not if the series was to pass off peacefully and have a chance of healing the wounds ripped open in 1932–33. The

ease with which Jardine was shunted aside offered another reminder that this man, so often considered the platonic ideal of patrician English rectitude, was simultaneously a product of the English establishment and an outsider. "He is not the right fellow to be captain," Warner wrote to his wife before the first Test in Australia; two years later the rest of the English cricketing establishment agreed.

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By then Jardine's approach – and the experience of seeing Bodyline bowling in England – had come to be seen as an unfortunate embarrassment. There was winning and there was winning like this. Only Arthur Carr's Nottinghamshire – home of Larwood and Voce of course – stuck with Jardine. Larwood was, like his skipper, unrepentant. Naturally so, for they did not feel they had done anything of which to be ashamed.

Jardine's approach to Australians was forever uncompromising. His motto could have been that adopted by the Scots Covenanters during the endless wars of the seventeenth century: "Christ and No Quarter". Their severity was as terrifying as their certainty was chilling. In *Old Mortality*, Sir Walter Scott's great novel of politics and religion, an old Covenanter, Balfour of Burley, speaks words that with little modification could, you fancy, have been uttered by Jardine too: "*Young man, you are already weary of me, and would yet be more so, perchance, did you know the task upon which I have been lately put. And I wonder not that it should be so, for there are times when I am weary of myself. Think you not it is a sore trial for flesh and blood to be called upon to execute the righteous judgements of Heaven while we are yet in the body, and retain that*

blinded sense and sympathy for carnal suffering which makes our own flesh thrill when we strike a gash upon the body of another? And think you, that when some prime tyrant has been removed from his place, that the instruments of his punishment can at all times look back on their share in his downfall with firm and unshaken nerves? Must they not sometimes question even the truth of that inspiration which they have felt and acted under? Must they not sometimes doubt the origin of that strong impulse with which their prayers for heavenly direction under difficulties have been inwardly answered and confirmed, and confuse, in their disturbed apprehensions, the responses of Truth himself with some strong delusion of the enemy?"

When his young interlocutor questions this, suggesting that "feelings of natural humanity" should surely influence beliefs and behaviour, Balfour's indignation – and justification – reaches new heights: "*We are called upon when we have girded up our loins to run the race boldly, and when we have drawn the sword to smite the ungodly with the edge, though he be our neighbour, and the man of power and cruelty, though he were of our own kindred and the friend of our bosom.*"

By any standard this is pretty severe stuff. And, in its way, it is as close to an explanation for Bodyline as we shall ever be likely to receive now. The killing would go merrily on for the slaughterer was the Lord's work. Bodyline, once started, could not cease even after the series was won, even after Larwood had hobbled, broken-footed and bleeding, from the field at Sydney. It acquired a momentum and an internal logic of its own. To abandon fast leg theory

would be to admit doubt. It would be an admission that Jardine's critics had a point. If you want to understand Douglas Jardine you must turn to Scott, Hogg and Stevenson for illumination.

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But then Jardines were always fighters. The chief branch of the name were one of the prominent Reiving families on the Scottish Border. Their stronghold was Annandale in Dumfriesshire, just north of the pocket of disputed territory on the border known as "The Debatable Land". For nearly 300 years the frontier existed beyond the control of either London or Edinburgh. It bred hard men, quick to violence, slow to forget, the Borderers – Scots and English alike – had a talent for blood-feuding. The Jardine family motto, *Cave Adsum*, means Beware, I am here. It is a statement of fact, a warning and a threat. It seems appropriate for the author of *Bodyline's* greatest hour.

Lest you think I make too much of Jardine's Scottishness, it bears recalling that his contemporaries were happy to acknowledge his Caledonian heritage. According to Robertson-Glasgow, Jardine possessed "the true Scottish dislike of waste in material or words" – an observation that, though clichéd, is notable for revealing the extent to which Jardine's contemporaries were conscious of his Scottish ancestry.

He was too. His daughter Fianach recalled how her father was "ferociously proud" of his ancestry, a theme upon which he talked at length when addressing the centenary dinner of Kirkcaldy's Dunnikier club in 1956, just two years before his death.

By then he was a board member of the Scottish Australian Company too.

In late 1957 Douglas Jardine travelled to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where he contracted tick fever. Upon further examination he was discovered to be suffering from lung cancer. His wife took him to Switzerland in the hope that he'd find the mountain air easier to breathe. To no avail. The end came quickly. He was cremated and then, in late July, his family travelled north to Scotland where his ashes were scattered on the summit of Cross Craigs mountain in Highland Perthshire.

Overlooking Loch Rannoch, Cross Craigs can be a bleak and austere place. Yet even in darker meteorological moments it is never less than a starkly beautiful spot. Fianach Jardine, a minister ordained in the Scottish Episcopal church, recalled some years ago that this spot, much favoured by her father on past shooting trips to the Highlands, seemed an appropriate final resting place for his remains. "Although it was July," she said, "it was really quite cold and cloudy until the moment came to scatter father's remains when the sky turned blue and a brilliant sun came out."

Home at last and forever, perhaps. Or, as a verse written by his mentor Andrew Lang has it:

*"It's ill to loose the bands that
God decreed to bind;
Still will we be the children of the
heather and the wind.
Far away from home, O it's still for
you and me
That the broom is blowing bonnie
in the north country".*

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DIGGING UP THE FAST

Palaeontologist Liam Herringshaw suggests that quick bowlers are the pinnacle of human evolution

First, a wooden implement, hand-carved using stone tools. It is round-handled and flat-bladed, though the bottom is broken off. Dug up from 10,000-year-old peat deposits in farmland a few miles south-west of Scarborough; the most ancient paddle in the world.

Secondly, the “frontlets”. Made of bone, they are deer skulls with eyeholes scoured into them and the antlers cut down to stumps. More than 20 of them have been found in the same small corner of North Yorkshire.

Thirdly, in a trench excavated into dry ground next to what had once been a lake, a series of round post-holes surround a specially dug hollow, rich

in pieces of worked flint. The cryptic remains of a simple wooden hut, it turns out to be Britain’s oldest house.

These discoveries all come from a Mesolithic site called Star Carr, and are just a selection of the astonishing artefacts that have been uncovered there over the last half-century. Every year of excavation brings new finds: indeed a willow digging stick was recently unearthed by a friend of mine.

Star Carr is the most important Middle Stone Age site in Europe, the exquisite preservation of its specimens providing archaeologists with unique insights into prehistoric life. It has revolutionised our understanding of

what people were doing in Britain shortly after the Ice Age.

However, I can’t help but find myself wondering. A grassy clearing in Yorkshire. Preparation work in early summer. A basic hut for shelter. Willow tools for digging in on a sticky wicket. Special headwear for about 22 people. A bat.

Star Carr’s occupants weren’t hunters or gatherers. They were the first cricketers.

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As a palaeontologist, my research interests are generally much older. I study ancient sea life. As a late-thirty-something in a youth-policed cricket club, I am also a fossil.

Being so steeped in time, I am naturally becoming an old man. I still think of myself as a fast bowler, but the speed is steadily leaving me. I enjoy on-field successes, but not quite as excitedly as I did 20 years ago. Over-enthusiasm is best left to my junior teammates. Let me stand in the field and contemplate the past.

Our young opening fast bowler is particularly exuberant. No rap on the pads is met with silence, no declined appeal accepted meekly. His expressions of disgust could startle a navvy. They certainly rile many an older opponent. After one fractious encounter this season – a game I had the misfortune of missing – he and the rest of my team were described as “Neolithic” in the opposition’s match report.

This got me thinking. I presumed it was not meant as a compliment, but

the Neolithic saw the beginning of farming, the domestication of animals, the development of sophisticated tools and the origin of modern language. If a comparison was supposed to be deeply insulting, it rather missed its mark.

Alternatively, perhaps the author knew more about prehistoric peoples than you’d first suppose. Since human physiology hasn’t changed significantly over the last few thousand years, an aggressive, quick-running, accurate-throwing individual would have thrived in the Stone Age just as they do on a modern cricket field. Maybe it was a “deep time” nod of acknowledgement.

Examining prehistory is no easy task, but a spark of curiosity had been kindled. What is the fossil record of human speed and throwing ability? Just when could quick cricket have come into being?

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To steal a term from biological species classification, cricket has a ghost range. This is not the number of continents on which Shane Watson has been scared by hotel apparitions, but the time lag between the sport’s evolution and its first recorded appearance.

If we take grass, willow, cork and mammalian leather as pre-requisite ingredients for a proper game, a match would have been impossible until about 15 million years ago. However, we also have to have cricketers, and anatomically modern humans have only been around for about 200,000 years.



Why do cricketers have to be human? Because throwing is a uniquely human trait, the fastest thing our body can naturally do. No other species is physically capable of bowling, not even our closest ape relatives.

As international batsmen well know, humans can hit small targets while throwing at speeds in excess of 90 mph. Our chimpanzee cousins are pound-for-pound much stronger than us, but they can barely muster a fifth of that velocity when throwing, and with far lower accuracy.

The acquisition of this extraordinary ability is a pivotal stage in our evolutionary history, and a recent study led by Dr Neil Roach of George Washington University, Washington DC, has helped shed some very interesting light on the matter.

Together with colleagues from Harvard University and the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore, Roach compared the body structure of humans and chimps, investigated what it is that enables humans to throw so fast and then looked at the fossil record of those features.

"I think cricket bowling is fascinating," says Roach, "and actually started studying the bowling motion before transitioning to pitching. I would love to get some good fast bowlers into the lab again, but it can be a challenge here in the baseball world."

Roach's analysis of pitchers shows that we have three key advantages over chimps. Firstly, our mobile waist provides more torso rotation. Secondly, the twisting of our upper arm bone

takes place at a lower angle, giving a greater range of motion. Thirdly, we have a more laterally oriented shoulder joint. This aligns the flexure of the pectoral muscles with the rotation of the torso, giving a greater moment of inertia to the arm.

Since humans and chimps diverged at least six million years ago, the question is when we acquired all these specific features and why. One hypothesis is that hominins – the tribe to which we and our extinct bipedal ancestors belong – were fast-food bowlers to begin with.

Hominins have been eating meat for more than two million years. Developing an ability to throw well was not necessarily for killing prey – at least to start with – but perhaps for defending carcasses or scavenging them from other animals better equipped with fangs and claws. If the first lbw was lion-before-wildebeest, an accurate quickie would have been crucial to earning dismissals. To explore this, Roach's team examined the fossil record to see who the first fast throwers might have been.

Australopithecus, which lived in Africa between about four and two million years ago, appears to have had some of the required skeletal characters, such as a flexible waist and a low torsion of the upper arm bone, but not all. It was a different matter for Upright Man, though. Skeletons of *Homo erectus* show he had hyperextendable wrists, so would almost certainly have been capable of spin bowling. Roach, however, thinks all the key features were in place for speed too.

Other scientists disagree. Dr Susan Larson of Stony Brook University, New York, argues that Upright Man's shoulder structure simply wasn't right for overarm throwing. It was too narrow and forward-facing, stopping *Homo erectus* from being able to pull its arm back far enough to generate a proper throwing motion. She interprets the skill as a uniquely human adaptation.

Roach certainly accepts that our shoulder structure is key to throwing, and has demonstrated its importance. He forced his experimental baseball pitchers to wear therapeutic shoulder braces that constrained the rotational range of movement. Their throwing speed was reduced by up to 14 per cent.

However, this is not the whole story. Roach argues that the storage and release of elastic energy is just as – if not more – crucial. The extremely rapid internal rotation of the upper arm bone is then powered by the combination of cocking the arm at the same time as taking a large forward step.

Translating baseball pitching to cricket bowling directly is problematical, of course, since the former can use their elbow flex. Studies by other researchers indicate that this is the second most important generator of throwing speed.

"The restriction imposed on cricket bowlers requiring them to keep a straightened, extended elbow through the throw does reduce their throwing performance," he notes. "However, they compensate for this reduction by using a run-up."

The fossil record of the run-up is a rather different matter. It even requires a different science: ichnology. This is the palaeontological discipline that examines fossil tracks and trails. By examining the footprints left behind by ancient people, ichnologists can assess how they were moving and at what speed.

In 2009, Australian scientist Peter McAllister published a book called *Manthropology*, in which he argued that modern males were wimps in comparison to their ancient ancestors. One of his claims was that, 20,000 years ago, aboriginal Australian hunters were running as fast as anyone ever had, or has.

This bold assertion was made off the back of research by Steve Webb and colleagues on a fossil footprint site in Mungo National Park, western New South Wales. Their work suggested that the man who made "Trackway 8" was travelling at a maximum velocity of 10.3m/s, or just over 37kph (23mph). This made him theoretically capable of running 100 metres in 9.71 secs, and therefore – at the time their papers were written – "faster than Usain Bolt".

Subsequent work by Javier Ruiz and Angelica Torices of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid has challenged this. By studying the stride patterns of international sprinters, and getting some of their students to walk and run on a beach, Ruiz and Torices came up with a new power law for the relationship between stride length (λ) and velocity (v). If you're interested, it looks like this:

$$v = 0.794 \lambda^{1.67}$$

Why not test it out yourself? It's not quite the same as getting a speed gun, but perhaps you can persuade your club scorer to carry out a bit of mathematical magic next time your star quick is boasting about his pace.

Anyway, using this equation Ruiz and Torices argued that the man behind Trackway 8 was certainly fast, but probably running no quicker than 8.2m/s (just under 30kph). It casts doubt on at least some of McAllister's claims, but Australia's proud history of producing world-beating quicks is not fatally undermined.

What we really require is cricketing ichnology. Crichnology perhaps. The trackway produced by someone running in to bowl is quite different to someone simply running, so identifying the presence of ancient fast bowlers ought to be possible. We need scientists looking for fossil tracks that abruptly terminate in a leap and a flurry of soil or sand, followed by a hurry off to the side.

But where to look? Lake settings are always a good place for preservation, which is why Mungo has its trackways and Star Carr its artefacts (it also has fossilised footprints, though of horses rather than humans). Changes in water level, the drying out of mud, potential for rapid burial by sediments - all combine to give enhanced fossilisation potential.

The seaside could work too. In his book *The Earth After Us*, palaeontologist Jan Zalasiewicz looks into the uniquely human features that we might leave behind for future fossil-hunters. Foremost among these are what he calls 'frivolichnia', or traces of pleasure.

Playing beach cricket, Zalasiewicz notes, we "unconsciously create a whole variety of frivolichnia each year." Most will be washed away by the incoming tide or obliterated by beach cleaners, but the vagaries of time and climate and the widespread playing of the game means that some will surely survive. So, next time you're bowling full pelt at your kids, take a note of your footprints. They might be all that is left of you for posterity.

As for the professional game, there's a fair chance that some cricket stadia will make a geological impression. With sea-level rise, large, coastal grounds probably have the best chance of being fossilised. Future ichnologists might even describe *Trottichnus jonathani*, the unusual scratch marks of a particularly difficult to dislodge organism. Traces of batter-defender against bowler-aggressor, marking out a ritual that has been in place for millennia.

First evolutionary, now cultural, our ability to throw fast remains important, but - with different rewards available - we perhaps no longer employ it so wisely. Stone Age hunters almost certainly threw less often than top-level fast bowlers, who seem to break down with alarming frequency. Flintstone would never have suffered the burn-out that Flintoff did.

Roach also feels that we're not going to get much quicker. "My suspicion," he says, "is that the demands of storing elastic energy to produce 90-100mph throws are significant enough that the tendons and ligaments crossing the shoulder probably can't handle much more.

"It is possible that you will see more athletes throwing 100mph in the future, but that will probably come at the cost of more injuries. I think it is highly unlikely that batters would be facing 120mph deliveries in the future."

After at least 200,000 years, perhaps pitchers and quick bowlers are as fast as they can be - the pinnacle of evolutionary speed. That said, conventional athletic wisdom did not predict that a tall, slim figure such as Usain Bolt would come along and shatter all the track sprinting records. Theories are there to be broken.

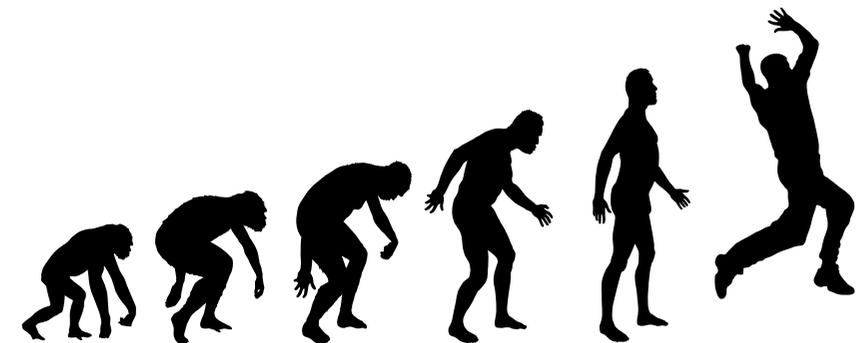
It has been argued that cricket is an invention of the Middle Ages. Perhaps it was. As for when truly fast bowlers

appeared, most historians of the sport regard them as a 19th century development. Maybe they were.

I'm holding out for the old ball, though. It might be pretty much impossible to distinguish a thrown stone from a non-thrown one, but I refuse to abandon hope of the discovery of a fossilised "leathern orb".

I'm also holding out on my controversial hypothesis of 10,000-year-old fast-bowling Yorkshiremen. Archaeological colleagues will no doubt shoot it down, but before they do, I offer them a final piece of evidence. Can it really just be coincidence that Star Carr is located in the parish of Seamer?

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THE UNREMEMBERED SIX

Christian Ryan on an uncharacteristic innings by Chris Tavaré

Some school semester in 1969 or '70 – it was spring – a hazel-eyed boy under the influence of a particular teacher, a Mr Briggs, could feel his future floating out in front of him, uncertainly, like the insects. He thought about following the insects. The west Kent commuter town where he went to school was a place of lakes, deer, old trees and valleys. Insects were what engrossed the boy. He liked listening to Mr Briggs talk about them. So many insects, anywhere you look – what makes each of them so interesting? How is it that wherever there is a habitat, they'll find a way of living? He discovered and read a book about animal behaviour, and his curiosity grew. He sensed he could be happy in that future, that world, it made him excited, and it was an outdoors world. But a second world – and this world, the way the boy carried himself in it, was very much an interior world – was

also just beginning to flicker at him. That was the spring he got picked in the school's first XI.

Cricket is a game played on a dirt pitch and grass. But it exists on the wind – the space, a kind of ether, between the ball/stroke that's just happened and those about to happen next, and the balls just bowled or about to be bowled and strokes executed or awaiting execution in all the games of cricket being played somewhere simultaneously of whatever duration, overs-span, age level, seriousness, etc, and also, most tantalising, every ball or stroke ever. Twenty-five seconds later another one comes along. But the ball/stroke that's gone doesn't actually go anywhere. The ball/stroke hovers. Nearly always, it is hovering in a place most people cannot locate, and the people who potentially could locate it – inside their memory,

imagination, in a newspaper report or book, on YouTube – are at that moment not doing so. But it is still there, somewhere. Ted Dexter once drove Tom Veivers for six during a tour game at the MCG. No footage exists. Yet a handful of the still-living recall it, and consider it maybe the finest stroke ever struck in Melbourne. One, Bill Lawry, told Jonathan Agnew last December that Dexter's drive "went halfway up the sightscreen, it was just flat, I was at mid off and it could have killed me, a tremendous strike of the ball."

The Lawry/Agnew podcast is currently google-able. Probably soon it will get dragged down, and definitely Lawry and the others who were present will someday die, and years may fly by without a single person giving a second's pause to dwell on what happened that day when Tom Veivers bowled, but even then the moment will be forever safe, forever *there*, this sentence's existence marginally increasing the prospect of a future kid or grown-up enjoying the sudden exhilarating feeling of that drive of Ted Dexter's popping into their head. What, though, of the ball/stroke that is unfiled, unwritten of, unspoken about, and unremembered by anyone who was there? What then?

One afternoon Chris Tavaré hit a six.

It happened in a three-day match in Newcastle, Australia, where the sky was bright and Northern New South Wales won the toss and made 163. Curator Ken Stace's pitch at the No.1 Sports Ground was flat and good, so 163 was below-par and anticlimactic, especially as cluey judges reckoned that of all the

Northern NSW line-ups ever assembled this lot had balance, experience and the best shot yet at knocking over a touring England side. They had extra incentive, too. A pre-game function was held at Newcastle City Hall and whoever did the invitation list forgot one team. The locals downed sullen beers among themselves instead that night. Late the next night, after the disaster of 163 – top score was Rick McCosker's 53, out hooking the last ball before lunch – a telephone rang at the Travelodge Motel. It was Kent calling to tell Tavaré he'd been appointed the county's new captain.

So next day, the day after his 28th birthday, walking out to bat, it is possible Tavaré felt in a place of some kind of serenity. Loose soil on the outfield, the result of recent top-dressing, had disappeared after a morning's gentle mowing. Nearly 1600 spectators, paying two dollars a head, were in. Tavaré would have noticed the gasometers across the street – evocative of The Oval, London. Or did the parked cars sidled up against sections of the boundary remind him of the outground at Folkestone, Cheriton Road, scene of a 42 and a 0 he'd made two months before?

In Newcastle some people watched from their car seats. And Tavaré batted, seatbelt on. He and opening partner Graeme Fowler lasted nearly two hours together at a scoring rate of 1-point-squirt-all per over.

Batting's a chew-a-person's-insides-up ordeal. It asks that you be dominant while requiring you make yourself vulnerable – the ball, object of your downfall, rests in the bowler's hands and is outlawed from touching yours. Your goal is twofold: to survive and



score runs. Routinely Tavaré made it onefold, and in this way he's in a category of not much more than one. Invincible in defence, uninterested in scoring, he was - if we apply the twofold test - a half-batsman, with the aura of an anti-batsman. Once, Tavaré spent 67 minutes on 0. Later, same innings, he spent 60 minutes on 24, first-class cricket's only batsman to have endured a pair of scoreless hours in the one innings. Adding to the burying-my-goldfish feel, he did it at HQ, the Home of Cricket, Lord's: like flatulence in the front aisle at church. I mentioned Tavaré being a one-man category - unlike the other blockers and stonewallers who clog cricket's scorebooks, and as distinct from the rearguard specialists, the human barnacles, the many vexing pissants (eg Geoff Boycott, who in some parallel timeless Test universe is still putting on 92 for the second wicket with Tavaré in Mumbai); unlike them, Tav, perversely, was so unrelentingly boring and so predictable in his boring-ness that it became not at all boring. It became - something other. This was a creepy concept to try bending your mind around, sitting on the couch, TV switched to the cricket. You could not watch. You could not look away. Your head was filled with Tavaré. And it was filled with a stack of issues and stuff totally unconnected to Tavaré. Peering at Tavaré could have the effect, unusually, of making a person feel as if they were peering in on oneself.

Naturally, only a cricket watcher whose own insides were reasonably chewed up would react that way to Tavaré. In Newcastle, Fowler was caught at short leg, David Gower came in, and he and

Tavaré added 90, Tavaré's contribution being 30 - and at some point during their partnership the crowd started hooting.

"Yeah, I remember maybe," says Michael Hill, Northern NSW's captain that day, "there was some hooting. But look, we played Rest of the World in '72 and Graeme Pollock and Sunil Gavaskar added about a hundred after lunch, in even time, perfect batting, beautiful batting. They got hooted because the ball kept going along the ground. Very tough judges in Newcastle." Also, at an indeterminate hour, possibly post-hooting, and certainly after the morning's batting was done and he'd squeezed in some side-practice, England's captain Bob Willis returned to the Travelodge to answer letters. Willis was resting this match. Gower stood in. And the captain on tour always has bags of incoming correspondence to keep up with.

There's a little-seen Patrick Eagar photo of Tavaré - different innings, same summer, a fast bowler is about to let fly. It is a rear-view landscape shot. It is, to the uninitiated, a photo not of Tavaré but of four slips and two gully fielders, crouching chevron-style not arc-style, a mildly unusual geometric formation which is why Eagar has taken it from behind. But if you are a Tavaré person it is to Tavaré your eyes cling. In the far left corner of the frame, he is waiting on the crease. Dangling exactly vertical is his bat. That's not how the textbook teaches you to do it. In the same vertical line, going up, are his weirdly long forearms, his above-the-elbow region, and the back of his helmeted head. Textbook-

wise, he should be approximating a back-to-front question mark, but he's an exclamation mark minus the dot, an unbent line - with some air of impermanence, as if he has just floated into shot, and is tilting, tipping ... Tavaré! This is what stills photography can do to the stillest batsman the game has known. It can render him so still he starts sliding backwards. I can't look at the photo without feeling unsettled and downhearted, and I don't think that's right and I don't think Eagar intended it that way. In another photo - just a grainy square in a magazine, no photo credit, badly cropped, the bat's sawn off at the top - Tavaré is essaying a drive: bareheaded, aggressive, everything's flowing, classical. And I don't know which of the photos, unless it's neither of the photos, is playing tricks.

After dealing with the ball, each ball, he would wander halfway to square-leg, head bowed. Whether he was relieved to have survived the last ball or gathering strength for the next, no one was sure, and nothing showed on his thin face. Cheekbones jutted out of the gauntness; his eyes seemed deep-set in their sockets. When people picture him now, the thing they are picturing is often that walk towards square-leg, which was not a tic he started off with but something that developed many years into his career, by which time he'd been to Oxford and completed a zoology degree.

He still thought about the insects - how, wherever there is a habitat, they'll find a way of living.

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Perth, in the summer that straddled 1977 and '78, was a yellow-lit city of flies, highways, the Channel 9 Appealathon, sand, Hungry Jack's signs, a sort of LA of Australia running at quarter speed, where ambition is soaked up in sunscreen and washed off in the shower block afterwards, and where Tavaré came to bat at No.3 for the University Cricket Club. He was well loved by teammates. At least three still see and keep in touch with him.

Greg Davies - "Square of the wicket: fantastic. Particularly on the off side. Tavs rarely let anything short get past him."

Leigh Robinson - "Chris was a stylish batsman. Seemed to be getting out caught behind. But he had lots of shots. Hit the ball quite hard."

Colin Penter, captain - "A dashing player. Very strong off the front foot. Strong cutter. Wasn't a big hooker. Still strong through the leg side, though, off pads..."

He averaged 14 in October, 13 throughout November, 6.75 in February and 10 in March. In between he collected a 68 at James Oval in his only innings all January. On the last day of 1977 he made 125 at Cresswell Park, hammering the Claremont-Cottesloe bowlers in an elegant and brilliant exhibition that included a two-hour partnership of 162 runs with Greg Davies, who nonetheless can't quite place it.

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Was it really an urge to catch up on his letter writing that drove Bob Willis back to the Newcastle Travelodge? Watching Tavaré bat can have been

no easier for those who knew him than it was for us, who could only guess at him. A fortnight later Tavaré assembled 98 runs across nine hours, 53 minutes and two innings at the WACA, and Willis in his tour diary painted the dressing-room scene thus: "Two of the side lying on benches, not watching the game at all, and two more intent on the television. Some were reading or playing cards."

"I do *enjoy* watching Tav bat," Willis himself would say to Mike Brearley in earlier times. Something unbearable, beautiful, painful – loveable – wraps round the cricketer who plays his own way, even if it is a closed-off way. Their vulnerability is palpable. So much is on show, and at stake – nothing less than a likeness of them. If Tavaré was batting, that meant Willis's grateful bowling knees were getting some sorely needed sleep. But even for Willis this was a delicately balanced thing. The phenomenon of Tavaré setting himself at the crease, like a tree's roots expanding, freed the batsmen around him to play their strokes, or else it pressured them into having to overplay too many strokes, no one could predict or tell which and it changed on an innings-to-innings basis. And yet Ian Botham would say: "I *like* batting with Tav."

Botham was next man in – "best player England has produced since Dr WG Grace," shouted the *Newcastle Herald*, advising its readers to flock to the ground. Immediately Botham got away with a backward sweep and a heave, which made his Ashes miracles of 1981 feel close. An off break came down, and he drove and edged it to slip.

Accompanying Tavaré the whole circumference of Australia was his wife Vanessa, and he was happier with her nearby, although aeroplane tickets were pricey and a player's tour fee modest. Also, she had phobias about flying – for which she required sedation – and heights as well. And this tour of Australia consisted of 25 flights in 127 days, from one downtown hotel to the next, most of them taller than the Newcastle Travelodge. It was hard on her, worried him. Getting to Newcastle alone had involved a coach, a 20-seater plane, then another coach. Test cricket – the seconds between those heavy-footed walks towards square-leg – was strain enough.

"Unsmiling," remembers Bob Holland. "Serious. Tall. He played with a straight, dead bat, or let balls go, and there was no reaction to any sledging, no annoyance, his character did not change." Holland, joined by the captain Hill and Colts offie Steve Hatherell, was part of a Northern NSW spin trio against Tavaré. A big-breaking, back-spinning leggie, Holland played 11 Tests for Australia, and first grade till he was 52, and in his life bowled to Sobers, Gavaskar, Viv, the Chappells, never another like Tavaré. "Can't think of another one. With first-class cricketers, when they got half an opportunity to attack, they usually did. He wasn't like that. He would wait and wait and wait."

Holland's spin partner Hill had encountered English occupiers before: John Edrich, Geoff Boycott. Tavaré was something unique. "But closer to Edrich than to Boycott because Boycott was much more technically perfect."

In Newcastle, a breeze fluttered across the ground and Tavaré called for a sweater. "Hit the fucking ball," hollered a spectator, "and you'll keep yourself warm."

Alien-seeming to some Australians, this was a man who donned a headscarf, pinafore and attended the England touring squad's Christmas Day dress-up lunch as Hilda Ogden from *Coronation Street*. Quintessentially English was another interpretation: he did the *Telegraph* crossword, roast beef was his favourite food, and the place he best liked to play cricket was The Parks in Oxford. He mixed well with others but was early to pyjamas and bed. Not a big drinker, he'd drink a bit. Shirts, not always quite figure-fitting, were perfectly ironed. The tour social committee fined him, affectionately, for braininess. In interviews it was as if he had a cutting and brilliant riposte that would put everyone on the floor but something was holding him back from using it. And so he'd give the predictable answer in his downbeat voice. Installed in his car, future county teammate Peter Roebuck noticed, was a device to make it go exactly 70mph on motorways. Cricket wrested control away, it was cricket controlling him. How he was doing on the field – that's how and who he was. "Sometimes tortured," according to Willis, who he'd come to for advice, and then follow the advice. Self-preoccupation was not a problem. He'd make team-centric suggestions about field settings, training routines. Generally, though, he did not speak a lot. He liked gardening, and woodwork, and films, and home. He once said to Willis that maybe a degree of screwed-upness was crucial to both their success.

Alien-seeming – they did not think that in Perth.

Something was afoot in Newcastle.

Tavaré hit an off-drive so hard it hurt the hands of the fielder who stopped it. In the 89th over he was 85 not out and the Northern NSW bowlers reached for the new ball. Tavaré stepped forward, sort of skipping. Some shots, visiting commentator and pundit Henry Blofeld saw, showed a lovely flowing arc of the blade. To the spinners he, occasionally, danced.

Ghost rumours linger, of what journalist Alan Gibson thought he saw when Tavaré batted half a day at Leicester during the 1978 county season – "Some of his drives reminded me of Beldam's pictures of Victor Trumper"; of a 27-ball ton at Crystal Palace's football field in the 1981 Lambert and Butler Floodlit Cup.

In Newcastle, hitting Holland to the midwicket fence brought up 100. "Frustrating," Holland recalls. "Bowl six good balls and he'd play six back, so I'd try tossing one higher, it would be slightly overpitched, and he'd hit it hard and very, very classical." In stands of 55 with Derek Randall and 37 with Ian Gould, Tavaré was the dominant partner. Vic Marks had heard him remark once or twice before: "I'd love to be able to play like Lubo [Gower] or Gatt [Gatting]. I can't." Now Marks and Tavaré added 47, Marks making six of them.

Suppose in Newcastle, Australia, he batted four seasons in one day. If, watching Tavaré, it turns out we never really knew him, is it possible to know anyone, by watching?

He moved from 123 to 131 in two balls, off-driving then on-driving Hill right and left of the sightscreen. His first fifty had taken 222 minutes, the last fifty took 50. When, half an hour before stumps, he was bowled for 157, nearly no one who came to the ground had left, and people clapped.

Sometime between 50 and 85 a six was hit, an on-drive.

Hill remembers spilling a catch - "a sitter, waist-high, two hands, standing in the gully where I'd fielded all my life" - when Tavaré was 34 not out and ex-Test man Gary Gilmour was bowling off a seven-pace run-up.

Part-timer Robert Wilkinson remembers the wicket he took, Gould (though he misremembers it as Gower) "caught at midwicket".

Matthew Engel's *Guardian* report makes no mention of a six.

Wicket-keeper Kerry Thompson admits "nothing about the match jumps out at me."

Hatherell has "virtually no memories of Tavaré".

One photo exists of Tavaré's innings, and he is on-driving, along the grass.

Left-arm quick Timmy Towers died of cancer at 36.

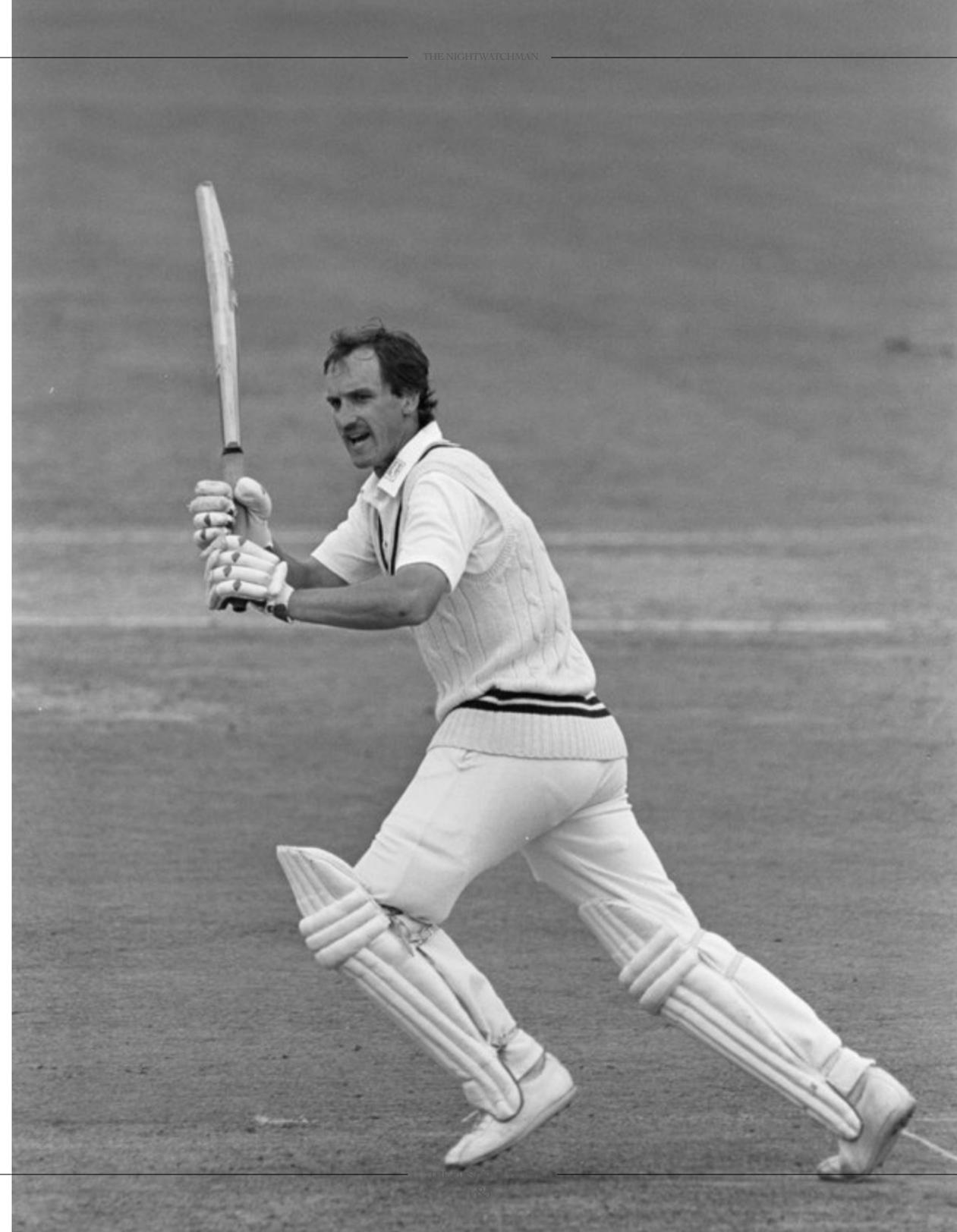
Holland remembers Eddie Hemmings's nine wickets and shrewd strategising ("despite the burden of a pillow under his shirt").

Mid-on fielder Greg Arms remembers Holland bowling from the southern end and Tavaré hitting from the north, towards the city, "a couple whistling past me".

No one remembers a six.

At the school where it all started, Sevenoaks School, that's where he is now, teaching biology, with additional responsibilities for school hockey, netball and cricket. It does not take much - being there's enough, he says - for his own school cricketing days to come roaring back fresh, and from there it is a small leap to other balls blocked, hit high, still rising, never landing.

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ROOT CAUSE

Vaneisa Baksh looks to her own past to see what light it might shed on the current state of cricket in the West Indies

Gus has no navel. Jimmy announced this one day, and we accepted it with perfunctory incredulity. Its absurdity was so at one with the routine revelations of Ruby's Bar that it elicited barely any attention after the first roar of disbelief. Jimmy swore it was true, that he had seen the evidence, but warned us not to ask Gus about it as it was a question that violently provoked him.

Before my time, Gus had been a journalist like the rest of us, but something had gone wrong in his life and he had taken to the streets of Port of Spain, living off handouts. Often he would sit on the pavement outside the *Guardian's* offices, scribbling feverishly in a lined copy book, and when I passed him I'd try to get a glimpse of what he was writing. Sometimes just three or four words would completely fill the two facing pages; sometimes it was tiny, compact lines – armies of spiders marching uphill and down, then off the pages like soldiers disappearing into unknown wars. I never

knew what he wrote about and, even on the occasions when he felt like talking, he always had such a furtive air about his notes that I didn't dare to ask.

About 15 years had passed since Jimmy had told us Gus's business. I'd long since left the *Guardian* newspaper, as had nearly all of my drinking colleagues. I'd never had the courage to ask Gus about his navel's whereabouts, but it intrigued me as I tried to imagine the possibilities behind this absence.

One day, stuck in traffic and listening to cricket on the radio, I began to think about it. A navel is the point at which the umbilical cord has connected us to our mother. It is the lifeline of the foetus, the symbol of where we have come from; how could we have accepted so easily that Gus has no navel?

The absence of questioning was our absurdity; had we become so cynical and indifferent that we accepted any old

story as long as the drinks kept flowing? From a sober distance it seemed symbolic of something happening in West Indian societies, but it was hard to put a finger on what.

West Indian folklore is full of stories of wanderers who return home to spend their last days in the precincts of their birthplaces. They had to, because their navel strings were buried there, and everyone knew the inexorable pull of that talisman. You had to bury the newborn's umbilical cord under a nearby tree, within its roots, to give the child some kind of standing, a base, so to speak.

It is an ancient practice spanning several cultures. Although the rituals are done for a variety of reasons – blessings, ensuring value and importance, prosperity, determining skills and careers – they share the common idea of connecting to the earth, and establishing an affinity with the past.

For African and Indian descendants, whose ties to their ancestral lands had been severed completely in most cases, it was a practice that helped to sustain a sense of origin. But that link has been a hard one to maintain and, as the original arrivants with their direct bonds to the past died out, memories faded like shadows.

Adopting the Western practice of discarding the umbilical cord, West Indians have dismissed its symbolism, so that the idea of not having a navel, of not connecting to the past, does not even strike a chord. It is a nameless absence: a thing missed without knowing it.

A couple of years ago, my daughter's paternal relations embarked enthusiastically on a genealogical project. Planning a family reunion, it started simply as a way of finding out about each other's current domestic

status, but then it grew to encompass the elders. In a relatively short time, with help from the internet, they were able to trace ancestors all the way back to the early 1800s and to find that the range included Scottish, English, French, Spanish, Chinese and African.

Finding these links drew them closer, establishing a sort of clanship that had not existed before. Across continents, they began to share domestic news and celebrate achievements and milestones like a nuclear family. The threads weaving them together bound them with tales of exploits and mishaps, and everyone could see the family streaks that only loving eyes can discern so plainly.

They could now speak of this one having got his or her artistic skill from that side of the family; or of how the penchant for writing came from Philip Rostant, a wealthy French-Creole born in 1818, who edited the *Port of Spain Gazette* and the *San Fernando Gazette* and opened the way for mass distribution of newspapers cheaply in Trinidad and Tobago. Somehow, connections of this sort endowed achievements with a kind of peerage. The idea that a trait ran in the family, that in the past a member of the clan had achieved stature, rendered it with such nobility that descendants were inspired to seek similar accomplishments.

I couldn't imagine being able to do that. Knowledge of my own line was rather sparse and vague. My paternal great-grandmother had reportedly come from India. She died when I was 10 and, though we had been very close, sharing a bond she had insisted was because I was an old soul, I knew nothing of her antecedents. On both sides of my family little information preceded my grandparents. Nothing existed behind the lines. It was as if life for my clan



began with them, and even so, their backgrounds were hazy.

For years, only one image of my maternal grandfather is repeated, frozen in a seven-year-old's perspective. It is one of just a couple of memories of him.

He is standing just outside the door to his bedroom, looking at us, looking at this enormous brood of children and grandchildren – easily numbering 60 – who gathered ritually on Sundays at the house in Barataria.

The visits began early and as each family arrived, the cacophony swelled until the air shimmered with laughter, shouting, crying babies, a blaring radio, sizzling pots, and chairs scraping on the terrazzo floors.

It was a glorious madhouse. No matter how stiffly my mother dressed us, this being a Sunday visit after all, in no time we shed the finery and frills – the prickly dress, the hard, black, shiny shoes with the buckles; and the white socks with the lace edge that had to be folded back just at the pink cord – and threw on the “home clothes” we carried in plastic bags so we could romp with our cousins. This was worth the entire morning of shouting and cajoling as my mother hustled us to get ready so we could hit the road, the five of us fussily filling a taxi for the short ride.

In my memory, my grandfather is standing in a thin, white, collarless cotton T-shirt with about four buttons down from the neck. A hand towel is draped on his shoulder. He is wearing thinly striped blue cotton pyjamas with a pair of wooden sapats on his feet. His eyes are large and bulging, exaggerated by the darkness of his skin. His hair is as curly as mine and, even in my childish assessment, he is a small man.

The Trinidad and Tobago Identification Card he had acquired in 1969 said he was 5ft 4in and listed his date of birth simply as 1899. He was my nana, Abdul Kassim, who had come from India, leaving a wife and children behind somewhere in Calcutta. I know he was a tailor; that he sold cow's milk on a bicycle, and I remember seeing him with a grey felt hat on his head, holding a bag of green cloth with khaki handles that probably carried milk bottles in it. I do not recall his voice, and my mother said he did not talk much; he was a taciturn, strict, but gentle man, given to keeping his own counsel.

I see him soundlessly surveying this rambunctious multitude and I wonder whether he ever felt at home in their midst, or whether he remained perpetually a cultural and emotional outsider.

My other memory of him is the day of his funeral, looking at his face, the only part visible outside the white cotton he was wrapped in. I was 10, and it was the first time I had seen death. I cried so energetically they had to get me out of there.

Over time, feeling that it was enough that I knew my parents gave way to an abstract desire to find my roots. The family I knew had little in common with me, and I suppose I wanted to be able to go further back to find out if there might be some other oddity along the ancestral line that I could claim as a kindred spirit. I now believe that my great-grandmother is the closest I will find. But not knowing what existed beyond my grandparents, except for her, was strangely diminishing, as if everything about life was so small it could fit into two generations.

I tried to find out more about my nana, but no one seemed to have anything

concrete to offer. I finally got hold of his ID card, and the marriage certificate he acquired in 1965 when he was 66 and my grandmother, Hapijan, was 55. The Muslim wedding ceremony that had yielded almost a dozen children had not yet been officially recognised by the State and so, old and weathered, they sought legitimacy.

What became of the wife and children left behind in Calcutta, I will probably never know. In the same way that his name seems to have been altered, either by officialdom or to begin his new West Indian life free of any encumbrances from India, it was as if he had only begun to exist when he touched the island's shores. So too, his marriage to Hapijan Ali only acquired official reality when it was registered in 1965.

Contrived and artificial beginnings, the recreation of the self for the Indian immigrant was abrupt and as arbitrarily subject to the colonising deities as it had been for African slaves.

Entire lives had been erased and rewritten at varying degrees of indignity. A name was altered, anglicised or simply remade. A year – 1899 – would suffice for official documents, not a date of birth. You were made here and, if the official was not listening or couldn't be bothered, you could be made into anything, even something that bore no resemblance to the self you knew. Your appellation was at a colonial officer's whim.

What to do but forget about the past? How did you prepare yourself for a new society but by discarding your baggage? What was internal would stay intact for as long as you carried it, but if you carried it quietly who would know you when all the external traces were gone? Who would know where your navel string was buried?

These colonially concocted societies have had to find ways to relate to their wrenching histories. Where the past exists, it is distant and often too painful to be touched. Where it has been forgotten or remains undredged, it has left a hole that can be filled with anything. The loss of ancestral memory permeates contemporary West Indian society so deeply that every day seems remade as a reaction to some external force. We live ephemerally and completely enclosed in a dim present, without the beacons of past or future for illumination.

Paradoxically, all these disconnections were finely connected, continuously broken threads woven together in an unruly mass that in its bulk, created the illusion that we had all the string we needed to get us out of the labyrinth. In truth, every strand had a dead end.

This concept had been unfurling rather nebulously as I tried to understand what was happening inside West Indian societies. Cricket had been useful as a laboratory. Writing about it provided a more focused lens on the big picture and helped to sharpen the ideas I'd been grappling with.

Examining it over the past decade and a half invoked the motif of disconnections in one form or the other. In the course of researching its history through player autobiographies and biographies written over almost a century, it was striking that only one of the writers included his genealogy. This was Roy Marshall, a white son of the planter class, whose family records indicated that his Scottish forebears had been in Barbados since 1750. If any of the other West Indian cricketers could go that far back into their family lines, they did not write about it. Most of them merely mentioned their fathers and, occasionally, an uncle. By 1970,

when Marshall's book was published, several from this biographical genre had already appeared without this kind of background, and Marshall may have felt it necessary to establish his right to be considered a true Barbadian.

Of all the writing cricketers, only Sir Learie Constantine and Sir Vivian Richards make explicit connections between their heritage and their pride. Only these two constantly invoked a sense of lineage and carried that consciousness as sword and shield. Constantine had been right there at the birth of a West Indies Test team in 1928. Richards was there up to the end of its prime as a champion team in the early 1990s. Constantine and Richards, the alpha and the omega of a distinct era in West Indies cricket; what has happened since has been the consequence of a massive rupture.

At the end of the Richards epoch, the fractures began breaking apart. West Indies cricket, which should have celebrated and recognised its unique nature, never quite grasped its elements, and so there was no foundation of understanding to help it dig its heels in under pressure. After Richards it simply staggered forward, reeling from crisis to crisis and acting as punch-drunk as it looked. Various entities in the cricket world faced similar situations at one time or the other. How they responded made the difference. West Indies cricket was not dealing with one upheaval at a time – no one does because life never conducts itself in such a polite and orderly fashion. The events have been varied and the conditions diverse.

There was no settling-down period after Richards and his band were removed. Instead, it was the beginning of an era that saw an unprecedented number of players coming and going from the fold. In fact, more players have been capped since the 1990s than had ever been in the 65 preceding years of its Test history.

It brutally disrupted the mentorship and transitory process that continuity can provide. For a people acquainted with the pain of abrupt dislocation, it recalled the coping strategy of forgetting about the past, and simply living day to day.

I'd been mulling over this broken idea, trying to find a way to untangle the complex strands that had woven the tale of West Indies cricket at its sorriest. The statistics and the matches told a story, the disputes and the disasters told another. There was a saga teeming with plots of rags, riches, sex, political intrigues, power-broking and all the other elements of the great dramas, but it was not a story of greatness.

The tragedy of Daedalus, who built the labyrinth for King Minos and was then imprisoned to keep its secret, is related in Greek mythology through the death of his son, Icarus. It had always seemed to me to be more about a father's loss than a son's death. Daedalus had risen to the top for his skill, discipline and craftsmanship. The story goes that he helped Minos' daughter, Ariadne so her lover, Theseus, could kill the Minotaur inside and come out of the labyrinth. To escape, Daedalus fashioned wings made from bird feathers that dropped into their tower prison. (Such patience can only be mythological.) Daedalus warned Icarus that if he went too close to the sun its heat would melt the wax holding his wings together, but the boy got giddy with in-flight euphoria and forgot all the science he needed to remain airborne. In a sense, I suppose, he soared to his death, but it was his father who had to watch the disintegration and see the fall. To me, that seems the heavier burden.

Somehow all these disparate threads seemed to converge at the story of Gus not having a navel and the cavalier way we had responded to the news.

I wondered whether to call Jimmy, whether to look for Gus and ask him to show me his navel, whether I needed to know or if it were better to leave its enigma intact. But the dilemma resolved itself. Walking through Port of Spain one day, these thoughts fresh in my mind, I unexpectedly saw him outside the *Guardian* building. I was so certain he would not remember me that I nodded at him but didn't stop.

As I went past, he said my name, so softly I might have imagined it. I turned around in surprise.

"Gus? You remember me?"

"Of course," he said haughtily. "I am a journalist."

At least Gus knew where his navel string was buried.

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SMELLING THE ROSES

Lawrence Booth on Australia's umbilical cord to the mother country

It was the late Peter Roebuck who nailed it, in characteristically urgent fashion, light on facts yet strangely persuasive.

"No country appreciates Lord's more than the Australians," he wrote in *In It To Win It*. "Over the years, Australian cricketers have cocked many snooks, most of them at pomposity, patronising attitudes, snobbery and hypocrisy. More than might be thought, though, they have given the ancients of the game their due."

The Oval might have produced more stirring Ashes moments over the years, mainly by virtue of hosting the last Test of the series – though it's true that it did host the game, in 1882, that begat the newspaper joke that begat the urn. Other English venues, too, have their places in the annals: Old Trafford 1902 and 1956, Headingley 1981, Edgbaston and Trent Bridge 2005.

But, for Australian cricketers, it has always been Lord's – the umbilical cord, if you'll forgive the presumptuousness, to the mother country, and the place to be seen, if not necessarily heard.

This is curious in one sense, because Lord's emits precisely the kind of vibe

that, according to national stereotype, ought to put an Australian on edge. It is home to a private members' club (though admittedly one with a public function); it can appear to look backwards as much as it does forwards; and it is shot through with forelock-tugging hierarchy, which isn't immediately compatible with the Aussie veneration of mateship.

For those arriving from a land whose national anthem proclaims its youth and freedom, all this could come as a shock. Why else did Dennis Lillee greet the Queen with a cheery but startling "G'day"?

Yet Australians like tradition more than they care to admit. This much is obvious when you walk into the other MCC – the Melbourne Cricket Club – and it is obvious at a venue such as Adelaide Oval, where on the first morning of the traumatic 2006-07 Ashes Test I was denied entry by a stickler of a steward who spotted that my T-shirt lacked a collar.

In fact, it was the first thing he noticed: as far as he was concerned, my existence at that moment was defined by my very un-collar-ness. And since the only way to the press box was through the members'

area – where collars are not so much a fashion accessory as an entire way of life – it was clear that this was a problem. I was frogmarched into a memorabilia shop and urged to right my sartorial wrong by buying the only collared T-shirt available: an official Cricket Australia piece of merchandise, which now lies, unloved and moulding, in my loft at home.

So, yes, Australian cricket can't help hide its affection for Lord's, because Lord's appeals to the sense of order and tradition that lurks beneath every Aussie larrikin (a passer-by in Adelaide once shouted at me for crossing a deserted road because the green man was still red). When Australian cricket fans tell me they're unconventional, I look at their matching yellow hats and green shirts, and smile indulgently.

But their relationship with Lord's goes deeper than that. Succeed there, and you are ruffling the feathers of English cricket. It's like making off with a bearskin helmet from a guard outside Buckingham Palace. Part of the thrill resides in its naughtiness. And for all but one day of the 20th century, Australia were very naughty indeed.

It came on the Monday of the second Ashes Test in 1934, when Sunday's rain had turned Lord's into a spinner's haven. It was not, by all accounts, a sticky dog, but it provided enough purchase for Hedley Verity's left-arm spin to wreak havoc. Verity took 14 wickets for 80 runs that day, including Don Bradman, who according to *Wisden* "never looked like staying very long, making many of his strokes without restraint".

Even more than Bodyline, it is an innings often used by mischievous Englishmen

when they are trying desperately to debunk the Bradman myth: faced with a superior craftsman, you see, he decided to hit out before he was got out (Ken Barrington would never have done such a thing). Bradman's slog skewed high and not-very-handsome into the gloves of Les Ames, prompting Wally Hammond, who never needed an excuse to take a dig at The Don, to recall: "As he passed Woodfull at the other end, his skipper gave him a look so compounded of anger and disappointment and woe that I have never forgotten it." You imagine Hammond went to bed dreaming about it.

The ever-conscientious Bill Woodfull might have been just as upset with what turned out to be the only blot on Australia's copybook at Lord's that century. England have won seven Ashes Tests there, but four of them came in the 19th century, and the two most recent in 2009 and 2013. Between Verity's match and the victory for Andrew Strauss's side five years ago, Australia played 18 Tests at Lord's, of which they won nine and drew nine. It is an away record unparalleled in Test history. And, for England, it began to feel like the albatross that could not be slain.

For a long time, the assumption was that, while the Australians felt inspired by the surroundings, the English were cowed by its history and a sense of expectation that bordered on entitlement. Perhaps they just got blasé, like a Parisian who awakes every morning to a view of the Eiffel Tower.

Certainly, when the Australian batsman-turned-commentator Jack Fingleton watched Bradman walk through the Long Room for his final Lord's innings, in 1948, he was moved to write: "There



is no atmosphere in all the cricketing world to equal this one at Lord's." Reverence came naturally. You can see why, over the years, the Aussies might have raised their game.

In fact, Bradman made 89 that day, almost a failure by his standards, and Fingleton, observing him closely for his wonderful tour book *Brightly Fades the Don*, noted: "I thought Bradman looked sad as he walked back from the sinking sunlight into the shadow of the Long Pavilion. This was a moment to live in the memory... Bradman's last Test walk at Lord's and, again, he was cheered all the way into disappearance."

Australian readers may wonder why the same courtesy was not extended to Ricky Ponting in 2009, when English crowds thought it was funny to boo the best batsman Australia have produced before or since Bradman. But by then that crowd's own relationship with Lord's had changed, if not yet – for a few days at least – their team's winless run against the Aussies.

Australia have not been the only team England struggled to beat at Lord's. In the 1980s and '90s, England played 29 Tests at Lord's, and won only six – two each against India and Sri Lanka in the days when those sides were even worse tourists than they are now, and one each against New Zealand and West Indies. Meanwhile, England lost 12 and drew 11. What appeared to have been true against Australia since 1934 now seemed to apply to almost everyone else: visitors to Lord's became inspired by what they saw and felt.

As with all theories that make sense at some visceral level, this one could be overturned only through sheer

weight of evidence. In 2000, the ECB – encouraged by the new England coach Duncan Fletcher – introduced central contracts. The team's fortunes changed instantly. And nowhere was that change more radical than at Lord's. Since the start of the millennium – and before this year's June Test there against Sri Lanka – England had played 28 Tests at Lord's, winning 16 of them and losing only four.

Two of those defeats, inevitably perhaps, came against Australia. But one of them served the unexpected purpose of convincing England that a team containing Matthew Hayden, Ponting, Adam Gilchrist, Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath could actually be beaten. In a counter-intuitive kind of way, one of England's greatest Ashes moments at Lord's came in defeat.

The 2005 Ashes was the first to get the full modern-media treatment. The series was being previewed before the two preceding Tests at home to Bangladesh had taken place, and no one who was anyone within cricket had failed to provide their prediction to at least five national newspapers.

I remember writing a piece for the *Guardian* in which I was instructed to find someone willing to say that the first session would be, y'know, kinda crucial. Unsurprisingly, this wasn't hard (a much more interesting piece would have been one in which an expert had decried the opening exchanges as much ado about nothing). But by the end of that first Test at Lord's, it wasn't clear whether the first session had been crucial or supremely irrelevant.

Writing in *Wisden*, David Frith captured some of the carnage: "Before the first

drinks break, Harmison, bowling from the Pavilion End, struck Langer painfully on the arm, dented Hayden's helmet grille as he tried to hook, and drew blood from Ponting's cheek when he too tried to punish a fiercely rising ball: three injury delays during which the Englishmen merely talked among themselves."

Australia were skittled for 190, with the cheers in the Long Room replacing the usual well-heeled applause. At stumps, however, England had themselves subsided to 92 for seven, with the merciless McGrath taking the first five of them as he jagged the ball into the middle-order right-handers from the Pavilion End.

McGrath's own memories of the occasion tell a mini-story about Australia's relationship with the place. He had begun the match with 499 Test wickets, having taken seven in his previous game, at Auckland in March. "There was part of me that wanted to wait until Lord's to get my 500th wicket," he told Sam Pilger and Rob Wightman in *The Ashes Match of My Life*. "I briefly thought I should hold back a bit. How ridiculous does that sound?"

At Lord's four months later, he "felt at ease". McGrath went on: "There was a calmness about me. This was how it was meant to be: playing England in front of a packed house at Lord's. All around me tens of thousands of England fans were celebrating our disappointing first-innings total as if they had already won the Ashes. It was time to quieten them down."

Eight years earlier, McGrath had taken eight for 38 at Lord's as England were skittled for 77 in a rain-ruined draw. Aided by the slope, he knew what he was doing. On the second morning of the

2005 game, England were all out for 155. They would go on to lose by 239 runs, with McGrath returning match figures of nine for 82. Englishmen everywhere concluded: here we go again.

But the effect of Steve Harmison's first-morning blitz had not been forgotten: England could ruffle Australia after all. Thus ensued the greatest Test series in history, in which England won by two runs at Edgbaston, by three wickets after enforcing the follow-on at Trent Bridge, and in between came within a wicket of winning at Old Trafford. At The Oval, Kevin Pietersen eased their last-day jitters with a blistering 158. Yet without the self-belief engendered by their fast bowlers at Lord's, none of this might ever have happened.

Perhaps it was a complete coincidence that, in 2009, England would finally end their Lord's Ashes hoodoo. And that, in 2013, they would London-bus the Aussies, beating them for the second time in four years after waiting in vain for three-quarters of a century. Perhaps.

Or maybe, just maybe, England were slower to turn around their Lord's record against Australia because the Aussies were simply more adept at smelling the local roses.

In 1948, Fingleton painted the scene: "Hats and coats were off in the popular stands, flags were flying, the trees looked very green and clean, and people were squatting contentedly on the grass behind the white line and in front of the pavilion."

The next time an Australian tells you he doesn't buy into all that stuff, don't believe a word of it.

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IN SEARCH OF FELIX MENZEL

Dan Waddell becomes obsessed by a man who lived for cricket in Nazi Germany

Had Felix Menzel been born in England – or Australia or India – then among cricket fans he would be a household name. Blue plaques would mark the place of his birth. Tournaments and trophies would be named after him. A stand or two might have been erected in his memory. But as it is, even in his native Germany, he remains unknown and forgotten.

I first came across this remarkable man in the early stages of researching my book *Field of Shadows*, about a tour to Nazi Berlin in 1937 by the Gentlemen of Worcestershire. At that point, the Englishmen fascinated me. However, as I dug deeper and learned more of German cricket, Menzel became the true hero: a cricket obsessive for the ages who risked a great deal to play and promote what he described as “this beautiful game”.

Despite three years of intensive research, he remains an enigma. He first appears in reports of the Leicester CC tour of Berlin in 1911, when in his

late teens he won the respect of his opponents with his accurate medium pace and big hitting. One towering hit was known for several decades as the biggest six ever struck in the country.

Then war intervened. Felix fought and, it is suggested, was wounded. Whatever his injuries, they did not hinder his appetite for cricket. Together with his brother Guido, another all-rounder, he became the mainstay of cricket in the German capital after the war as the sport blossomed. Bolstered by British troops and workers, the Berlin league consisted of 12 teams and the standard of play improved immeasurably.

In 1930, Felix and Guido were part of a Berlin XI that toured England. It was the same summer where a young Don Bradman confirmed his talent to English spectators, so the Germans’ visit received minimal coverage. The only time they made the national press was when they were barred from entering The Oval pavilion during a county match, a courtesy extended to

all touring teams. “The MCC is pretty autocratic,” thundered the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, “but at least it has some glimmer of sporting manners.”

Surrey were forced to apologise and invited the Berliners to attend the final day of the match between Surrey and Middlesex, where they were granted a sneak preview of the wicket for the final Ashes Test and an audience with Jack Hobbs, which all had a significant impact on Felix. He began to dream of a German team playing in front of packed stands against the greats of the game like Hobbs.

Such a vision was – initially, at least – undermined by the arrival of Hitler and the Nazis to power. They discouraged cricket, believing it be effeminate and unmanly. Under their rule, the number of teams in Berlin dwindled from 12 to four but Felix would not be denied. In his role as “Kricketführer”, he managed to persuade the Nazi sporting hierarchy – basking in the glow of the successful 1936 Olympics – to allow an English team to tour Berlin in 1937.

How he achieved this is a mystery, even more so when one considers he wasn’t a member of the Nazi party. There is no record of him in the 12 million central membership records held at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. Not being part of NSDAP was usually a barrier to any advancement, but not in Felix’s case. Perhaps a clue to his influence lay in his occupation. One report suggests he worked in the jewellery trade. I scoured address books of 1930s Berlin online and found three Felix Menzels, one of them a gilder. Did he supply leading Nazis, including the vain, strutting Reichsportsführer,

Hans von Tschammer und Osten, with jewellery or other trinkets in return for a few favours?

Whatever, flushed by the success of the Gentlemen of Worcestershire’s tour of 1937, a year later he invited a team from Somerset to visit. At a dinner to welcome them, he outlined his vision and made a direct pitch to MCC, asking them to consider a tournament in which England might play developing cricket nations such as Germany, Belgium, Denmark and Holland. “Cricket is so soothing and peaceful,” he added. At the same time as his leader was doing all he could to tear Europe apart, Menzel was trying to unite it. I trawled newspaper archives and discovered his request was reported in the UK and Australia. (“‘Heil Cricket,’ Say Nazis,” reported the *Daily Mirror*, inaccurately.) However, there is no record of MCC’s response.

The fact that Menzel was allowed to speak to the press on such matters – under a regime that valued propaganda more than any other before or since – is another indication of his influence and adds to his mystery.

Of course, war put an end to any further discussion. By now Felix was too old to fight. But we do know that, even as the RAF bombs rained down on his hometown, he refused to stop playing cricket. The Nazis had imported foreign labourers to work the factories and fields in the absence of those men sent to fight. The Germans were forbidden from fraternising with them but such threats didn’t stop Felix arranging several games of cricket with Dutch and Danish



workers in secret. He seems to have been untouchable.

Once the war ended, and Berlin lay in rubble, Felix rounded up the few surviving members of the Berlin league. One summer day in 1945, they trudged from the ruins towards a group of English soldiers at a checkpoint. Rather than asking for water, medicine or cigarettes, Felix and his friends asked for a game of cricket. Once the soldiers had got over their astonishment, they agreed and that afternoon, with the sun on their backs, they played a match. "We felt in a very good mood," wrote Felix later.

With the help of a younger cricketer named Kurt Reitz, Felix then helped rebuild and revive the Berlin League post-war. His influence waned when he was forced to move to Frankfurt, presumably in search of work or business, but he travelled back by train every August to play, even when well into his sixties.

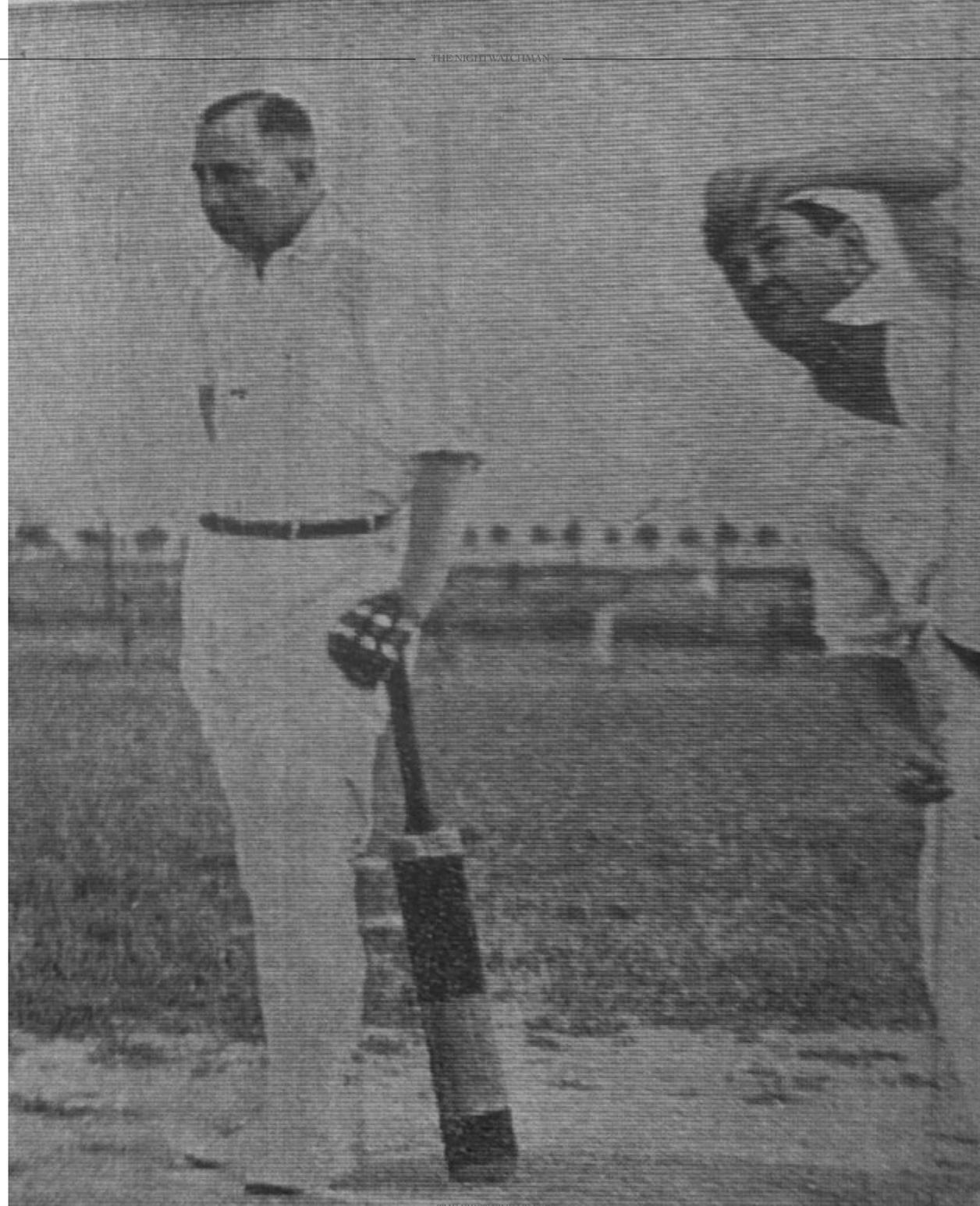
The last record I have of him is from 1956, via a letter he wrote to former *Cricket Society Journal* editor James Coldham. After that, the trail goes cold. The paucity of surviving records means I have no idea when he died, or if there was any family beyond his brother Guido - he simply disappears, as if through a crack in time. I contacted a number of people involved in modern

German cricket - not one had heard of Felix Menzel.

By now, my book was almost finished but my pursuit of Menzel had become almost obsessive. I travelled to Berlin to scour newspapers and magazines for more information. In them I found tantalising snippets about his playing exploits but little more. Eventually, thanks to Oliver Ohman, a reporter for *Berliner Zeitung* who had a collection of old football magazines, I managed to track down a photo. It shows Menzel, avuncular and serious, leaning on a heavily taped bat and watching intently from the non-striker's end as Arthur "Mauschel" Schmidt delivers his looping left-arm spin. Incidentally, Schmidt, a rotund, jovial figure, was a bowler of great wile and guile, perhaps the best German-born player of all time. My research indicates he was Jewish and that he was gassed to death at Auschwitz.

German cricket is now in a healthy state, with much of its growth attributed to the enthusiasm of English, Indian and Pakistani immigrants. But there has been no one more pivotal or fundamental to its development than Felix Menzel, a genuine custodian of the game, who made sure cricket survived in Germany despite the death of his friends, the annihilation of his city by war, and hostility from the most despicable regime the modern world has seen.

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MAN AND SUPERMAN

*Tom Holland contends that Kevin Pietersen is a hero for our age –
Beowulf, Achilles and Lancelot rolled into one*

When George Lucas sat down in the mid-1970s to write a film-script set in a galaxy far, far away, he had high ambitions. His aim was to make a film of literally mythic power. His manual was a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which the author, Joseph Campbell, argued that mythologies everywhere all draw on the same basic themes. This is why the story of a great hero has such universal appeal. His feats, his flaws, the arc of his quest: all reach deep into the subconscious. Lucas learned the lesson well. The result, of course, was *Star Wars*.

Sport, unlike a movie, has no script. People would never watch it otherwise. Even so, there is the odd sportsman whose career strikes such chords in the imagination that it is hard not to feel that someone, somewhere, must have made him up. English cricket has certainly not been lacking for heroes these past 10

years. A decade ago, few fans would have imagined in their wildest dreams that England might end up three times Ashes victors, and briefly top the Test rankings. Flintoff and Vaughan, Strauss and Swann: these are names fit to rank with any in English cricket history. The present captain – a clean-cut former chorister who just cannot help himself scoring centuries – could hardly look more like a hero if he tried. Yet Joseph Campbell, in the admittedly improbable event that he could be resurrected and endowed with a working knowledge of cricket, would present none of these stars with the palm. There is only the one possible candidate. Kevin Pietersen may not have a lightsabre – but he is undoubtedly English cricket's very own Hero with a Thousand Faces.

The path to greatness is familiar from countless myths. The hero is born in obscurity and then has to overcome



numerous obstacles. Pietersen, to a degree exceptional in this age of carefully monitored youth programmes, came to Test cricket by a long and circuitous route. While hardly the first South African-born player to have ended up playing for England, the degree of turbulence that surrounded his progress from youth cricket to the ultimate stage was certainly out of the ordinary. Whether bust-ups with the South African cricket authorities or kit-bags slung out of Nottinghamshire dressing-rooms, trouble was never far away. Unsurprisingly, the willingness of such a raw and untested cricketer to ride roughshod over the sensibilities of men accustomed to deference from junior players did not make Pietersen universally popular. Cockiness – a word frequently applied to him – is not readily forgiven in the hierarchy-obsessed world of cricket. The reputation of Pietersen for arrogance, first forged when he signally lacked the achievements to justify it, has never left him since.

This, in a man destined for a career of extraordinary deeds, is not necessarily to be reckoned a fault, of course. An apprentice without a due sense of his own potential is unlikely ever to make the grade as a hero. Achilles, Beowulf, Lancelot: none of them was exactly lacking in self-belief. That a young man sublimely aware of his own genius should have been willing to make enemies in the cause of his destiny would have come as no surprise to Joseph Campbell. I suspect, though, that he would have seen in Pietersen's youthful self-confidence something more interesting than mere brashness. There was, and remains to this day, an innocence about KP's immodesty. Unlike Tony Greig, that other South African-born England captain, he takes no particular pleasure in tilting at establishments. He is not so much

hostile to them as indifferent. South African racial politics and English conservatism are of concern to him only to the degree that they obstruct his career. Such, perhaps, is the mark of the ultimate hero: that he creates his own reality.

This, in the context of a sport as obsessed with its own past as cricket, is sufficient to mark Pietersen out as someone exceptional: a man unshaped by the traditions that generally mould most cricketers. Certainly, no other South African-born player has managed to swat away the entire troubled legacy of apartheid with quite the insouciance shown by KP. Many whites, no doubt, have been frustrated by the racial quota system applied by the cricket authorities in South Africa; but none has thought to describe it as "heart-breaking". Given even the faintest hint of racism on Pietersen's part, the word would surely have become a millstone around his neck, dooming his claims to greatness for good; but no such hint has ever been found. KP, as his current burgeoning love of India and the Indian fans demonstrates, is the very opposite of a racist: a man for whom race, quite simply, is an irrelevance.

Coming to England, and committing himself to a new country, his status as an outsider was only reinforced. Even today, in the ruthlessly meritocratic set-up that the national team has become, the influence of the past on English cricket continues to weigh. County loyalties and class tensions remain – as they have always been – a key part of the swirl of attitudes in the professional game. To Pietersen, though, they mean nothing. Brought to Nottinghamshire in 2000, he had not the slightest hesitation three years later, when the county was relegated, in demanding a release from his contract. His captain

saw this as treachery; Pietersen saw it as common sense. Similarly, the old divide between gentlemen and players, which has survived in ghostly form into the 21st century thanks to the reliance of English cricket on the public school system, casts not a shadow on KP. Unlike Strauss or Flintoff, Cook or Bresnan, he is resolutely classless. It gives to him that aura of strangeness, of not quite belonging, for which some England fans still cannot wholly forgive him, but which in truth is the hallmark of his distinctive genius. There truly is only one KP.

Heroes in epic, of course, often had a similar quality: bred and raised far away from the run of common men, and possessed of an aura of the eerie. Like them, Pietersen eventually succeeded in triumphing over youthful adversity, and winning for himself the chance to take on the very best. David took on Goliath, Luke Skywalker fought with Darth Vader, and KP made his Test debut against Warne and McGrath. The century he scored at The Oval – an extraordinary feat of dragon-slaying which ensured that England, just as they were on the verge of letting the Ashes slip through their fingers, would get to win them back after all – was the most joyous moment of that entire joyous summer. KP had arrived.

As the innings that sealed England's victory over Australia after almost 20 years of pain, Pietersen's first Test century will always enjoy a place of honour in the annals of Ashes folklore. Yet it is typical of the peculiar radiance of his star quality that even at such a moment, as the yearnings of an entire nation were being gloriously fulfilled, the drama of Pietersen's own personal fulfilment was not merely subsumed into the broader drama of England's victory. Until The Oval, he had not had a

particularly happy series. His batting had stubbornly refused to catch fire; he kept on dropping catches. Now, though, on the most effulgent stage that English cricket had enjoyed since 1981, KP did what he had always done, and demonstrated that the rules which govern lesser men were simply not for him. One shot in particular lives on golden in the memory: a breathtaking, audacious, quite preposterously murderous shot. Brett Lee, bowling at his fastest, was swatted straight down the ground in a manner that would have done credit to Babe Ruth. It confirmed Pietersen as a cricketer of incomparable boldness and creativity. As the ball cracked off his bat past a startled Lee, and even Boycott was reduced to splutterings of amazed delight up in the commentary box, a giddy prospect suddenly opened up: for KP, the sky was the limit.

The innings at The Oval in 2005 set the template for what was to follow. The nervous start: hurriedly scrambled singles to get off the mark, the constant dicing with danger. The explosive sense of acceleration, fuelled by an almost febrile need to dominate bowlers – and the most dangerous ones especially. Shots that no other man would have the talent, the nerve, and perhaps the sheer streak of lunacy to contemplate playing: Murali, the greatest off-spin bowler of his day, reverse-swept into the stands; Dale Steyn, the best fast bowler in the world, hit for a six so towering that he could do nothing but track its parabola with a gawp of stunned impotence. No England batsman in living memory has played with such fearlessness and brilliance. No batsman in the world today generates such an electric sense of drama. Ultimately, there is only one way to sum it all up: KP is a genius.

But therein lies the problem. Heroes, so Joseph Campbell wrote, are invariably

outsiders. Pietersen's standing as the supreme England batsman of his generation is edged with poignancy. As events have shown, the drunken larking with his teammates during the 2005 Ashes victory parade did not mark what he so obviously hoped it would be: his full integration into the England set-up. It is not only in his accent that the man from Pietermaritzburg retains traces of his foreign upbringing. It is the nature of genius, perhaps, that it can often verge on the ridiculous; but Pietersen, so insecure despite his bravura, so vulnerable despite his egotism, has always lacked the English instinct for self-mockery. Heroes do not laugh at themselves – nor do they like to be laughed at by others. Pietersen is a man whose nature and exploits alike qualify him as a figure from epic. The mock-heroic is not a genre in which he can hope to thrive. Put a hero into a comedy, and the effect on the hero himself is bound to verge on the tragic.

The first of these tragedies reprised a scenario that has long been a staple of English sitcoms, from *Fawlty Towers* to *The Office*: the man given responsibilities to which he is grotesquely unsuited. A man less qualified to serve as England captain than KP it would be hard to imagine. Everything that defines his genius – the implacability with which he pursues excellence, the innocence of his egotism, his lack of interest in tradition – ensured that he was bound to come a cropper. The England captaincy, more than any other position in British sport, is one hedged about by history. No one can hope to make a success of it who does not have a finely tuned ear for the subtleties, traditions and hypocrisies of the English cricket establishment. A successful captain can either assault this establishment – as Tony Greig ultimately did – or end up, in the manner of Andrew Strauss, as

its standard-bearer. What an England captain cannot do, however, is behave as though it does not exist. KP's period in office – to his own hurt and bewilderment, but to no one else's great surprise – was short, and terminated in the squalid and underhand manner with which the panjandrums of English cricket have customarily effected their assassinations. Nothing, though, became KP's captaincy more than the manner of his leaving it. He swallowed the humiliation of his reduction to the ranks, did not let the bruises show, and buckled down to serve his replacement. Although his batting temporarily suffered, he never blamed this mild slump in his form on the loss of the captaincy. Soon enough, he had become under Strauss what he had previously been under Vaughan and Flintoff: the linchpin of England's top order. The player renowned for his arrogance had revealed a hitherto unsuspected characteristic: forbearance.

The entire debacle of Pietersen's period as captain was one in the finest tradition of English cricket: a farce fit to set the shades of Lord Hawke and Douglas Jardine cracking wintry smiles. KP is nothing, though, if not a quintessentially 21st-century figure, and the second debacle in which he took a starring role was an altogether more cutting-edge affair. How fitting, and how tragic, that the England batsman who more than any other outsoars the dead weight of the past should have ended up on the rack as the result of something as of the moment as a spoof Twitter account. His teammates found it hilarious. Pietersen found their hilarity painfully upsetting. The resulting culture clash very nearly destroyed his career.

Even dropped from the England team, though, KP remained box-office. The details of the scandal made it the first

great cricketing drama of the social-media age. Quarrels over IPL contracts, texts to the South African dressing-room, apologies posted on YouTube: EW Swanton must have been spinning in his grave. As has been the case throughout Pietersen's career, though, everything that is most modern about him co-exists with qualities that would have been perfectly familiar to Joseph Campbell. Heroes pass through ordeals that then make their exploits glitter all the more brightly. It is for that reason that Pietersen's heroism has never blazed to more brilliant or admirable effect than it did last winter, in the second Test against India at Mumbai. The pressure on him walking out to the wicket on the second day would surely have made any other batsman crack. His technique in the first Test had been found grievously wanting: no less an expert than Bishan Bedi had declared that he would never score any runs against the Indian spinners. His

position as England's leading batsman meant that the failure of the top order in the previous Test was bound to weigh on him to a peculiar degree. Above all, of course, there was the need to demonstrate to his teammates, and to a dubious and divided cricketing public, that England needed him, and that he needed England. Reintegration can rarely have seemed such a challenge.

Naturally, KP rose to it. His disdainful flick for six off Pragyan Ojha, the shot of his entire peerless innings, would never have provided such an adrenaline rush of pure pleasure had there never been the KP Genius Twitter account. Like Achilles, the great Greek hero who fell out with his teammates, sulked in his tent while the Trojans put them to the sword, and then returned to action in a golden blaze of glory, KP illustrates a timeless truth: heroes are worth the trouble. Without them how much drabber and less colourful the world would be.

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EDMUND BLUNDEN AND THE WIDER FIELD

Richard Beard on the importance of cricket to one of England's great war poets

"The game which made me write at all, is not terminated at the boundary, but is reflected beyond, is echoed and varied out there among the gardens and the barns, the dells and the thickets, and belongs to some wider field."

Edmund Blunden

If Westminster Abbey is open to new ideas – a distinct possibility now that women can finally be ordained as bishops – the church hierarchy might consider a Sport Corner to complement the commemorated greats in the Poets' Corner. The honour and glory would give our ageing pundits a late-autumn ambition, a final contest in which they'd never know the result.

The nation's sporting champions contribute to the greatest happiness of the greatest number as surely as our poets and writers. If the England

fast bowler John Snow were included, primarily for his heroic bowling against Australia in 1970-71 (31 wickets in the series) then as a published poet (two volumes, 1971-73), his plaque could form a bridge between the Poets and the Athletes. He would be met halfway by Edmund Blunden, the only writer in Poets' Corner with an entire chapter of his biography entitled "Cricket".

Blunden's biographer Barry Webb fits the cricket chapter into a central section called "An Interlude: Preoccupations". By this stage of the biography the reader will have worked out that, for Edmund Blunden, cricket is much more than an interlude. In the index, listed under "E.B; cricket", the references start on page 12 and end on page 264, with Blunden attending the final day of a fifth home Test against Australia. Cricket is at the beginning of his life, and the game remains reliable to the end.

Blunden's cricket addiction can be traced to the moment he was entrusted with the first-team scorebook in the Kent village of Yalding (cricket club founded 1798 and over 200 years later on Facebook: "always on the lookout for new members"). When Blunden first sharpened his pencils, in about 1903, the team was mostly made up of his dad, who was the local schoolmaster, and members of the church choir (his dad also ran the choir). The young Edmund doffed his cap and earned extra pocket money carrying the bags of visiting players from the "many-coloured blazer class". Occasionally he was allowed to bat at No.11 for the seconds.

In some ways Edmund Blunden is no different to thousands of other cricket tragics: the early adoption, the entanglement of youth and sunshine, the ongoing negotiations between skill and luck, the seduction of a game that for half a summer's afternoon involves sitting beneath a tree.

But, for Blunden, cricket would unexpectedly become a more urgent way to pass the time. In 1915 at the age of 19, already a published poet, Blunden enlisted with the Royal Sussex Regiment. In May of the 1916 cricket season he was sent to northern France, where he reported for duty at the Somme, often acting less like a soldier and more like the cricketing pastoral poet he was. Once in No Man's Land, repairing fences, he came under sudden German fire before discovering that the battery-powered torch in his pocket had turned itself on.

He was in the Somme region for four months and in October 1916 wrote to his mother: "Cold and wet and lack of sleep are enemies to the finest soldiers.

There is also the added enemy of the presence of so many dead men. And after a while the dead become more frightful to the mind."

Ypres and Passchendaele were grimmer still, but Edmund was a survivor, and on yet another mission over the barbed wire he won the Military Cross. In the trenches he wrote and he stayed sane but otherwise, in a war that famously turned so many minds, how did Blunden cope? And not just in the fields of France but afterwards, when what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder kept the war alive for combatants long after the shells had ceased to fall?

Blunden had his poetry, and as soon as the war ended he had his cricket. He could have wasted away in deckchairs at the county grounds of his choice, or used his sedentary experience as a scorer to feel comfortable on a committee: Finance, or Players and Ground. As in his boyhood, when the second team were short, he maybe could have turned out on a Sunday. He did none of the above. Edmund Blunden the war poet became a peacetime maniac for playing cricket.

The list of teams for which he put on his whites reveals a cricketer always available for selection. The skippers just had to ask, and Edmund Blunden would buckle up his cricket bag and prove he was still alive. In 1919, a demobbed undergraduate at Oxford, he played for his College but also turned out for Garsington, a club still active today in the Oxfordshire Cricket Association leagues ("you are very welcome to get in touch about playing or fixing up a friendly"). Blunden moved to Suffolk and played for two different villages, Stansfield and Cowlinge, and in 1924 when he accepted



a job at Tokyo University (where he was to write his best-selling prose memoir *Undertones of War*) the trip was made bearable by the stumps he'd added to his bat in the ship's hold.

Three years later and back in London he's in the scorebook for Jonathan Cape, for Collins, for an "All-Parnassus" team and a Keats-Shelley XI, for the Barnacles and the Bushmen, and for a time in the 40s he captained the recently revived Authors XI. He claimed once to have played with four former England Test captains, one of whom must have been Douglas Jardine, a regular post-war ringer for the Authors. Tossing the ball to Jardine was just another green and white summer's day for Blunden, because he often played for three different teams in a week.

Other poets of the time occasionally showed a mild interest, depending on the standard of the catering. Blunden's friend Siegfried Sassoon, when turning out for his own team at Heytesbury House, would field on the boundary so he could leave the pitch when bored. Edmund Blunden was never bored. When it came to cricket, George Orwell publicly called him a "fanatic", not that Blunden cared. Every springtime brought him a fresh cricket season, wherever in the world he might be: on a second visit to Japan in 1949 he played for the English against an Australian side, a shadow Ashes that he relished. He was 53 years old at the time.

Edmund Blunden the war poet couldn't get enough of cricket. On the days he wasn't playing he followed the first-class game at Tonbridge or Chichester, at the Parks and whenever possible at the Test match grounds. He watched cricket and he wrote about cricket, either in letters

to his friends or on scraps of paper discovered after his death. At The Oval in 1938: "Hutton finished every stroke, whether for runs or not, as before the eye of all cricket history." Like every fan he had his favourites, with a particular soft spot for WW Armstrong, "the Big Ship" - "He made a bat look like a teaspoon, and the bowling weak tea; he turned it about idly, jovially, musingly. It was almost too easy. WW Armstrong sat down while they fetched the ball."

Was Blunden any good? One awkward consequence of playing for a team of writers, as the contemporary Authors XI have also discovered, is that teammates may pounce on misadventure. In writing. As with the electric torch in No Man's Land, Blunden could be absent-minded on the cricket field. IAR Peebles the England leg-spinner ("one of the few who could make Bradman look fallible") earned his selection in the 1950s Authors XI with a cricketering autobiography, *Bowler's Turn*, that remembers his Authors' captain: "He allowed me to bowl a few laborious overs and I was pleased and grateful when a Publisher struck a gentle skier to mid-on where our leader had stationed himself. But regrettably the ball fell to earth on an unoccupied space, for, weighed down by the cares of captaincy, he had forgotten to change over with the rest of the field and so was still stationed roughly at old-fashioned point."

Entering his sixties, Blunden could be forgiven a senior moment in the field. Another witness to his cricketering ability was CB Fry: "He can bat, he is a natural batsman, and even now I could turn him into a formidable player. His defect is that he stops his forward stroke and doesn't follow through, turning on his left hip. He is inclined to stab at the ball,

but, make no mistake, he could become a fine batsman."

The clue is in the "even now". CB Fry wrote this in 1947 after umpiring a match in which Edmund (Edmund always seems to be there, whatever the cricketering occasion) had defied the bowling of the National Book League: he was 51 years old. A survivor, a dogged participant who never gave up on the outside chance of being called "a natural batsman" by CB Fry, Edmund Blunden's persistence was eventually rewarded. Also in writing.

CB Fry was being kind. The photos show a bird-faced man with hands far apart on the bat handle, squinting in the general direction of the bowler. Blunden never wore batting gloves, ever since his schooldays, which may have disturbed his courteous batting partners more than himself. There's an evocative photograph of the publisher Rupert Hart-Davis walking out to bat with Blunden for Jonathan Cape against the Alden press, in Oxford in 1938. Hart-Davis has also declined to wear gloves, in deference to his prestigious author. He does not look comfortable.

Blunden did once write up his passion for cricket, in the 1946 book *Cricket Country*, and many of the book's insights remain recognisable to lower-grade cricketers today: "In any kind of sport, nothing charms us more than when someone who feared that he should never manage it at all is providentially permitted to get past that stage."

In his review of *Cricket Country* Orwell tried to ingratiate himself with the observation that "the test of a true cricketer is that he shall prefer village cricket to 'good' cricket," but Orwell had

little feel for Blunden's passion. Edmund Blunden didn't *prefer* village cricket: this was the only kind of cricket he could play, until his early sixties, when a top edge into his spectacles convinced him to call it a day.

But why so much cricket, every English summer for 40 years? The clue, or even the answer, may be found in his special pleading for any dropped catch of particular horror in a letter to the cricketer CS Marriott in 1931: "I have sometimes been able to excuse myself from missing a catch or a long-hop by the revelation that my mind had floated off to Flanders."

This displacement would first have worked in the opposite direction - a dream of cricket in the English sunshine keeping Blunden sane while he was winning the Military Cross in the winter mud of Ypres. From the trenches of the Western Front, the reverie of cricket defied the reality of war, and when the shelling was especially severe Blunden could soften the hours with his rote memory of the full initials of every first-class player, past and present. This would have been easier in 1916 than it is now, but still.

Cricket offered Edmund Blunden a vision of salvation, a distraction from human suffering that performed the same function as religious awe. For an absent-minded poet in the First World War there was no finer place for the absent mind than Edwardian village greens, and the coherence of remembered scorecards. And when the war was over, Blunden moved into his daydreams. Cricket could save him three times a week, for as many years as he cared to give to the game. Season after season he embraced

cricket's slow opiumisation – the mind absent but never empty, the game everything while obviously nothing at all.

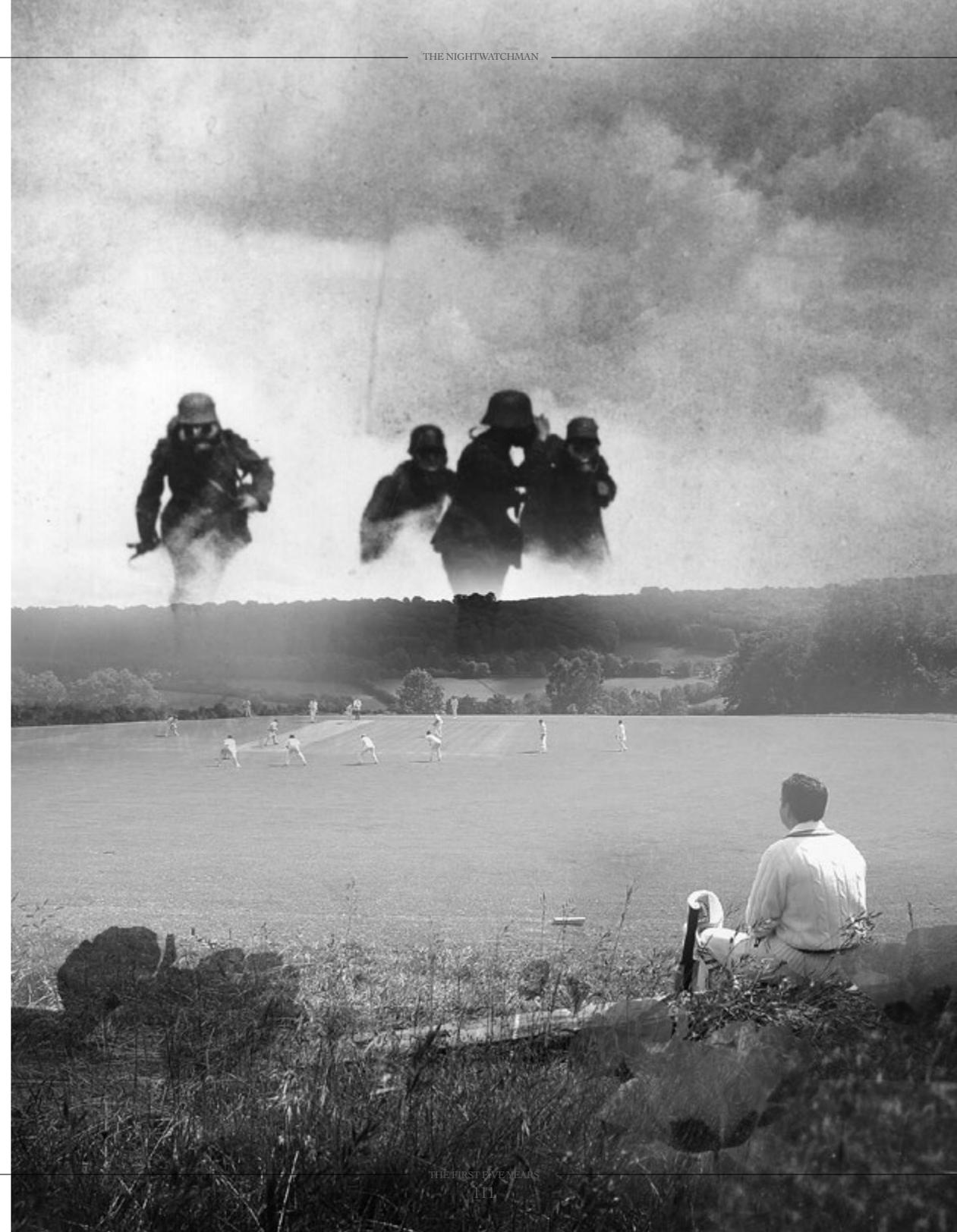
Towards the end of his life, Blunden wrote a poem about his father's death, the finality only hitting him when he realised his father had left behind his cricket bag. Something truly terrible must have happened: cricket was the opposite of death.

For Blunden cricket was not a life's work – his poetry did that job for him, and it's

for his writing that he's commemorated with 15 other war poets in Westminster Abbey. His later writing was blunted by his lifestyle: he had his cricket, and cricket defied reality and memory, leaving in the place of those artistic motors an elegant style and emotional reserve. In the years from 1915 to 1918, Blunden's fantasy of cricket had sustained him through the barrages of the Western Front. In return, he remained loyal to the game for the rest of his days.

We all have our reasons.

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BY THE LIGHT OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN

Charlie Connelly recreates Alfred Shaw's heroics on the Lusitania

SS Lusitania, Isfjord, Spitzbergen, 78.4° N, 15.9°E, 11.30pm, August 12 1894.

There was something about the deep gold of the sunlight that was prompting unfamiliar pangs of nostalgia. He wasn't one for sentiment and had never seen the appeal of reminiscence but there, standing alone on the deck, he began to feel a curious ribboning of his soul attempting to pull him back in time.

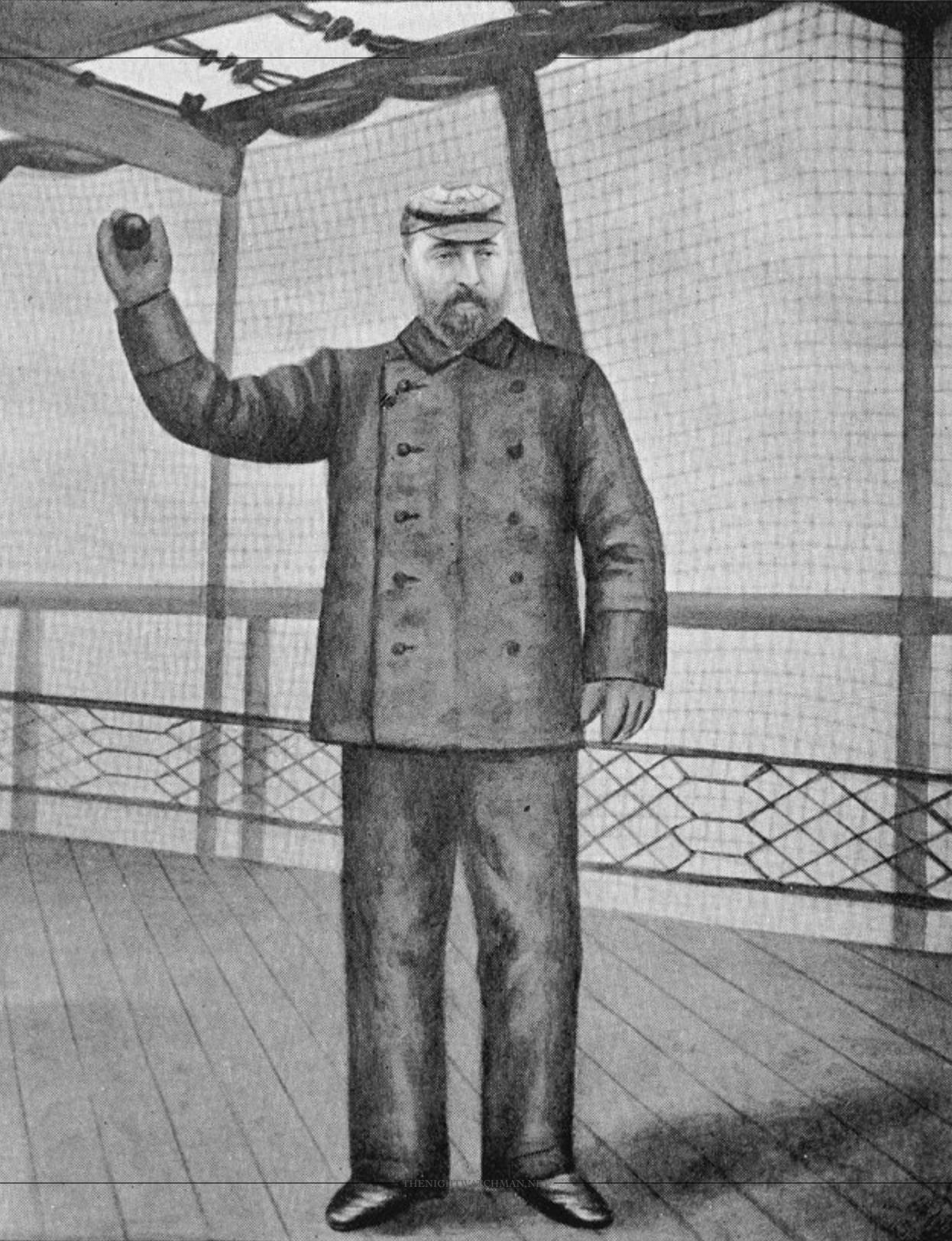
For once, everything was silent. The churning throb of the engines had long stopped and the last echo of their vibration had finally seeped out of his bones. He'd left behind the boisterous hubbub and cutlery tinkle of the dining saloon to come up here and take a rare opportunity to be alone for a few minutes. He looked out across the deep-blue water to the snow-sugared peaks beyond the layered basalt of the fjord. The honeyed beams filtered through the rigging and warmed his skin: it was nearly midnight yet his heavy-lidded features were being warmed by the sun. He'd travelled to some of the world's most remote places but this, this was something new.

Mr Lockyer's booklet, back in his cabin, had been right. "In summer everything

in these Arctic regions is beautiful," he'd written, "and the bright clearness of the atmosphere seems to affect spirits and appetite as well as sight."

Alfred breathed in the clear air and felt it penetrate right down to the bottom of his lungs. This was undiluted purity, he thought, the purity of creation; the purity of the air, the purity of the water and the purity of the landscape, unchanged since the time of the prophets, visited only by clutches of walrus-hunters and the occasional cruise. The previous year he'd travelled to the Holy Land and been appalled at the stink. He was unable to feel any reverence in Jerusalem due to the horrors of filth he saw all around him. It was only when the party had bathed in the waters of the Jordan where Christ himself had been baptised that he'd been able to feel any sense of wonder at his surroundings. Yet here...

Suddenly, movement. A trio of grey fulmar dove into his vision, swooping together towards the rippled surface of the sea, but before they landed on the water they were starlings, alighting in the field on the farm back in Burton Joyce. He was ten years old and just dozing off in the sunshine when



the flutter and squeak of dozens of birds brought him back to life with a jolt. He scrambled to his feet, picked up the wooden clappers that lay at his side and cracked them together. The birds flew into the air, arcing and turning as one mass, but landed almost immediately again in a far corner of the field. Alfred snatched up his horn and ran towards them, parping away as he did. He was almost upon them when the birds took flight again, lifting off in a swirling mêlée towards the neighbouring fields, veering directly over his head as they did so. In slowing to a jog and watching them leave, a beautiful sight against the clear blue sky, he didn't see the large stone over which he tripped and went sprawling in the dust, rolling over and landing on his back at the base of the hedge, blinking at the heavens.

A head loomed into his view from over the hedge. It belonged to Nathaniel, bird scarer from the neighbouring field.

"Alfred," he said. "Shall we play at some cricket?"

Alfred leapt wordlessly to his feet, brushed the dirt from his breeches and squeezed himself through a gap in the hedge.

An hour later the two boys were still engrossed in their game. Alfred had pushed his wooden clappers into the ground to use as a wicket while Nathaniel's made a passable bat when lashed together with twine. Alfred had been given an old ball by his elder brother Arthur and always kept it in his knapsack. It was still large in his child's hand but through hours of bowling it at the back wall of the house at home he'd gained impressive control and struck Nathaniel's wicket with confident regularity.

The starlings, meanwhile, had noticed Alfred's absence from his field and were

happily availing themselves of its contents without the slightest disturbance. When the farmer returned from an agreeable lunch of beer and cheese at The Wheatsheaf, his rosy countenance turned puce when he saw the local avians enjoying a hearty meal of his seed entirely unmolested.

"Alfreeeeeeed!" he roared, breaking into as much of a run as his beer-leaden legs would allow. "By heaven, youth, when I lay my hands upon you..."

Nathaniel caught his breath at the roaring and turned to see the farmer's rotund figure bustling towards them at a determined pace while waving his arms at the birds who ignored him completely. Noting the batsman's momentary dip in concentration, Alfred swished his arm round and the ball pocked against the makeshift wicket. "I have you again, Nathaniel!" he cried, before rushing forward, picking up his knapsack, dropping the ball into it and setting off at a sprint for home, arriving a full five minutes ahead of the farmer who would, between breathless pants and gasps, inform Alfred's father that his son's employment as a bird scarer was at an end with immediate effect.

"Would you like a drink of water, Fred?" asked Shaw senior.

"I would very much, Bill, yes," came the farmer's half-whispered reply, bent over with his hands on his knees.

The clumping of boots on the wooden stairs brought Alfred back to the fjord and he looked round to see Lord Sheffield struggling up the steep steps, cricket bat and leg guards clutched to his chest.

"Alfred, old man," he said, "let's pitch some wickets and get started."

He'd been in Sheffield's employ for a decade now and there was a deep mutual affection between them. The aristocrat looked after Alfred well - he never had to pay a penny towards any of these excursions - and Alfred had recognised in Sheffield from the start a bottomless passion for the game of cricket. For ten years Alfred had been receiving young cricketers from all over Sussex at Sheffield Park, the beautiful ground laid out by his Lordship to indulge his passion and try to raise the standard of Sussex cricket to a status worthy of the county's legacy as the cradle of the game.

Unfortunately barely one in a hundred of these lads had had even a remote chance of forging a successful career despite Sheffield footing the bill for all their expenses. Whenever Alfred would broach the subject of this pecuniary waste the Earl's eyes would sparkle with childlike wonder and he'd speak of the untapped talent that must lie among the Downs and in the furthest recesses of the county, where young men play with unrefined excellence for long hours into the gloaming on dusty, uneven wickets. With the greatest bowler in England to smooth off their rough edges and the true, lush turf of Sheffield Park on which to develop their skills, the time was surely near when Sussex would have a team to rival any in the land. "Why," he'd gush, "right now there could be a youth playing at cricket in a Sussex field who will go on to be as great as you, Alfred."

It astounded the old professional, from a poor family of frame-knitters in rural Nottinghamshire, that Sheffield was happy to invest so much money for such little reward, but he knew that without such a patron there was little prospect of a bright future for Sussex cricket. Alfred recognised in Sheffield the same

innocent love for the game he'd nurtured as a child back in Burton Joyce, that mixture of excitement, passion and hope, the unshakable belief that the perfect shot, perfect ball or perfect match was just around the corner.

The same look was clear in his eyes as he emerged onto the deck, spilling leg guards and gloves as he went. Alfred had had his confrontations with cricket's hierarchy over the years, he'd even once led the Nottinghamshire professionals on strike over contracts and benefits, but he was no iconoclast. The purity of the look in Sheffield's eyes when they lit up at the prospect of a game of cricket was more than enough for him.

They balanced each other. Both passionate about the game and both having contributed their own legacies in different ways, Alfred excelling from the very beginning - carried shoulder high for the last mile home to Burton Joyce after his victorious debut at Hoveringham while still a boy - to become arguably the greatest bowler England ever had; Sheffield able to propagate the game of cricket in a different way through the good fortune of his social and economic circumstances. The simple man who used to walk five miles each way without a penny in his pocket just to practise and the aristocrat who on a whim could bring a golden-haired lad from a distant village because he'd heard a rumour he could drive a ball like Grace in his prime, made curious but genuine friends.

"Just think of it, Alfred," said Sheffield as he panted up to him, "surely nobody can have played a game of cricket further north than this. Even if by chance the Laplanders had learned the game and played it out on the snowy wastes, they

are still hundreds of miles south of us here. Cricket, in Spitzbergen, by the light of the midnight sun! By heaven, Alfred, only if Franklin is found with a scorebook at his right hand can the game we're about to play be bested!"

Alfred had reacted coolly when a game of cricket on the deck under the midnight sun was first mooted, but the idea now appealed to him. This really would be a game like no other. Not an official match, obviously, but a game of cricket nonetheless, and about as close to the North Pole as any man had ever been; certainly any cricketer. The pull of memory assailed him again as he walked toward the prow of the ship while Sheffield set about creating a wicket and devising the format of the game.

Alfred had never felt the urge to reflect, to take stock, as he was feeling it now. It had always been about the next game, the next season. Yet looking out through the pure air across the fjord he realised it was almost exactly 30 years since the Nottinghamshire committee had sent him and Oscroft down to Lord's to play in a trial match for the Colts of England against the MCC and Ground. Thirty years! He'd taken 13 wickets in that match, all but two of them clean bowled, while Ozzy had made half centuries in both innings, yet it was the young Irish fellow in the team he remembered most, brought over from Dublin, a nervous, shy boy who had but one eye yet still took a marvellous running catch at square leg despite his handicap. For the first time in three decades he wondered what had become of him.

Just a year later he was turning out for the Players against the Gentlemen at The Oval, where he had always allowed himself

to cherish the memory of sneaking one through Dr Grace's defences in the first innings and knocking back his off stump. He was still learning his craft then, so at that moment, as the giant form of the Champion took two steps backwards, briefly surveyed his broken wicket and turned for the pavilion, he knew that he was good enough. He'd always suspected it, he'd always been told it was so, but in that instant he finally knew.

He watched the sun dip almost to its lowest point above the mountains. Chatter increased behind him as the volunteers for the game emerged onto the deck but he kept his back to them for a little longer, letting the golden light wash over and around him and trying to understand the yawning sensation that had opened up at the core of himself, a sense of time unravelling behind him. Was it that he didn't have many more seasons to look forward to that had brought about this rare burst of introspection? Or could it be that here, in this purest of places, his soul was being cleansed somehow, in the same way he'd felt physically cleansed in the waters of the Jordan?

A sense of mortality settled upon him. He thought of the time the England touring party's coaches had been swamped crossing Otira Gorge in New Zealand 15 years earlier, how he'd been one of the first out as the waters rose, wading waist deep and then swimming back to help the stragglers before they were swept away. If they had arrived five minutes later in all probability the party would have been washed away and drowned. Days later they were in Melbourne and Alfred was preparing to bowl to Charlie Bannerman what became the first ball ever bowled in Test cricket, despite the fact the party had only arrived from New Zealand after

an arduous crossing late the previous day. He remembered with a sigh how, before Bannerman had even made double figures, he'd lobbed a simple chance off Alfred's bowling to Armitage at mid-off, where inexplicably the chance was put down. Bannerman's subsequent 165 had grated on Alfred ever since.

Then he was back in the old Lord's Tavern sitting at the bedside of poor George Summers in the summer of 1870. Alfred had seen him struck by the ball from Platts and it was a painful blow, yet Summers had seemed only stunned at first. A doctor surmised that he'd be all right as long as he was kept quiet and had someone to sit with him until he was recovered. Alfred attended him for two days and nights and considered the man almost completely well until a herbal remedy arrived from Summers' mother. He boiled and drank the potion despite Alfred's and the doctor's scepticism and Alfred considered it was the cause of his agitation the following day, when he leaped out of bed and insisted a voice was speaking to him when there was none. The doctor pulled Alfred to one side and informed him: "You can get him home now as soon as you like; there is no chance for him."

With Sam Biddulph's assistance they transferred the stricken Summers to King's Cross on a bed squeezed into a cab and escorted him back to Nottinghamshire, where the poor man died within hours of arriving home.

Yet such a tragedy was notable for its rarity, and cricket had been good to him. At 51 years old the sun had looked to be setting on his playing career but here he was, fresh from leading the 1894 Sussex county bowling averages, his burning

cricketing star having not quite yet dropped behind the hills.

The boy from the family of stocking knitters had come a long way since those childhood games with Nathaniel. He'd seen extraordinary things, from the spectacular arrival at New York by sea with Willsher's 1868 touring side to the pyramids of Egypt with Mr Thomas Cook himself, the mountains of New Zealand to the waters of the Jordan that had cleansed Christ, and all because of cricket.

Now here he was, about to play a midnight game at the top of the world with the sun still as bright as an English summer afternoon. A rush of emotion welled in him, causing a sharp inhalation, the air rasping in between his teeth. Suddenly, everything was beautiful. Everything.

"Ahoy, Alfred!" Lord Sheffield's voice echoed around the fjord, summoning the ageing bowler to his trade. Sheffield crouched over his bat while fellow passengers took up makeshift fielding positions. Alfred removed his cap and slipped off his coat. Someone threw him the ball and he tossed it lightly from hand to hand.

"Come on, old-timer, do your worst," grinned the aristocrat with mock derision. The corners of Alfred's mouth flickered briefly with the hint of a smile, he gripped the ball in his right hand, looked down the wicket and took his first step towards the chalked bowling crease.

Over the next three-quarters of an hour Alfred Shaw, two weeks shy of his 52nd birthday, would bowl out an estimated 40 people on the deck of the Lusitania.

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JAMES JOYCE, CRICKET CORRESPONDENT

Simon Barnes pays tribute to his favourite (cricket) writer

So who's your top cricket writer? Cardus? Ashis Nandy? CLR James? There was that golden period in the 1980s when John Woodcock and Matthew Engel were both cricket correspondents filing daily. Roebuck, rest his soul, wrote some wonderful stuff. Haigh is hard to touch these days.

Objectivity is impossible. It's about who best presents the game to you: and it's one of those deeply personal choices that life tends to offer. Whose vision of cricket most illuminates your own? It's not about whether you agree with a cricket writer: it's the extent to which the writer enables you better to enjoy cricket or better to endure it. The writer who best makes the business of cricket meaningful: a pursuit in which wisdom can be found without losing sight of the game's essential triviality.

And so, without any disrespect whatsoever to the legion of excellent writers and excellent people I have

shared too many press boxes with around the small but always vivid world of cricket, I am going to plump for James Joyce. True, he didn't have the fearful yet soothing discipline of the daily file; he took seven years to write *Ulysses* and 17 more to write *Finnegans Wake*, which is leisurely even by the standards of old-fashioned Sunday-paper-men.

But Joyce remains the finest writer who ever wrote about the game. It's true to say that cricket isn't what Joyce is best known for, but that doesn't really matter. Joyce was an encyclopaedic writer: his subject was absolutely everything. That makes him a cricket writer even if he never mentioned the game: but in fact cricket turns up in each of his most significant works.

The first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ends in a mood of serene triumph: a personal vindication, a victory over injustice, a



sense of rising from lowest to the most high: a victim turned conqueror. The hero, Stephen Dedalus, was beaten for his inability to do his schoolwork: his explanation that his glasses had been broken was not accepted.

But Stephen, defying all convention, despite being the youngest and smallest boy in the school, dares to seek out the rector and explain. He is let off further punishment as a result, and is mobbed by his admiring schoolmates. And it is at this supreme moment that Joyce turns to cricket:

“The fellows were practising long shies and bowling lobs and slow twisters. In the soft grey silence he could hear the bump of the balls: and from here and from there through the quiet air the sound of cricket bats: pick, pack, pock, puck: like drops of water in a fountain falling softly into a brimming bowl.”

On, then to *Ulysses*. I've read and re-read *Ulysses* on every continent on earth, and in a fair few press boxes as well, always with the cover flat to the desk in a doomed attempt to avoid charges of showing off. One of the troubles with reading Joyce, and with reading *Ulysses* in particular, is that everything else seems – well – rather thin in comparison. A bit like Test-match cricket when compared to other forms of the sport: nothing wrong with them, but they do tend to lack the depth and variety.

Sport runs through *Ulysses*, cropping up in different forms again and again: so much so that I celebrated the centenary of Bloomsday – 16 June 1904, the single day on which the fictional events of the book take place – by writing a piece in which

I claimed that *Ulysses* is, in fact, a sports book and that Joyce is the world's chief sportswriter. The Ascot Gold Cup and the victory of the dark horse Throwaway is packed with all kinds of significance, and so to a lesser extent is the boxing match between Myler Keogh, Dublin's pet lamb, and Sergeant “Pucking” Percy Bennett, the Portobello bruiser.

There's also coverage of bicycle racing, motor-racing, swimming, tennis, Gaelic sports, especially putting the 16-pound shot, marksmanship – and the hero, Leopold Bloom is fascinated by the exercises of Eugen Sandow, the primordial strongman, precursor of Charles Atlas.

By comparison with these riches cricket gets a comparatively fleeting mention, in which Bloom, in a reverie about the sensual pleasures of indolence, hits on cricket as a perfect image of pleasurable torpor.

“Heavenly weather really. If life was always like that. Cricket weather. Sit around under sunshades. Over after over. Out. They can't play it here. Duck for six wickets. Still Captain Buller broke a window in the Kildare street club with a slog to square leg... heatwave. Won't last. Always passing, the stream of life, which in the stream of life we trace is dearer than them all.”

And Bloom proceeds to his bath, his lemon soap safe in one pocket and a mildly dirty letter in another. Can't play it here, eh? Interesting line to muse on as England prepare to enter the World Cup under the captaincy of Eoin Morgan of Ireland, Dublin-born even if he didn't acquire all his cricketing skills there.

Joyce saves his best bit of cricket writing for the last: almost the very end of *Finnegans Wake*. This is Joyce's book of the night, in which dreams and reality and the inconsequential happenings in a Dublin boozier are all mixed up with the entire history and mythology of the western world. The shadowy events and non-events are captured in a bewildering language of omnilingual puns and references that tend to be just a fraction out of reach. Two chapters from the end, the landlord of the pub and his wife, HCE and ALP, are in bed at half past quick in the morning, and at this great moment when they come together, so the book explodes with, of all things, cricket.

“She had to spofforth, she had to kicker, too thick of the wick of her pixy's loomph, wide llickering jessup the smooky shimney. And her duffed coverpoint of a wickedy batter, whenever she druv behind her stumps for a tyddelsly wink through his tunniclefft bagslops after the rising bounder's yorkers, as he studd and stoddard and truttet and trumpered, to see had lordherry's blackham's red bobby abbels, it tickled her innings to consort pitch at kicksolock in the morm.”

And so this bravura passage continues – with a flick at the bails for lubrication – “He'll win your toss, flog your old tom's bowling and I darr ye, barrackybuller, to break his duck!” This a great joyful ejaculation of language, a great hot gush of words for the joy of using them, revelling in the mad perversity of hurling the most English of games into the intimate doings in a bedroom above a taproom in Chapelizod. Here are jokes within jokes within jokes, one on top of the other until no one is really sure where he stands or where she lies.

“The game old merrimynn, square to leg, with his lolleywide towelhat and his hobbsy socks and his wisden's bosse and his norsery pinafore and his gentleman's grip and his playaboy's plunge and his flannelly feelyfooling, treading her hump and hambledown like a maiden wellheld, ovalled over, with her crease where the pads of her punishments ought to be...”

This is as far beyond pornography as life is to death. Cricket has become a rousing celebration of the most lively thing in all life. That's how it seems to me, anyway. Edmund Lloyd Epstein, in *A Guide Through Finnegans Wake*, doesn't see it quite like that: “The sexual act is vigorous enough, but it is all part of a game, as the dozens of cricket terms imply.... In fact the sex act is just that, an act, part of a game.”

But I feel that Epstein has suffered the fate of many academics who get too close to the books they study, something that happens to Joyceans more than most other kinds of academics: they lose the joke, the joy, the spontaneity. Even when it becomes clear, as the chapter unfolds, that the copulation isn't an unmitigated success (“You never wet the tea!”) it's still two pages overflowing with jollity.

It may be a game, it may be an act: but it never for a second ceases to be playful. Perhaps that's one of the things we tend to miss in cricket itself: too often we take it with all the terrible seriousness it seems to demand. Cricket, like all great works of literature, is about life and death, at least in part. Cricket is more complicated than most sports because of its life and death imagery: every innings is a kind of life, every dismissal a little death. But such

lives and such deaths are still playful: atishoo, atishoo, all fall down.

In this glorious crickety passage from the *Wake*, full of the love of cricket and the cricket of love, there is a celebration of cricket, of play, of playfulness, of life, of love. And even if it ends badly, or at least not as well as we had hoped at the toss, it's a damn good ride... and you can't argue with facts like that.

Joyce informs cricket writing, as he informs all forms of sportswriting. He does this not just when he mentions cricket or racing or boxing by name, but with every word he writes. That's particularly true of *Ulysses*, the book I know better than any other, for I have been reading it for most of my life. Let's consider its basic premise.

Ulysses takes the marvellous events of *The Odyssey*, which Homer relates over ten years' travel in which Odysseus (in Latin his name is Ulysses) roams the Mediterranean, living on his wits and longing to be home. In Joyce's retelling of the epic, Bloom roams Dublin in a single day, having encounters that recapitulate those of Odysseus, living on his wits – and in particular on his generosity of spirit – while longing to be home.

Thus Odysseus goes down into Hades and meets the shades of the dead; Bloom goes to a funeral and contemplates mortality. Odysseus has an encounter with the giant Cyclops and does him down; Bloom confronts a bigoted bar-room ranter.

The device mocks Bloom and his small concerns by comparing them with the adventures of one of the greatest epic heroes of antiquity – but at the same

times it elevates Bloom, the ordinary man – as ordinary a man as ever relished his breakfast – into an epic hero.

In Bloom's misfortunes and in his decency and good deeds, there is something great. Thus ordinary events and ordinary people are lifted from the context of their ordinary surroundings and shown to have eternal significance: mythic grandeur, soul-deep meaning. The trivial events of a Dublin day are as significant as the doings of gods and heroes on the long journey between Troy and Ithaca.

Thus Joyce takes the trivial and turns it into the stuff of the epic: never losing sight of its essential triviality, never forgetting its eternal significance. This is the tightrope that Joyce walks without fear, in the manner of Blondin crossing the Niagara Falls. On one occasion Blondin stopped halfway to cook himself an omelette, an appropriately homely touch, though to be truly Joycean he should have fried himself a kidney.

And this task – that of marrying the epic and the trivial – is what every cricket writer, what every sportswriter has to do, knowingly or not, every time the cursor starts to wink on the screen.

Take, for example, the central story in English cricket over the past 12 months. It is a classic tale of the impossible hero: the mighty battler that no one can live with or live without, and his rift with the leadership. The same story is told, with various differences, in *The Iliad*, in which Achilles falls out with Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces, and instead of fighting, goes and sulks in his tent.

This is not precisely the story of Kevin Pietersen and Alastair Cook, but the parallels are obvious. (Piers Morgan as a non-combatant lickspittle Patroclus?) Everybody heaved a sigh of relief when the turbulent hero was out of the way at last, and everybody missed him when the time came to fight again... leaving us all debating the eternal questions about the relationship of individual talent to corporate effort.

No one is bigger than the team, there's no I in team, what he did was unforgivable. Those things are as true for Achilles as for Pietersen: and in the same way, people rejoiced to see the back of him and wondered why results fell off when he was gone: not just because his abilities were missed but because the trauma of his departure affected everybody's morale and decision-making capabilities.

And yet at the same time, cricket is only a game. It's just a few people out there with sticks and balls. It doesn't matter one way or the other whether England win all their games at the World Cup or none of them. It is not – though here we must drop our eyes for a moment and have a brief moment of silence for Phillip Hughes – supposed to be a matter of life and death.

Cricket, like all sports, brings us stories of an epic dimension, of glorious melodramatic impact, showcasing individual heroes who perform mighty deeds and who fail sometimes more gloriously than they succeed. But mostly when these heroes speak, they show us that they really are not the gods and heroes that stalk the pages of Homer: "How do you feel in this, the

moment of victory, tall son of England's soil and beloved of the goddess Athena?" "Oh ox-eyed goddess who shows the paths of truth to men, it hasn't sunk in yet."

In other words, the people who perform great cricketing deeds for us sometimes assume the aspect of great heroes, and sometimes the things they do seem to have an archetypal significance that rings down the ages – but they're still human beings, fallible and limited, one moment fearful, another moment far too pleased with themselves, much as we are ourselves.

Thus to understand sport and its performers, we need at the same time to see the human weaknesses that unite us with the top athletes and to savour the achievements that separate us. Sport is both epic and everyday: both trivial and eternally significant. Sport exists only in the moment and yet it has a significance that carves deep fissures through the variegated seams of time.

That is the eternal appeal of sport: and it is the reason why sportswriting is so peculiarly satisfying. The sportswriter must accept that the world will always be aware of the essential triviality of the subject (and by implication of the writer): but the sportswriter has the daily consolation of dealing with the epic nature of the events that unfold before the press boxes of the world. That's always been good enough for me: after all, the same contradiction was good enough for James Joyce.

"(how's that? Noball, he carries his bat!) nine hundred and dirty too not out..."

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WAITING TO SEND

Gideon Haigh talks about what he talks about when writing

I have been asked to write a piece for *The Nightwatchman*. About what I'm not entirely sure. I feel faintly uneasy. But then, at this prospect, I always do, and somehow it has always ended up getting done.

It's made me think at any rate. Because this month is actually 25 years since the publication of my first cricket article, in *Wisden Cricket Monthly*. It concerned a County Championship match at The Oval, all four days of which I attended, in which Lancashire made 803 in reply to 9 for 707. At the moment, coincidentally, I am sitting in the living room of one of the players who made a hundred in that game, Mike Atherton, now my friend and *Times* colleague. He is at the other end of his dining-room table in the act of writing a column about England's selection for the third Ashes Test. He is using a battered old silver MacBook Air identical to mine. The tableau is a little like a literary Magritte painting. Because while I watch someone write a column, I'm contemplating a column about columns.

Mike is looking out the window just now. He hasn't typed anything for a

few minutes. We were chatting earlier about Gary Ballance and Ian Bell, the difficulty of sizing replacements up given the lack of pace and the shallow ranks of spin bowling in the County Championship. He's drawing a few ideas together, preliminary to committing his thoughts to print, as am I. Curious: I've never really thought about how people do this, including me. Yet it's the form of writing I've done most of: columns of 900-1,000 words about cricket, expressing opinion, describing action, capturing moments. And it's very different to my other main form of writing, of books, which I do alone, surrounded usually by other books. Today Mike and I have only one another for company; quite a lot of the time we tap away in a room full of other people describing similar events, at similar lengths, for similar publications.

In some senses, it's an activity that's changed little from a hundred years ago when the likes of Pelham Warner wrote for the *Morning Post* and Philip Trevor for the *Daily Telegraph*. After the First World War, Neville Cardus raised it to an art form in the *Guardian*. He might not recognise cricket any

more, but he could still relate to the act of writing about it. Certain unchanged aspects of cricket lend themselves naturally to opining: the amount of time it takes; the amount of that time in repose, between balls, between games; and now, funnily enough, the degree of its electronic diffusion, which means that many, many people see it who aren't there and who wish to check their views against those who are. As a proportion of overall output, there's probably more opinion generation than ever, television and radio bearing the main brunt of instant reporting.

In the apparatus dedicated to following the game, written media occupy a special, at times slightly uneasy space. We do not pay for our privileges: our lanyards reveal us to be "non-rights holders". We are less of a clerisy than in the days of, say, EW Swanton or John Woodcock, and are now in some respects quite marginal to the game. The true opinion shapers are the eminences of the commentary box, heavy with playing honours – Mike, of course, doubles as one of those. But there's still something about words nailed down, rather than in flight, that provokes response. As Cardus wrote in comparing the publics whom he served as music critic and cricket writer: "If I said that the *Hammerklavier Sonata* was the last thing Beethoven wrote, I'd get a couple of dozen letters, 75 per cent from foreigners. But if I said that Sir Leonard Hutton made 363 at The Oval in 1938, I'd get thousands from Yorkshiremen alone."

Mike's just got up to make coffee, wonders if I'd like one. Frankly, I should be making the coffee. I sometimes say that between us we played 115 Tests for

England, but I enjoy no natural authority. I'm no more than averagely opinionated about cricket; I am fair-to-poor at prediction, no better than ordinary as a judge of talent. My head is overstocked with cricket memories mixed with history and biography, while I've an abiding interest in cricket's business and politics, partly because these seldom seem to interest many others. But in this sense I don't feel myself much advantaged as a cricket writer, especially given my everyday earnest incompetence as a cricket player.

Which may be why I've continued at it – for the stimulation of the constant low-key stress involved in finding new things to say about old things. Batsmen hit a ball, bowlers try to get them out; players play well and badly, set records good and bad; players get picked and dropped; coaches, selectors and administrators are perceived as a result to have succeeded and failed. A writer of female erotica once said to me: "The challenge with writing my stuff is that sex is such a repetitive activity." I replied: "That's the challenge with writing my stuff too." How many ways can you describe the activities of cricket meaningfully, in such a way that it doesn't sound like something said many, many times before, but also in such a way that doesn't sound like a flight of gratuitous fancy? I've wondered this for 25 years, then consoled myself with the advice that the Martian gives Woody Allen in *Stardust Memories*: "You want to help mankind? Tell funnier jokes."

Being a current player, even an exceedingly modest one, adds a little layer of interest too. Winning; losing; staying in; getting out; attacking; being



attacked: it's not only big-time cricketers who do these things. Funnily enough, just last summer I developed a new sense of sympathy with modern players. I won my very first flag in 40 years as a club cricketer. On retirements I had until that time taken a fairly unsentimental line – that rational self-appraisal was the duty of every cricketer; that big wins should be regarded as opportune moments for graceful departures. But if top cricketers feel anywhere near as good as I did after forming part of the Yarras 3rds in the Mercantile Cricket Association C-Grade, then I don't wonder that quitting is hard, because my first instinct was not to rest on my laurels but to want to feel that good again.

Hmmm. Mike has just typed something. Must have been good, because he is – the best in the business, I think. And he just wrote something else. I bet it was smart. Unlike this rubbish I'm writing. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea. There's that voice – the voice that tells you you're missing the point, off on your own folly, speculating idly. But, of course, some days it's like that. A trend is hard to delineate. The ideas refuse to form. On the days you are writing about an actual game, the play may be uninspiring, the context unclear. You commit too early. You start too late.

Of course, you hanker to watch exciting, dramatic cricket; but, perhaps even more so, you wish it to occur on a timetable conducive to straightforward interpretation and punctual delivery. The two do not necessarily always go hand-in-hand. An example that sticks in my memory was the Lord's Test ten years ago, when England walked off to a “glory-glory-Ashes-coming-home” ovation at tea having bowled Australia

out for 190. As this was obviously the story, I duly wrote so for the *Guardian*. Then English wickets started falling. “Yes, that's not good for England,” I said after each. “But hey, the story is still their bowling and Australia's batting, right?” Not with England 7 for 92 it wasn't. My 1,000 carefully chosen words had perforce to be dustbinned, 1,000 more in praise of Glenn McGrath cobbled together. Not that the first lot were bad; they were just wrong for the occasion. Not that the second were any better; they were merely more current.

I swapped stories recently with Martin Johnson, who inevitably had a better one, about a 1993 B&H Cup group game involving Surrey and Lancashire at The Oval – the first in which cameras were used for line decisions. There was a run-out sent upstairs which revealed only David Shepherd's ample posterior, around which Martin crafted a typically wry and waspish column, then filed it with Surrey on 1 for 212 chasing 236 as he was embarking on a hot date. Unfortunately, Surrey promptly lost their last nine wickets for 18. Martin found himself on a phone trying to dictate an additional paragraph that a) salvaged the piece, and b) redeemed his evening. He had to admit he rather failed. A week or so later he ran into the game's individual award-winner, Neil Fairbrother, whom Martin had failed to mention in his piece at any stage. Fairbrother, he said, did a double-take. “I know what you're thinking,” said Martin, getting in first. “And you're right.”

Watching a day's cricket in order to write of it critically, I've often thought, is like trying to review a stage show in which two theatre companies attempt simultaneously to present different plays, absorbing into the cast their

unwilling rivals. Space and time fluctuate unhelpfully too. Perhaps you have 800 words when you want 1,000; perhaps you have 1,200 when you need only 700; perhaps you have early-Friday deadlines when you need the time to weigh and consider. At least in my experience, rare are the days you leave feeling you've got it even half-right, and there can be very bad days when you feel it is entirely wrong, and no sooner have you filed than you rewrite compulsively in your head. Pressing the “send” button is the best and worst moment of the day, the long-term question being whether relief or regret will be the abiding emotion.

Hmmm, I've just mentioned that 1993 game to Mike. He remembers it; he played in it; it's on YouTube. That's one thing that has assuredly changed since the days of Cardus: the tools at our disposal. When I started, some colleagues still arrived in the press box weighed down with *Wisdens*. Now it's more Google than googlies, no score being more than a few keystrokes away. Cricket writing features more stats because there are more stats handy; a “good stat” is almost tantamount to a scoop.

Back in the day, there was an almost-puritanical commitment to arriving at one's own perspective. In *The Australians in England* (1961), Charles Fortune described his shock at finding that a few reporters in the Lord's press box were listening to radios. What was the world coming to when scribes required help in arriving at their opinions? What would Fortune make of our quarters now, festooned with screens, humming with radio headsets, a nerve centre of social media? As a luddite, I confine myself to studying the occasional replay; but I've also sat next

to reporters who've barely raised their heads from Twitter.

This being so, I may be the wrong person to reflect on how this shades what we write. A broad consensus usually *does* form on a day's play, and always has, not because cricket journalists are particularly conformist thinkers, but because groups of people watching and discussing the same thing will tend to agree on the narrative that divides them least. In that sense, watching, reading and listening to other media, social and antisocial, expedites a process bound to happen anyway. But it does place a heavy onus on those in the business of the instant: one of my friends from Cricinfo recently described to me the experience of walking in the back of a press box to see a hundred or so laptop screens all showing his website. It also poses a challenge to stay fresh and new when daily journalism is at best a third draft of history, and possibly even a fourth. Given the game's modern fascination with epiphenomena – stats, quotes, replays, graphics – you might wonder where the incentive to watch the play still comes from. Perhaps in time a day's play will come to be regarded purely as a form of data generation. I hope I won't live to see it.

Mike's got his head down now. How's his piece going? “Almost done,” he says. “I was thinking more about the column I have to write tomorrow.” Yes, we – all of us – in a way are on this treadmill, meeting the moment's needs, shooting at moving targets. After a while you just have to draw a line under things, let your piece go and hope to do better tomorrow. “I'm just going to file,” says Mike. Think I might do the same.

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CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORGOTTEN

Hugh Chevallier remembers Phillip Hughes in the sad tale of Ben Stroud

On the face of it, there's little to link a game of village cricket with a Sheffield Shield match. Still less if you compare the venues: Upton Grey were hosting Crookham on a pitch grazed by sheep, while New South Wales were playing South Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground. And the connection recedes even further if you look at the dates: the village game happened in August 1933, the Shield match in November 2014.

Yet there is a fearful symmetry to these two encounters, a symmetry that gives irrefutable proof of the enduring danger of cricket. Both matches were abruptly abandoned when a player was fatally injured doing something he loved. There were differences. After Phillip Hughes was struck – in a fixture being live-streamed on the internet – bulletins flew around the globe, the cricket community could talk of nothing else, and a nation was consumed by sorrow. In Ben

Stroud's case the blow was witnessed by a handful and, though there was widespread grief in a small community that keenly felt the loss of a dear son, his death has left barely a trace.

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The field at the back of my north Hampshire garden has grown many crops over the years. Just now it's potatoes. In the spring, a squadron of tractors builds up wave upon wave of ridge and furrow, ridge and furrow. The evening sun transforms the ridges into miniature mountain ranges that stretch to the far distant hedge. As the days lengthen, young plants burst from the ridgetop and the earth turns green. By midsummer, the sea of leaves is white-flecked with potato flowers. The scene has a beauty, and a sadness. For more than a century, the whites would have been worn by cricketers; the flowers would have been daisies in the short-cropped

turf. And the farmworkers here would have been discussing tactics with the skipper or chatting by the rickety pavilion, not contractors brought in to blitz a field with as much heavy machinery as nearby RAF Odiham.

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In 1964, the year Geoffrey Boycott made his Test debut on a bigger stage, cricket left Upton Grey. It's not clear when it arrived, though the village were playing Basingstoke in 1842 – and defeating them a year later. Odiham, three miles away, trace their cricket history to 1764, so perhaps Upton Grey began in the 18th century too. Like every rural club, they drew from those who worked on or with the land. The captain might have lived in the big house, but few of his team did. Their days were spent in farm or forge, yard or stable, garden or mill. Village cricket allowed landowner and landworker to play together – and compete – on a proverbially level playing field. Except the downland of North Hampshire is rarely flat, and the slope at Upton Grey beat Lord's into a cocked hat.

After the war, the influx of newcomers picked up speed. (I would be one many years later.) The new villagers worked in Basingstoke or Reading or London, and breathed prosperity into the community. Houses (and their prices) were done up. All looked well. But the hike in property values – and rents – was not reflected in rural wages, and many who worked in the village found it harder to live here. Meanwhile many who did live in the village but worked elsewhere found a busy week punctuated by a lengthy commute made it harder to devote

time to a game of cricket, let alone the preparation of a pitch. Though farming was not yet today's agro-industrial monster, employment in the countryside was growing thinner, and the club struggled to raise a team from Upton Grey and the two nearest hamlets, Weston Patrick and Tunworth. More and more, numbers were made up by friends, or friends of friends, from Fleet or Basingstoke. The heavy lifting, though, fell on an ageing and diminishing band.

By the early 1960s, the ground was leased to the club at the nominal rent of a shilling a year by Jim Turner, from Manor Farm. Peter Bedford, the last secretary of the UGCC, describes Turner as “a straightforward man focused on his farming – in which cricket had no role to play”. To others, he was known as “Prairie Jim” or “Texas Turner” for his strong dislike of hedges.

The team's fixtures were starting to dwindle, recalls Peter Carter, another member of the side in its last years, and who first turned out for the club in 1947, aged 13, and later had a trial for Hampshire. The start of the 1964 season was particularly slow: week after week went by without any cricket, though several matches – including the fixture against the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston – were planned.

What happened next is unclear. One version has Turner, apparently without warning or discussion with the club, deciding that good land was going to waste and taking a plough to the pitch. Another claims that the farmer, seeing the team drifting towards oblivion, gave a year's notice of his



intentions. Whatever the truth, as the share bit into the turf, so a club quietly vanished, the ground destined to grow wheat, barley, oats – and now potatoes. Bedford and Carter agree there wasn't the outrage one might have expected. There were other reasons the club was floundering: a curmudgeonly landlord in The Hoddington Arms, where the team repaired for tea and more, had made them feel unwelcome, the pavilion-cum-shed was falling down, and the sense of camaraderie wasn't what it was. Yet if you find someone who grew up in the village, there can still be a trace of anger.

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Nearly 25 years ago, my wife and I moved into a tiny cottage in Tunworth, a mile or so from Upton Grey. I was keen to play some village cricket, and asked around for a local team willing to put up with my shortcomings. There had been a club, I was told, but it had folded some while back. Before the subject took a different course, my neighbour recalled that someone involved with the Upton Grey team had died during a game, but it was a long time ago, memories were hazy and details hazier still. Anyway, I made do with an occasional team put out by colleagues at AA Publishing. Or they made do with me. We played an execrable standard, but we had fun.

Twelve years on, and with two growing children, our Tunworth cottage was bursting at the seams. We eventually fetched up in Upton Grey, in a house named Spinners. I assumed a connection with the wool trade, but in fact a previous occupant

called Malcolm Hooker – apparently a slow bowler of some talent – had been keen to leave his stamp on the village. The apostrophe, if ever one existed, had been mislaid before we arrived. The guilty party was unlikely to have been Hooker's successor at Spinners. Like me, Jeremy Westwood was a cricket-lover and a publisher. Unlike me, one imagines, his daughter would marry Robin Martin-Jenkins, the Sussex all-rounder and son of the inestimable Christopher. Given that I was now on the staff at John Wisden & Co, the various cricket connections suggested this was the right move.

Over the next dozen years, a couple of people, after hearing I worked for *Wisden*, told me the field at the back of my house had once been the village cricket ground. No one knew anything of the chap who had died – or maybe they did and I never asked the right question. The club and the pitch had faded like a rainbow after a shower. Once or twice, as I gazed from the garden gate on a warm evening, the sounds peculiar to a game of village cricket would come to me. The thwack of a mistimed drive; the call for another amble up the wicket; the "Ooh!" from fielders as another catchable slip chance goes begging; the rattle of leather on ash as a wicket falls; the slap on the back for a successful bowler; the gentle commiseration for an out-of-form lower-order slogger on yet another duck. The soundtrack, of course, was to my own cricketing life. Of summer after summer of Upton Grey cricket there was not the faintest echo.

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This spring, I was asked to write a piece – this piece, it transpires – for *The Nightwatchman*. I'd long meant to find out more about the story I heard almost a quarter of a century earlier, yet done nothing. The commission was the spur, though initial enquiries proved dispiriting: a friend who is also the village historian had no record of a cricket pitch, let alone anything so remarkable as a death. Jeremy Westwood was similarly in the dark; he knew nothing of the men and boys who had played for the village, not even that there had been a pitch beyond his back garden. A family who for 40 years or more had lived in the big house up the hill could confirm the site of the pitch, but that was as far as it went. And a Google search proved fruitless.

Or so it seemed. Then my wife tried a different combination of terms, and sent me a link to a short article in the *Western Daily Press*, dated 23 August 1933. I shelled out the £6.95 that allowed me to read beyond the first few words, and the story emerged:

CRICKETER KILLED

Struck on Back of the Neck by the Ball

While playing cricket at Upton Grey, near Basingstoke, Hampshire, Benjamin George Stroud (28), of Weston Patrick, near Basingstoke, was struck by the ball on the back of the neck, and died on the way to the hospital.

At the inquest, yesterday, Charles Toomer stated that he was batting with Stroud when the bowler delivered a well-pitched ball and Toomer hit it. The ball hit Stroud as he turned his head to avoid it.

Dr E. A. Widdowson stated the death was due to a ruptured artery at the base of the brain, and a verdict of "Accidental death" was returned.

The parallel with Phillip Hughes was shocking. As Andrew Ramsey, writing in *Wisden 2015*, said: "He had received a blow to the left side of his neck, just below his helmet. The impact crushed his vertebral artery, causing it to split and resulting in a massive brain haemorrhage... Fewer than 100 cases had been recorded in medical literature, only one inflicted by a cricket ball. In most instances death had been immediate." Could Ben Stroud have been that one previous instance?

The footage of Hughes putting his hands on his knees and then falling, face first, to the ground was appalling, yet this brief, detached report of a long-ago death affected me as much. It happened in my village – might even have been visible from my back window. How could I not have known about it? Armed with a name and a date, I needed only a few minutes' research in Basingstoke Library to unearth a detailed account, published six days later, in the *Hants and Berks Gazette*.

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The game between Upton Grey and Crookham starts at three o'clock on Saturday, 19 August. The pitch is no friend of batsmen, and earlier in the season a visiting team from Water End dismissed them for 18. So Upton Grey's 57 for 5, reached in 45 minutes, has the look of a decent total. Charlie Toomer, the No.3, is on 22; Ben Stroud, the team's keeper, is on three. It is Toomer's second summer in the team,

and his all-round talents make him an instant success. After his first season he sweeps the board at the end-of-year awards, winning the cups for best batting and bowling averages, as well as the five-shilling purse for most catches. It's no surprise he's now vice-captain.

The scorebook – or at least the relevant page – survives, but for the crucial delivery the bowler's name does not, unless it's Hall, with three wickets under his belt, or Chillery, who has cleaned up the other two. Whoever it is, he loses his length, and the batsman's eyes light up. "The ball came straight to me," Toomer later remembers, "and was rather well pitched. I hit it rather harder than any ball I had hit during the match."

Charlie Toomer lives outside the main village. His employer is Percy Bullivant, a Yorkshireman who bought the stately Tunworth Old Rectory from the church in 1917. Bullivant prefers horses to cars, and Toomer works as a groom. His modest home is a cottage next to the allotments and opposite the tiny school. Neighbours play for Upton Grey too: Jack Lucas, who runs the Tunworth post office, has just been bowled for five.

Ben Stroud, quite tall for a wicket-keeper, comes from a long-established Weston Patrick family, and as if to prove it he lives with his parents, Edward and Emily, in a house called Strouds Cottage. He works as a labourer for WJ Hunt, and is fit because Hunt's yard is in Herriard, at the top of a long and unrelenting hill. Sport occupies much of his free time, and when he's not playing cricket,

chances are he'll be on the village tennis court. Or arranging whist drives to help fund the two clubs. Or helping out with the scouts. At 28, Ben Stroud is a couple of years younger than Toomer; he is a busy, happy, cheerful, optimistic young man, full of energy and buoyed by the love of his family, neighbours and teammates. And of his fiancée, Peggy McCallum.

"It went straight back without touching the ground, and would have hit Stroud full in the face," recalls Toomer at the inquest. "But he turned to avoid it, and the ball struck him on the back of the neck. He fell to the ground." The effect of the impact is catastrophic and instant. The story is later told that Stroud grunts a terse "Bugger!" and collapses. Fielders and teammates rush to him, now unconscious, and bundle him into a car. It speeds along the narrow road that twists through the downs to Odiham. In the car is Walter Kinge, the Upton Grey captain. He believes Stroud dies on the journey, and at 4.15 Dr Widdowson, after dashing to the small hospital, confirms Kinge's fears.

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The inquest at Odiham's Parish Room on the afternoon of Tuesday, 22 August comprised Dr Widdowson, from the hospital, and HM Foster, coroner for the Aldershot district; there was no need for a jury. Emily Stroud identified her son's body. Widdowson said a post-mortem showed the deceased had been in good health and that he sustained an external injury on the left side of the neck, though not a fracture of the skull. A ruptured vertebral artery

at the base of the brain had caused an extensive haemorrhage. Charlie Toomer, Walter Kinge (employed as a chauffeur in Weston Patrick) and Ernest Tipper, the secretary, all gave accounts of what had happened. Answering questions from the coroner, Toomer said there had been no rough play and that the game was being carried on according to the rules. The verdict, as the papers reported, was accidental death.

The next day, the little church of St Lawrence in Weston Patrick could not contain the mourners. Despite it being a working day, all Ben Stroud's teammates had come, plus several from the Crookham side. He was buried beside his older sister Rose, who had died, aged 29, six years earlier; his matching gravestone would later read "IN LOVED MEMORY OF BENJAMIN GEORGE STROUD – ACCIDENTALLY KILLED AT CRICKET". The *Hants and Berks Gazette* gives details of the flowers and their tributes. They number 69.

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Life in the village somehow went on. It had to. Before the club AGM the following February, held in the Scout Hut where Stroud helped out, the chairman, the Reverend Henry Sewell, said a brief prayer, and the meeting stood in silence for a few moments. The minutes start with the incongruous words "1933 was another successful season", before recounting one or two highlights of Stroud's career – he shared a partnership of around 70 with Kinge against Burkhams in 1929. The meeting also decided "that there should be no match on the third Saturday in August... it was resolved to

keep that day as a memorial to their late comrade, Mr B Stroud".

In terms of results, 1933 had been a reasonable summer: of the 24 completed matches, 13 were won and 11 lost. Toomer dominated the bowling, and his figures, even on helpful pitches, proved his skill: 115 wickets at 4.33 apiece. The *Hants and Berks* had reported him as being "very deeply affected" by the tragedy, but he was not a man to show it, at least not publicly, and he accepted the captaincy for 1934. He promptly trimmed his bowling average, claiming 88 at 3.71, and led the batting. The results matched his achievements: 18 wins, four defeats and a draw.

In 1939, the club shut down for the duration of the war, and the ground fell quiet. When cricket returned, Toomer did not. He was in his early 40s, and had left Tunworth. He came back for a few matches in the 1950s, but his children were growing up, and his connection with the village had weakened.

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During my research, I discovered that Toomer's son, Phil, lives in Basingstoke. He knew of the awful events of 1933, though it was his mother, and never his father, who spoke of them. Phil played cricket too, and he remembers his dad giving him clear advice: "Always watch the ball; always watch the ball."

Ben Stroud had no children, but his sister Rose had two daughters, Emily and Eileen, who grew up with their grandparents. Eileen married Frank Young, a stalwart of Upton Grey CC, and their son Mick (Ben's great-

nephew) now works at Manor Farm, which includes the old cricket pitch. The field is called Home Bidden, betraying no hint of its past. Back in the 1990s Mick and I played a couple of games for a Hoddington Arms side. But I never thought to ask him about the half-forgotten tale of a player being killed during a game of cricket...

Phil and Mick have known each other for years, often going beating together. But neither had any inkling about their connection until this June. And it dawned on me that I also have a faint link to the tragedy. Jack Lucas, who had batted at No.4 on that day in August 1933, was Tunworth's postmaster - and the cottage where I lived in Tunworth was The Old Post Office.

The sudden death of any young person is horrifying. It is impossible to imagine the grief of Edward and Emily, burying a second child in St Lawrence's

churchyard. Spare a thought too for Charlie Toomer, who never talked about what happened that day, when he middled a ball from a Crookham bowler. As far as I am aware, and I have consulted cricket historians with a deep knowledge of the game, this is the sole instance of a batsman being killed by a teammate, the only time the non-striker has died after being hit by the ball.

That isn't precisely how Phillip Hughes died - he was struck by a bouncer from Sean Abbott, a New South Wales opponent - but the injury that caused the deaths was identical. There is one other poignant parallel between the two tragedies. Sitting in the stands at the SCG were Hughes's mother, Virginia, and his sister Megan, who saw the events unfold. The scorer for Upton Grey that August afternoon, and who also watched the events unfold, was Stroud's fiancée, Peggy McCallum.

...



EDWARD + EMILY STROUD SON BEN DAUGHTER EVA + A FAMILY FRIEND
EDWARD STROUD GRAND DAUGHTERS EMILY + EILEEN, EMILY AND FRIEND



Failing.
To fail.
To be a failure.



DECLINE AND FAIL

Anthony McGowan and Chris Riddell combine to illustrate failure

I suppose it's revealing of the kind of person I am, that my abiding memory of Botham's Ashes is not the triumph of the great man's two crashing centuries, or that devastating spell of 5 for 1, or even of Bob Willis's monstrous sex face as he rampaged in to take 8 for 43 at Headingley, but rather a sound: the clunk, like a slightly out-of-tune marimba, as a portly, bearded slow left-armer, Ray Bright, looking like the sort of country policeman who'd be glad of a lock-in and would happily turn a blind eye to any minor licensing misdemeanours in exchange for six pints of scrumpy and a frothing handjob from the barmaid, propelled his arm-ball into Botham's middle stump.

"Botham fails again," said a stern but not unsympathetic Jim Laker.

It was the second Test, and Botham's transfiguration was imminent, but here he was at the nadir, walking across the empty Lord's outfield to a silence as profound and resonant as the

aching seconds that follow the last note of Mahler's fifth symphony, or the accidental breaking of wind by a loved and respected elderly headmaster at morning assembly.

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Failing. To fail. To be a failure.

There comes a time in every self-aware person's life when you realise that you've failed. Perhaps even that you've moved to the next stage. That, like a diligent top-order batsman, you've converted a handy start, and *gone on*. And so, rather than having simply failed in some limited sense, there's been a Hegelian transformation of quantity into quality. The verb has become a noun. You are now a Failure.

Botham, of course, was in no sense a failure. But, oddly, some of the cricketers I've been fondest of were, at least on the greatest stage, failures. Some, like the elegant Paul Parker (one Test, average 3.2) or Mark Lathwell (two Tests,



average 19.5), seemed too delicate, too fragile physically, mentally to survive. My all-time favourite cricketer, Wayne "Ned" Larkins, (13 Tests, average 20.54), in truth probably just wasn't quite good enough - though he could hit a cricket ball harder than any other English batsman of his generation. And what of the mystery of Ramprakash and Hick? Both sublimely talented, towering above every other player in the county game, and yet with such modest achievements in Test matches? So why do I love these, the failures, more even than a Boycott or a Gooch, who made the most of what they had, and what they had was plenty?

I've spent much of my life contemplating failure, both as an abstract concept and as a real presence, the elephant in the room of my life, trumpeting and defecating with joyless abandon. And as a theorist of failure I'm like one of those scientists who experiments on himself, injecting the untested drug, swallowing the untried serum, carrying the glowing block of radium in his trouser pocket.

Failure is protean. It can be sly and subtle, painting your days with a Chekhovian melancholy; or it can be brutal, belching a blast of coprophagic breath in your face. Our businesses fail, our marriages fail, our hopes fail. There are earnest strivers who just can't quite make it; there are public-school slackers who can't be bothered; there are mad jabberers who are, at least, denied the knowledge of their own failure.

But even if failure is a steady drizzle that drenches all, there are areas of low pressure that suck in the misery. Failure hotspots.

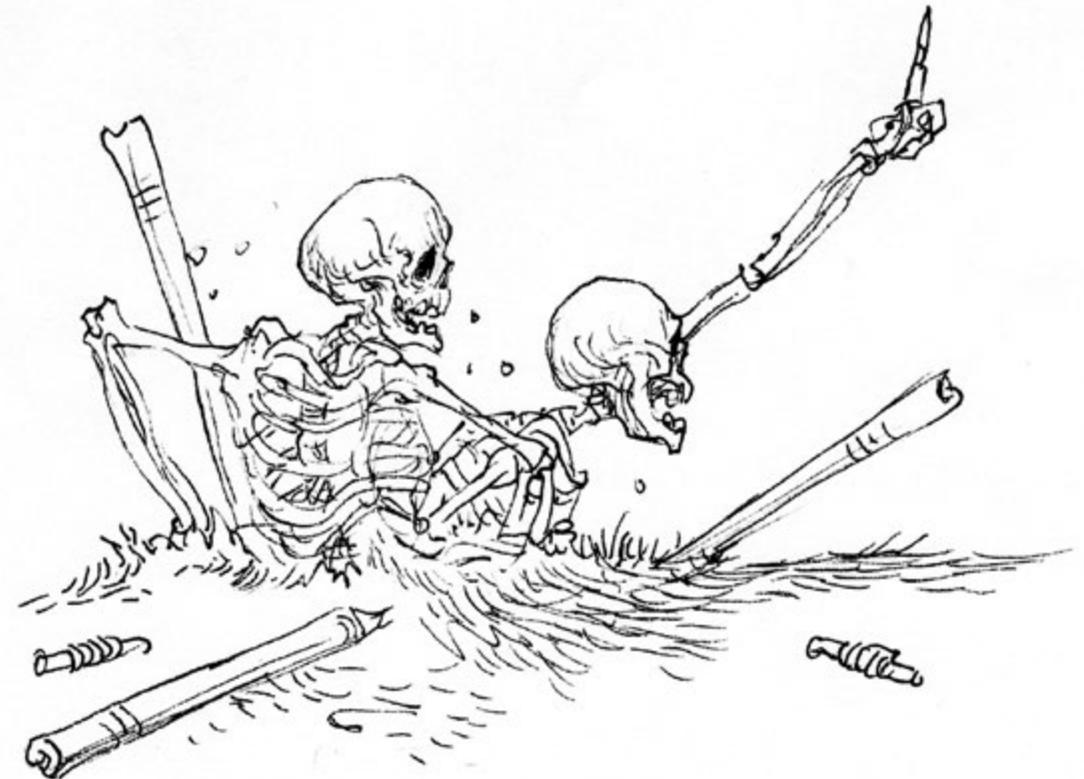
Cricket is, of course, one of these. Is there any other sport in which the term failure is applied so readily? I suppose that golfers can fail to make the cut, or a try can fail to be converted, but somehow it seems to be cricket in which failure on both the micro scale of the individual innings and the macro scale of the career comes into such precise focus.

But failure's targeting is even more precise than this. Failure is a batsman's prerogative. We hardly ever talk about a bowler failing in the same way. And I guess this is somehow wrapped up in the tragedy of batting. A bowler makes a mistake, he shrugs, throws out a vague, "Sorry skip," and he gets another go. The batsman miscalculates by an inch and nicks one into the keeper's huge maw. Or he moves a fraction of a second late and hears that dry rattle behind him, like the skeleton warriors in *Jason and the Argonauts*, rising from the dragon's teeth.

Yes, it's batsmen who fail.

And that failure hurts. It hurts the pros who pay their mortgages with runs. Hurts the casuals, who will have to spend another week of office drudgery, replaying the fatal error; whose moments before sleep will be filled not with the memory of that solid drive or that meaty pull shot, the resonance of which travels up the arms and into the shoulders, but the hapless waft, the miss, the plinked catch to mid on, the savage victory whoop of that hateful trundler...

But there is another area of life stalked by the possibility, or reality, of failure. Writing. "Failed" goes in front of "writer" the way "Bakewell" goes before



OR HE MOVES A FRACTION OF A SECOND LATE, AND HEARS THAT DRY RATTLE BEHIND HIM...

“tart”. Failure is the past, present or future of almost every writer, marking out our early struggles, our present slump, our future obscurity. And even the terminology is the same. Authors undergoing a slump get *dropped* by their publishers...

So what chance, then, for a writer who plays cricket?

It might be helpful if I sketch out my own flirtations with failure, cricketing and otherwise – “flirtations” being a polite way of saying I pulled down my knickers, raised my skirt and let failure have its way with me round the back of the pavilion.

In my teens, in the 1980s, I was a decent club cricketer, playing against power-station and pit teams in the lower reaches of Yorkshire league cricket. I was an opening batsman, and would generally blaze away to 20 or 40 or 60 (shunning the aesthetically less appealing 30s, 50s and 70s). Back then I was a particular kind of failure: one who perhaps should have kicked on, gone up a notch or two, but never did.

Perhaps it was all summed up one day in Mirfield, a grim little town near Dewsbury. Though I suppose if you don’t know where Mirfield is, being told it’s near Dewsbury probably won’t help much. Just imagine a melancholy settlement of soot-dappled stone and bubonic brick. Add some rain, the fine sort that hangs in the air and soaks a man down to his vest and roll-up.

We were chasing. I opened the batting and we chuntered along at a decent rate. But a flurry of wickets at the other end meant that the game was gone. I

was playing out the last over for a losing draw (an option in those days – you got a point out of the game if you could cling on to the bitter end). There were a couple of loose ones in that last over, and I clipped them away. The final ball was a long hop. I thought about flicking it over the short leg-side boundary, but was worried that I might give a catch and lose us the precious point. So I let it hit my thigh pad. There was a feeble appeal, and to the glee and surprise of the Mirfield lads, the local umpire gave it out. I slumped back to the pavilion, annoyed at having failed to salvage anything from the game.

A little while later our scorer came in. He was something in between a simpleton and an idiot.

“How many?” I asked, thinking I had 80 or so.

“99.”

“What? Why didn’t you give us a shout? I could have clattered that last one.”

“I hadn’t counted ‘em up....”

In truth, I didn’t really mind. I was 19. I assumed there would be many more centuries on offer.

Thirty years later, there had been none.

University, girls, drink, London, work. I stopped playing cricket. Started trying to write. And so a whole new world of failure opened up for me. My first book, a recasting of Dante’s *Inferno* for teenagers, received rejections that were clearly designed – perhaps as an act of kindness – to crush all hope. Several were so depersonalised it

was hard not to take them personally. “Dear Sir/Madam, Your novel/short-story/play/poetry collection (*please delete as necessary*)... etc etc.” One agent threatened to call the police if I sent her anything else.

But eventually, with the help of a few strokes of extraordinary luck, I found myself first agented and then published. And for a while it seemed that I had evaded the beast, the gaunt spectre of failure, performing its grotesque ballet. Alas, getting published merely provides more opportunities for failure to cavort. Will there be reviews? Will people buy it? Will the second book get a deal? And what about prizes? In the children’s book world there are many awards, national and local. Although, of course, this is a good thing, it turns out in practice to be merely another zone of anxiety. At least the adult literary novelists need only lament their failure to make the Booker shortlist. But in a typical week I might find that I’ve been shunned by Orkney, spurned by Huddersfield, ignored by Leeds and laughingly dismissed by Cornwall.

And those royalty statements... Publishing works by a system of advances paid to authors. This advance is paid back through royalties until, in time, the book has “earned out” and everyone rejoices. But what if you never earn out? What if each statement shows only the massive debt, reduced perhaps by 20 quid thanks to a deal with a remainder bookshop or an unsavoury school book club or a bulk purchase by a Kazakhstani warlord who wants something to sound-insulate his torture cells?



OR A BULK PURCHASE BY A KAZAKHSTANI WARLORD, WHO WANTS SOMETHING TO SOUND-INSULATE HIS TORTURE CELLS...

And so, even when published, my life still felt unfulfilled. I don’t know why, but for me the idea of failure has always been encapsulated by the concept of the packed lunch. Most days I cycle down to the British Library, convinced that the routine and the atmosphere of learning might help to jump-start my faltering creativity. The seats are comfy, and if the wi-fi is flakier than a Greggs cheese slice with psoriasis, that simply helps me avoid distractions. But there’s something about sitting with a thermos flask and a cheese sandwich and, perhaps,

a wagon wheel or Cadbury's mini-chocolate roll that makes you think that your life has reached a dead end.

I recall once going down to my locker in the British Library basement to recover my lunchtime sandwich. I'm number 351. At 352 there's one of those beautiful raven-haired Italian PhD students, another of the charms of the library. I imagine that she is named after a classy pizza - Fiorentina, Marinara, Capricciosa (though probably not Meat Feast). A brief look passes between us, and with it comes the knowledge that something extraordinary could happen were it not for the fact that, on my part, I'm happily married to the lovely Mrs McG, a woman with an immense capacity for revenge, and on hers that she doesn't want to. Then I open my locker, and out flows a deafening miasmatic stench, as if a hyena had shat in there. It's my cheese sandwich - some noxious French stuff, soft as bronchitic mucus, left over from a dinner party the week before. Capricciosa's face wrinkles in disgust. I think about trying to explain the sandwich, the cheese, the dinner party, but she's already reeled away. She's probably assumed that I store my soiled underpants in the locker. I lunch alone in the desolate sunshine of the courtyard, even the pigeons shunning my crumbs.

But one particular encounter brought home to me the truth of my failure in life. I was sent out one night to the Tesco Metro for emergency supplies. The embourgeoisement of my particular part of North London has taken the rather paradoxical form of a superabundance of charity shops. I had to pass six of them on the way, most of which had

left out their unsellable stock for the bin men. There were broken-backed pushchairs, spoutless teapots, baby mattresses stained with troubling areas of burnt umber and dull amber. Then I saw through the murk a figure hunched beside one of the piles. It was a man going through the rubbish. He was just a notch or so up from utter dereliction, and his face, curiously boneless, wore a haunted look. Care in the community, I guessed. Then my eye was caught by an object on top of the pile of trash, next to which he crouched. It took me a second to work out that it was a lady's hat. The sort of thing a divorced woman would wear to her second wedding in, say, 1963. A veil made of nylon netting. Some other sad decorative elements - a feather, a child's finger bone, a teabag. And, as I watched, I saw the man stretch out his arm and take hold of the hat. And then, as I knew he must, he placed the hat on his head and tamped it down. At the same moment he looked up at me - I was only a couple of yards away by this time. Our eyes met, and I saw the spasm of shame pass across his face. And then his expression changed again, and it became a look of recognition and understanding. He knew that if our places were reversed - if I'd been the person to see it first - then I too would have taken the hat and put it on *my* head. And then I looked down and saw that my arm had, of its own volition, reached out towards the hat. I filled the gap in time with a throat-clearing noise, and then we exchanged almost imperceptible nods, and I hurried on to buy the oven chips, a three-pack of Mars bars and a tin of Andrews liver salts.

On the way back I saw that the man had gone, and so, of course, had the hat. That was probably a good thing.



I IMAGINE THAT SHE IS NAMED
AFTER A CLASSY PIZZA - FIORENTINA,
MARINARA, CAPRICCIOSA (THOUGH PROBABLY
NOT MEAT FEAST).

Not sure how I would have explained it to Mrs McG.

I suppose the point of this was to show how close I felt to utter failure, to being the bum with the hat, curled up for the evening on the child's stained mattress, a broken teapot for his pillow.

And it was about this time that I joined The Authors XI cricket team. Formed by agent Charlie Campbell and novelist Nicolas Hogg, it brought together writers of varying degrees of renown and cricketing ability, linked only by their tragic, often unrequited love of the game. Although I hadn't played regularly for 25 years, I hurled myself into it, like a hippo in a mud wallow. I vaguely assumed that I'd still be OK,

particularly given the fact that we'd be playing other similarly cavalier outfits made up, I assured myself, of Southern softies, fops, beaux, dilettantes. What followed would have been an education, had I not already been the grandmother who sucked the egg of failure.

The bitter reality was that I was too old. I couldn't do what I once could and, even when I was good, I was only *quite* good.

Now I was quite bad.

I still liked to open the batting, but rather than flay a quick 40, I was now labouring over a slow 12. On my good days. And the bad days...? Well, last season my first four innings were 0,



ONLY THE NATURAL BUOYANCY OF
MY PADS SAVED ME.

3, 0 and 0. The last two were golden ducks – the first I'd ever had. And they were both from the first ball of the match. Diamond ducks, I think they may be called. After the second of these – a high full toss I'd generously scooped up into the astonished hands of cover point – I silently walked off the pitch and, without pausing, out of the ground (which was next to Virginia Woolf's house in the country), and tried to find a stream in which to drown myself. Only the natural buoyancy of my pads saved me.

But of course there is a profound difference between the comical farce of amateur failure and the genuine tragedy of the failing pro.

Many years ago I recall watching a programme about the Scotland Yard Black Museum. A grizzled old detective was talking about suicides – specifically those who threw themselves off one of the London bridges into the swirling murk of the Thames. He said that they always do it for one of two reasons – for love or for money. And, he went on, his rheumy old eyes staring straight at the camera, you could tell which by looking at their fingers. The bankrupts and the petty fraudsters who jumped would always have clean, unmarked hands. But those who jumped because they were thwarted in love – the jilted, the rejected – had fingers torn and bloodied, nails ripped and shredded, often down to the bone. For, as soon as they hit the cold water, they would realise that in fact life *was* worth living without Francine from Accounts or Rod the photocopier guy.

And so I don't suppose there are any casual cricketers who have "walked"

from life. We mope, we sulk, we dwell, we... carry on. But David Frith's book on cricketing suicides, *Silence of the Heart* – a sacred text for those of us initiated into the cult of failure – reminds us that the stakes are higher for the old pros. Suddenly alone, with nothing but their memories of early glory and later decline. Think of poor William Scotton, famous for his barn-door defence. He once put on 170 with WG Grace against Australia. But at the age of 37, dropped by Notts and largely friendless, he sliced open his throat with a razor in his lodgings not far from Lord's. His landlady found the body, still warm. Scotton, always a tidy player, had made desperate attempts to limit the amount of mess he was causing, with scattered towels and even a basin to catch the blood as it gushed from his slashed jugular. As he died, did he still hear the squib in *Punch*, mocking one of his more laborious innings:

*Block, block, block,
At the foot of thy wicket, ah do!
But one hour of Grace or Walter Read
Were worth a week of you!*

Or there was the incomparable Albert Trott – famously the only man ever to hit a ball over the pavilion at Lord's. And yet at the end, in another sad, dank boarding house, huge with dropsy, worn out at 41 with the drink, he shot himself. He left his wardrobe to his landlady and a few photographs to some old friends back in Australia. There was little else. He was down to his last £4.

So, no, I can't pretend that my cricketing woes are anything but flecks of grit in life's Vaseline. In fact I wonder if I might need cricketing pain as a distraction from those other deeper failures, as a writer, as a human being.

If I'm not thinking of a questionable lbw decision, wouldn't I be dwelling on the inadequate cheese sandwich, the tramp's hat, the indifference of the librarians selecting the shortlist for the Carnegie medal?

And there's another aspect to this. Life's problems are, largely, insoluble. I'll never have enough money to do the things I want to do. I'll never win a Nobel prize. I'm destined to disappoint my wife, embarrass my children. Each year I become fatter and less attractive. Whereas once the pretty publicity assistants at my publishers' parties would happily flirt with me, now I'm lucky if a huge and insanitary lady novelist of uncertain age proposes a fondle. And ultimately, even if I keep away from the beckoning bridges and close my ears to the whispering of the razor, I'll die.

On the other hand, cricket's problems, though difficult, are never entirely insoluble. A new ball can be seen off. Low bounce can be countered by getting in a good stride. You can make sure you stay down the non-striker's end when that burly bricklayer with a grudge is on.

And sometimes, just sometimes, it goes right, and for the length of an hour or so, you are not a failure, but live in glory.

...

And so it happened to me, at the unnecessarily beautiful Wormsley ground, in front of 2,000 spectators, against a team of actors. The wicket was perfect, with enough pace to

help my timing. And after a while I began to see the ball like a balloon, and the dilemma was no longer how the hell do I keep this thing out but where shall I hit it this time? And there was even a scoreboard, so I could see the runs accumulate. A first fifty, for me, in decades. And when I next looked up, I was 99. Again. The bowler was a slow left-artermer, in appearance not unlike the Ray Bright who had bowled Botham. The field was in, and he tried to float one up, but it came to me on the full and I swatted it away for four.

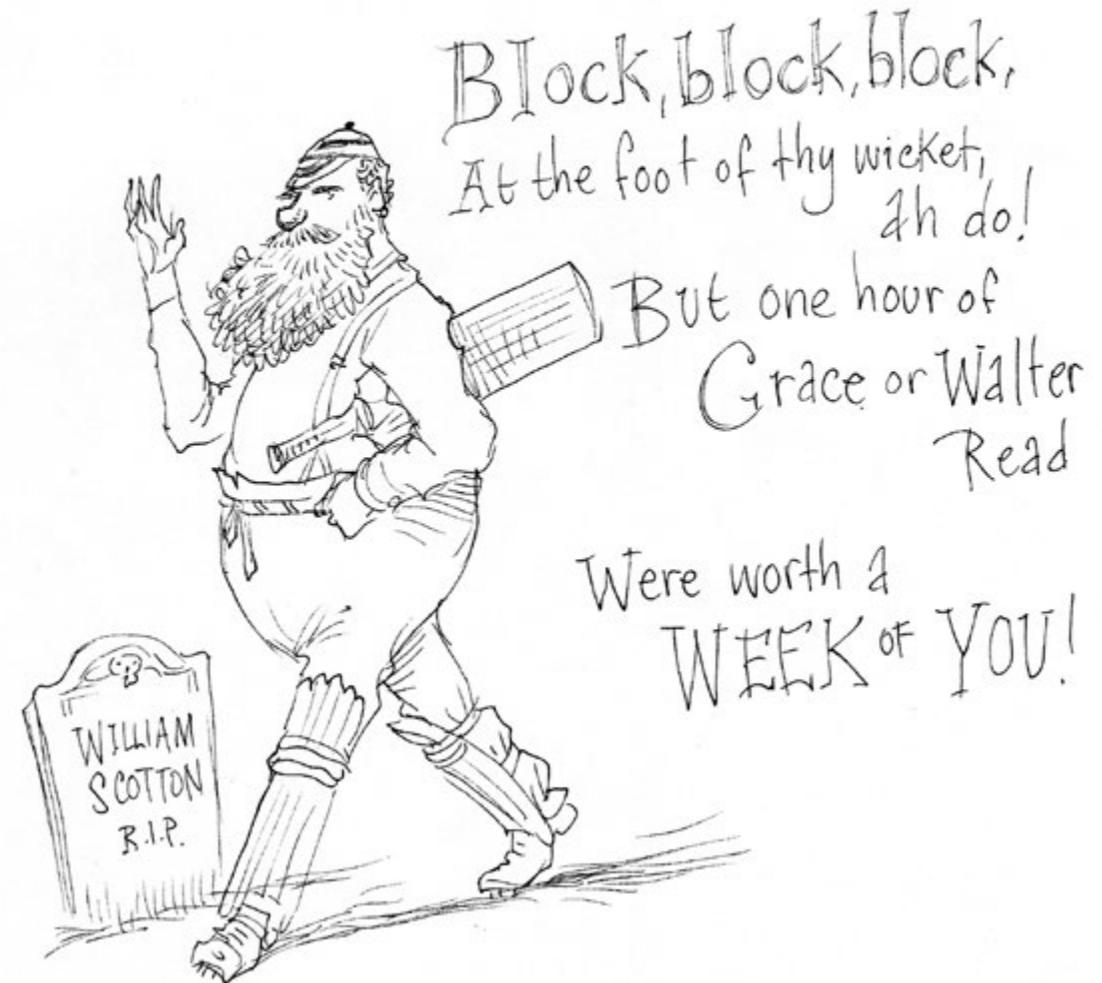
As I walked off, undefeated, my friends and teammates came out to cheer me in. Some were actually in tears. They'd seen me suffer, seen me fail. They would see me suffer and see me fail again in the future. But today I was getting in a jug.

...

Ah. That seems wrong. How can I end an article about failure on such an upbeat, optimistic note?

Let's go down again, back to why I'm drawn to failing, back to why something in me craves to be a Failure. And let's go there by way of Hick and Ramprakash. Most commentators on the game would agree that both possessed supreme talents which, despite moments of achievement, were ultimately unfulfilled.

And this provides a paradigm for failure. Simply not being very good at something isn't enough. Failure, by definition, needs the possibility of success. It's a tragic drama: greatness brought low.



To sidestep for a moment, I have a good friend: a very fine sports writer, a fitness fanatic and a cricketer of some ineptitude. Now he - let's call him "Will Johnson" - often suffers from the sort of injuries that we associate with top-flight sportsmen. His achilles is constantly on the verge of a rupture. His intercostals are forever tweaked or about to be tweaked or recovering from a recent tweaking. His cruciate ligaments are as vulnerable as a quail's egg caught between the buttocks of a rhinoceros.

For a long time I assumed that Will Johnson's frailties were the result of pushing his mortal body too far, too hard, in pursuit of the dream. And then in a match last season, Will fell in missing a catch and bumped his head. After he was helped to his feet, he went into a staggering, tottering little run. This was both baffling and curiously familiar. I strained to remember where I'd seen it before. And then it came to me. It exactly recapitulated the famous final few yards run by Dorando Pietri in the marathon at the 1908 Olympics. It's one of the great moments in sporting history, and one of the first to be caught on film. The tiny, frail figure, on the cusp of utter exhaustion, his legs boneless, his eyes glazed, falling four, five times, helped

...

to his feet by officials, wafted over the line by the love of the crowd. And finally, disqualified.

And then came my revelation. In his befuddlement, Will Johnson had sought a sporting template to mould his behaviour. Will Johnson had become Pietri. And so it was with all other ailments and injuries. This was the closest he could get to the sporting heroes he so idolised. Perhaps he could never bowl like Muralitharan or bat like Tendulkar, but he could emulate their elite-level injuries. The groin strain and the hamstring pull were his way of connecting with athletic greatness.

And so it occurs to me that the reason I'm drawn to failure, embrace it indeed, is that, paradoxically, it suggests a thwarted glory. For me to claim to be a failure means that I'm squeezing into bed between Hick and Ramprakash; that I'm laying claim to a huge potential, tragically unrealised. I'm a Hamlet in whites, a Lear in a sweat-mottled jockstrap.

But the truth is harder to face. I was never good enough to be a failure.

Thanks to Chris Riddell for the illustrations.





MY BRAND OF CRICKET: FULL OF FEAR

Alan Tyers doesn't exactly look forward to donning the whites

There has been a lot of talk recently about England's "brand of cricket" being "fearless" and of our boys playing "without fear". This has certainly resulted in some enjoyable performances, such as the ODIs against New Zealand last year, and also some splendidly inept ones, such as the 103 all out at Lord's in the Ashes Test, when England fell agonisingly short by just 405 runs.

The English cricket fan is never happy when we are winning all the time – look at how unloved and unloveable the team, with The Big Cheese as its honking totem, was during the 2010–12 period of dominance. What we really like is some impressive victories and then the nostalgic, masochistic thrill of a collapse. So the current England players – raised on Twenty20, and also not raised on getting totally gubbed by every other cricketing nation – are about ideal for most fans. Plenty of thrills, the occasional fiasco, and a

sense throughout that they are not scared to have a go.

It is great to watch, but it becomes ever further away from my own experiences of the sport, and I find myself yearning for the more relatable struggles of a Hicky, an Al Mullall, perhaps even an Ian Salisbury. The reason? I like our cricketers to play with a bit of fear, because fear is something I can understand. This devil-may-care, bulging-bicep certainty of thought and purpose? This is not the English cricket I was brought up with, and it makes me nervous and confused. Sometimes, it even makes me afraid.

Because cricket, for me, is fear. My own cricketing life has been absolutely saturated with and defined by it more than by anything else. If I could be said to play "a brand of cricket", it would be one of timidity, of physical and moral cowardice, of querulousness, of spineless, snivelling capitulation.

Let me take you back. The first fear I knew on the cricket pitch was the simplest one: actual, pure physical fear. When we were about eight, the cricket master, a professional Yorkshireman by the name of Wagstaff, took the class out onto the playing field and whacked a cricket ball at each of us in turn. (Child Act? Never bloody heard of it, lad.) He separated into groups those boys who had made an effort to catch it, and those who had made every effort to get out of the way. I was very much in the latter group, the Coke-bottle glasses, the fatties, the sensitive types, timid goats all. We evaders were dead to him from that day forwards, and boy did he let us know it. No further cricket coaching for thee, which was a shame, because I did enjoy the batting and bowling and running-about elements of it.

Perhaps it is a Yorkshire thing. A friend met Geoffrey Boycott in a shop when he (the friend, not Sir G) was about the same age as I was during the catch-avoidance incident. Geoffrey, by way of greeting, said: "Do you bat, or do you bowl?" as if a person's character – indeed, the whole question of the human condition – could be reduced to this. In the mind of Wagstaff, it was much the same: a binary measure of human worth. Either you are scared of the ball or you aren't.

From that age on, it was cast in my mind that cricket meant a) the threat of physical harm, and therefore also b) social shame for attempting to avoid physical harm. This is quite a cocktail. To this day when I see kids' coaches saying "of course, it's all about having fun at this age..." I cannot help but think "no, it bloody wasn't."

When I play my handful of games each summer for our exceptionally low-quality cricket team The Twenty Minuters (named in Blackadder homage for the "average length of team innings", not anything to do with the shortest form of the game), I am always alarmed by just how hard the ball is and just how hard they hit it at you. For various reasons of busyness, laziness and administrative incompetence, the Twenties rarely net these days. Thus, we turn up and most of us have not been anywhere near a cricket ball since the last time we played. Nothing in our jobs and lives through the week (we are writers, filmmakers, teachers, media ponces of the lowest imaginable kind) is any sort of preparation for having hard objects propelled at us and yet, against our better judgment, most of us try to stop the ball most of the time.

I remember reading in an Ian Botham book that Eric Clapton likes to field at slip for the Bunburys or what have you, but will often simply watch the ball fly past him in the cordon because he doesn't want to break a finger. Fair enough for old Slowhand, you could argue: you wouldn't want to cancel Wembley stadium on account of a hot chance in a charity match. One of our own number – a politician by trade and a cricketing no-hoper of towering incompetence – in recent years has taken to the Clapton Method and no longer engages with the ball if he can possibly help it. In fairness, he does have to shake a lot of hands in his line of work and a busted finger might be a hindrance, but still.

Our cricket team is, shall we say, a mixed-ability group. On our bad days,



it has sometimes looked like that mixture is Our Australian Friend plus ten others, but we are usually able to produce three to five people who can, in fact, basically play cricket. That leaves roughly half a dozen absolute incompetents to make XI.

Of course, there are people in the world who are worse at cricket than us. Of course there are. People who could not not grasp the concept of play, for cultural or religious reasons. Or physically grasp the bat. Some (but by no means all) blind people. The bed-ridden. Someone at that actual moment involved in, for example, giving birth. But generally speaking these people would not be playing cricket. Of the world population who play cricket on a semi-regular basis, the half-dozen to whom I refer can lay claim to being de facto the worst cricket players in the world.

We're talking all-run fours to mid-off, 13-ball overs, failure to score a run for multiple-season stretches, a whole litany of hopelessness. "You can only do your best," people say. But what if... what if your best is just total and utter shit?

Dr Allen Fox, a former Wimbledon quarter-finalist and psychologist, writes in the *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching* that: "While winning is highly rewarding and losing is extremely painful [there are situations where] no matter what you do you may still fail. This causes high-intensity unpleasant stress."

Given even the most rudimentary ability on the part of the person bowling or batting against me, I will fail. I stand at the top of what I laughingly

call my "mark", and I fear the thing that has happened so, so many times before: some broad-shouldered alpha smashing my non-turning, often non-bouncing, spinners into the forest. There is nothing I can do.

They've done experiments on dogs where they show a dog a circle shape. If the dog identifies the circle shape and presses a button, it gets food. Then they show it an ellipse shape. When the dog presses the button it gets an electric shock. Then they start flattening the circles until the shapes look more and more like ellipses until it is not feasible to differentiate between the two. But doggie wants that food. So he keeps pressing, against all logic. Result: lots of electric shocks. And this means a horrible time for the creature or, as Fox puts it: "experiential neurosis and distress as a result of trying to solve the impossible problem."

Give me a cricket bat or ball, and I am that shocked dog. Cricket is an impossible problem that I try to solve again and again, to my own detriment. The fact that I know a bit about it and watch it for (part of) my living only throws my own hopelessness into sharper relief.

David E Conroy, a professor of kinesiology (the study of human movement), argues of sporting failure: "Failure by itself is meaningless and insufficient for arousing emotional responses. It is the meanings we attach to it. These include experiencing shame and embarrassment, devaluing one's self-estimate, having an uncertain future, having important others lose interest in you, upsetting important others."

At the sub-amateur level of my own cricket, you can probably discount the part about failure harming your future, unless it was being fatally struck at deep extra cover while daydreaming, but the others are in play, no question. The reason we put ourselves in the way of the hard ball (against all logic and all expectation of good outcomes) is to avoid or minimise shame and embarrassment and upsetting others. Or, in simpler terms, being laughed at and called a pussy.

Fox observes that, faced with the unpleasant stress of knowing that doing their best is not going to be enough to win, some athletes will develop (usually self-destructive) coping mechanisms to avoid facing up to that hard truth. These include anger, loss of concentration, feigning or imagining injury and an acceptance of defeat. In my cricket team, we have come to accept defeat as a matter of course. It is statistically likely, so it is emotionally sensible to prepare for it. Indeed, so engrained have these defensive mechanisms become for some of us that we privately regard people who are trying too hard to win as being a bit rum. We are a collection of anti-Steve Waughs. There is a culture of losing at the club, and a proud one. Or at least a shamefully defiant one.

So I fear pain, I fear failure, I fear humiliation, I fear defeat. And don't get me started on success.

Cricket, being a game of many personal duels in a team context, produces dozens of wins and losses per game. Of winners and losers. In 32 years of playing the game, of standing in blind panic as the bowler runs up,

wishing I was anywhere else, I can only remember coming out on top of a duel once. And it was horrible.

In the lower sixth at school, I did social services. This was not out of altruism or some desire to be good, but because it was the least awful option of those available to pupils: you either had to be in the school's pretend-army-cadet-force death squad - which involved sleeping in a foxhole in Dartmoor and being attacked by a heavily-armed militia of rucker buggers - or you could do this community-helping business.

Not being a child of military bearing, I went for the social service, which involved volunteering once a week at a mental-health facility in the nearby town. The programme was called Friendly Club. Friendly Club, in fact, turned out to be not only educational but actually enjoyable and inspiring. There were some very nice people there, we used to play football and watch TV and stuff, and in the summer we arranged a game of cricket.

Because we schoolboys were largely decent, if perhaps lacking in finesse, we obviously tried to make it as easy as possible for our (quite disabled) opponents to win. This involved missing straight ones, calamity run-outs and generally carrying on like certain international cricket teams who've had that all-important special text message shortly before play. With these embellishments, our opponents - who were not so much unfamiliar with the laws of the game as completely oblivious to the concept of them - soon had us teetering at 12-or-something for 9. It was clear that the festivities were going to be

over before some had even got their party hats on.

Now, I'm not saying we couldn't have successfully defended 13 (although it could certainly have been an arse-ripper for the Twenty Minuters), but back at school we had a few decent players, and the Friendly Club XI or XII or IX or however many it was, well... didn't. Even still, when I went out to bat at 11, the teacher suggested I try to get a run or two, at least to give them time to get the tea-time orange squash sorted out, which is coincidentally exactly the same instructions they used to give the England team in the 1990s.

Anyway, the bowler ran up, kind of, in a loping circle and launched the ball like a hammer thrower vaguely in the direction of the pitch. I thought, right, I can probably hit this for one run and that will be fine. However, I had underestimated my own lack of hand-eye coordination. I skipped out to where the ball was going to pitch – at shortish extra-cover – and swung the bat. It absolutely pinged. Had he been co-commentating on the match rather than playing, as he then did, for Chelsea, football's Andy Townsend might well have observed: "If anything, Clive, he has hit that too well."

As the ball sailed back over the fence behind the bowler's head for a six, fully 25 metres if it was an inch, I realised that I had indeed hit it too well. However, I had already made an involuntary and deeply regrettable "yesssss" sound as I made contact. It did not look good for me.

It was, and indeed remains, the only six I've ever hit in cricket.

The bowler, once the rules and scoring had been explained, was upset, and obviously I looked like a complete sociopath. We declared, and everyone had the orange squash and ignored me. I did go over and talk to the bowler, who seemed to have cheered up. She said she had told the people at her work she was playing cricket. Where did she work, I asked? She took a picture out of her wallet. It was of Captain Kirk and Mister Spock. "Oh, I work on the Starship Enterprise," she said.

That six didn't half sail, though.

The only time I have cleared the ropes in cricket and the shame of it haunts me still. I fear the ball. I fear the humiliation through failure. Given that I have only succeeded once, I fear what happens if you do succeed. And not without good reason: it makes you a monster.

So cricket has come to mean fear. I fear my pathetic spinners being smashed for six, I fear breaking these delicate, work-shy hands in the field, I fear the imminent death rattle as I cower at the crease, I fear being struck by a lifter from an opposing quick (i.e. anyone of Jeremy Snape pace or greater). I fear being laughed at, being proven to be a hopeless weed, outed as a cowardly snake.

I have, though, come to embrace and enjoy that fear, or at least to make room for it. Most of the things I do in my life are not that scary: I have been doing the same job for a while, I have a stable home life, I am lucky to be healthy, I don't meet that many new people, I am not keen on parascending, I don't get into fist-fights. Cricket is really the only activity I do that inspires fear in me, that allows me to

connect to that elemental level of the human experience.

And, when I am playing cricket, I am not thinking about anything else other than cricket. Specifically, I am not thinking about anything else other than how scared I am by the cricket.

There is no time to think about work, or family, or money, or children, or the plight of the polar bears. Cricket, alone in my life more or less, gives me the fear. I dread and despise every moment of it, but that makes me feel alive. Cowering in fear, but alive: that is my own brand of cricket.

• • •



YORKSHIRE, THA KNOWS

Ian McMillan has found the White Rose county a constant companion

Let's think about Time. Let's think about Ordinary Time, as scientists call it, and Cricket Time, and its refinement, the measurement we know as Yorkshire Cricket Time.

It would have been the mid-1970s, I think, and I was watching Yorkshire play Leicestershire at Headingley. The game had been interrupted by harsh Leeds rain a few times, and me and the lads were sheltering and debating whether or not the bloke over there with the long hair was really Eric Clapton and, if so, should we be so uncool as to go over and ask for his autograph. Suddenly, as if a cheap hotel shower had broken, the rain stopped and the game began again and the guitar god was forgotten.

Nothing happened for a few overs; a man who looked like a half-inflated balloon stood up and shouted in a voice that was sandpapered and polished on the streets of Ossett: "Come on, Yorkshire: they onny mek shoes!" The rain began to assert itself again.

Fast-forward, or run quickly between the wickets, to the late 2000s; I'm at

Mad Geoff's the barbers in Darfield, near Barnsley, the village I've always lived in. Geoff is giving me a trim or, as he calls it, a "glancing blow" and my six-year-old grandson Thomas has come along as an interested spectator. It's raining outside and the talk has turned to cricket in general and Yorkshire cricket in particular. A man "wearing" a cardigan that, as Raymond Chandler almost said, had been taken from its mother too young, leans over to Thomas and says: "I bet you'll be playing cricket for Yorkshire sometime soon." Thomas doesn't quite know what to say; he's just started playing football for Brierley Cubs but he sometimes plays cricket with me in the garden. At this moment in the space/time continuum he prefers being in the goals rather than the nets.

"Were he born in Yorkshire?" another man asks, and I nod. A hitherto silent man pipes up: "Tha's not only got to have been born in Yorkshire to play for Yorkshire. My Uncle Keith said tha's got to be born with a cricket stump up yer arse." There is an appalled silence. Thomas laughs, then we all do. A man comes in and says: "What yer laughing at? Has Rotherham tumbled over into't sea?"



Move forward again in time, slow as a Test match. It's September 2015 and Thomas has become a cricketer; he still plays football, still helps the Cubs to win the league, but his real love is cricket, encouraged by his mum's boyfriend Steve and endless idyllic hours in the back garden. He plays for Darfield and my summer has been a series of visits to beautiful village grounds in places like Monk Bretton and Upper Haugh. At Monk Bretton there was a bit of a mix-up and they went to Darfield and we went to Monk Bretton; it was a bit like a cricketing version of *Waiting for Godot*. At Upper Haugh he took a wicket and I almost wept as the stumps spiralled into the sky and my wife, her eyes moist, told me not to be so daft.

We'd been to a few T20 matches at Headingley with Steve but I wanted to take him to at least one day of a four-day county match to experience, in my humble opinion, the game at its finest. It helped, of course, that Yorkshire were closing in on the title. It helped that the weather was good. It helped, crucially, that Thomas had an inset day from school.

So we got a lift into Barnsley and waited on platform 1 for the train to Leeds. We had sandwiches and we had a flask and some bottles of water. We had a Potter's pork pie from Wombwell, one of the best in the land. We gazed up and down the platform and picked out the people who would be going to Headingley to watch the white rose bloom against Somerset. Who's going on the pilgrimage with us? There's that bloke in the flat cap; the couple with the flasks as big as The Shard; the lad and his dad, the lad in his cricket whites, hoping for a game. I planned in my head that at some point I would

shout "Come on, Yorkshire; they only make cider!"

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How do we explain Yorkshire and cricket? How do we try to fathom it, to pin it down like a fluttering butterfly in a muffler? It's got something to do with history, of course, all those heroes in my time like Trueman and Boycott and Close. It's got something to do with collectivism – the idea, not often articulated, that team sport is a metaphor for how these pitmen and steelworkers and millworkers worked, each one looking out for the other, each one helping the slowest to shine. And, inevitably, it has a lot to do with politics, with the idea of Gentlemen and Players.

One of the first plays I ever wrote, with my mate Dave Harmer, was called *Slow Bowler* and it was about the 19th-century Yorkshire cricketer Ted Peate. He was born in Leeds in 1855, and although he began to play for a team called the Clown Cricketers, he ended up playing for Yorkshire and has been described as one of the best bowlers in the world at his peak, taking 8 for 5 in 1883 against Surrey. Sadly he came up against the haughty and insufferable old Etonian Lord Hawke who captained Yorkshire very successfully but was actually a Yellowbelly infiltrator from Lincolnshire. He was very keen on the spiritual and mental life of his team, and Dave and I dug up and embellished (we're writers, after all) a quote where he said, more or less, that the Yorkshire team of the time was himself and Ted Peate and nine other ale cans. The play went on as part of a double bill with Barry Hines's *Two Men From Derby*, about a young footballer being signed

for the First Division team. Both plays were, in a way, about class division, although our play didn't have a set that included a ton of coal, as Barry's did. Yorkshire these days is the revenge of the Players against the Gentlemen. Maybe I should write another play.

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At Leeds we got off the train and followed the small but growing band of fans to the train for Burley Park; there was excitement in the air but it was a kind of muted, four-day excitement. A rumour began, and spread like spilled tea, that Joe Root might be allowed out of England duties to play. It was rubbish, of course, and it would never happen, but we swilled the rumour around and some of us, like Thomas (and me, if I'm being honest: I'm naive), swallowed it whole.

Walking through the streets of Headingley towards the cricket ground is one of the great sporting pleasures; as a football supporter and a fan of the mighty Barnsley FC, I know that the moments before the game are often the best moments. But when you go to watch Yorkshire, the moments before the game are simply the moments when the orchestra tunes up and plays the overture before the real action begins. A trickle of us stroll past the terraced houses; a tousle-haired student gazes at us through a dusty window as though we are academics coming to tell him that he's missing a learning experience, which of course in some ways we are.

Thomas and I sit with some men who could have been shaken from

a box marked "Yorkshire Four-Day Cricket Fans". The youngest of them is probably, like me, in his late fifties. They all, and I'm not kidding, have copies of the *Yorkshire Post* which they flap open like Ordnance Survey maps. One has a sandwich box that seems to have one huge sandwich in it. Two are wearing straw trilbies. One is writing obsessively in a book with handwriting that looks like limping runes. They all seem to have the ability to glance up at the moment the ball is bowled and then back to their cryptic crossword or their sandwich or their rapidly filling notebook.

At this golden moment I am as happy as I will ever be watching sport. I am with my grandson, who loves cricket as much as I do, and who now gives me even more reason to go and watch the game at Darfield. I am supporting a winning team who play with verve and poetry. I am sitting with my fellow Tykes who know much more about the game than I ever will. As a Somerset bowler begins his run-up, I say: "They could do with Ted Peate!" and I'm rewarded by a clutch of knowing chuckles.

This is Yorkshire Cricket Time here at Headingley; the past, the present and the future all co-exist. Lord Hawke is here, and Fred Trueman, and Joe Root and our Thomas. We're all sitting together under a Yorkshire sky; a plane is making its slow run in to Leeds-Bradford and I imagine the cricket-starved holidaymakers and honeymooners gazing through the tiny windows trying to catch a glimpse of the true field of dreams. I raise my hand to them; it's okay, there's no jetlag here. That'll be a four. No, a six.

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WHEN WORDS SPEAK LOUDER THAN ACTIONS

Geoff Lemon on the twin joys of listening and commentating

The commentary box at Derby is side-on to the pitch. It's a deeply overcast day, players and ball both hard to pick up in the gloom. Derbyshire are in the field, having invited the Australians to bat. This would be less of a problem except that, in the crowded county schedule, teams rest their regulars from Ashes warm-ups. Even Iain O'Brien, the Kiwi bowler who is now the BBC's man in Derby, has never seen half these players. They use shirt numbers, but from side-on we can see only cover and point. The entire slip cordon overlaps, a Ganesh blob of limbs. From this position, you can't read the line of the ball, or swing, spin, seam, angle. Half the time you can't tell if it goes by leg stump or off stump. This is my first stint on any professional commentary service. Degree of difficulty: bewildering. But it's ok, because sitting down next to me in this tiny booth is Jim Maxwell, just about the most experienced cricket caller on the planet. I glance over, my breathing tense,

awaiting instruction. "Alright," he says cheerfully. "You lead."

* * *

For those of us who fall in love with cricket on the radio, it's something television can never match. *Watching* is purely about the sport, in its most direct method of consumption. *Listening* is equally about the medium. But it's real. Vision is direct, audio is sport rendered in another form. In effect, the game becomes literature, becomes performance. Sport and art are false distinctions anyway: they're all part of pushing the limits of human capacity, pleasing the brain via aesthetics or narrative, finding new ways to generate expression.

Among sports, the length and pace of cricket make it special. The hours in a day's play, the lull between deliveries, the long steady periods where a match tilts in neither direction. Cricket has a

surfeit of time. It has flux and flow. It is the place for the perambulation, the discursion, the non sequitur. Commentators can go into the fullest depth: topics within the game, certainly, but also further afield, tying in history and politics, classics and creation, reminiscence and mythology.

Operating in pairs is the core of that chemistry. As callers spend time with one another, their on-air relationships evolve, as do their relationships with the audience - individually and as partnerships. Some prickle one another and argue, some swap stories, some set each other off into fits of laughter. You can tell who gets along, or challenges one another. All of it adds depth and texture. Everyone has favourite combinations. You listen out, delighted or disappointed when a good pairing starts or ends.

All this is foreign to most sports, where intensity and brevity rule the approach. Action on the field becomes all-consuming, blotting out the sun. Cricket can have the most gradual build, matches taking shape over the course of days. Then in the moments when change picks up, when intensity does begin, good commentators note it, seize it, convey it. You get all the emotion, the realisation of promise, a slow-blooming flower that at exactly the ripest moment is picked and presented to you. And you have undertaken this whole process together, those friendly voices in your ear every step of the way.

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I fell for it later than most. I vaguely remember midnight cricket as a kid, sick and wakeful under dimmed lights,

but only as a sound and a feeling. I was 16 when the sport started getting me. My 1999 World Cup semi-final was a surreal version, thanks to it being 3am on the last night of term after an English friend shared several very interesting cigarettes. Unsurprisingly, and perhaps not unrelated, the school and I parted ways before end-of-year exams. In my weeks of exile, November Tests were my only company.

There were lovely things about television, too, switched on after rolling out of bed at 10.55am. One deep satisfying click from the button of the 1970s Panasonic, and there it was. Australian summers were all about expanses: wide shots of ovals stretched out in the broadest light, endless sky, the sound of space and sparseness. Heat, grass drying and crackling, the scrape of feet in the stump mics, the mutter of the sun-punched crowd, all of it filling the taffy pauses between one Benaud utterance and the distant next.

But radio was more powerful. Combine the two and there was no better teaching aid: radio's constant repetition of field positions, shots, and deliveries, untangling cricket's arcane taxonomy; the dissection of tactics; the detail on techniques and how players managed to do the things they did. Not to mention the lack of being yelled at by a furniture vendor every 90 seconds, which was enough to drive Ken Bruce completely mad. Those practical boons aside, there were the conversations, the references and callbacks, commentary in a way that became more personal and familiar. Perhaps the sheer amount of talking helped, but it felt like I got to know radio callers in a way I didn't the distant voices behind the screen.



Benaud was an authority. Maxwell was a friend.

There was one moment when the light first burned through. The end of 1999 brought India and Pakistan to be ritually flogged by Steve Waugh's team at its hardened peak. Three Tests each, then having to stay on for a limited-overs triangular. The emblem, the hard-bastard heart of that XI, was Glenn McGrath. He wasn't terrifying, just relentlessly reliable, arm pistoning up and down like a Singer sewing machine, and stitching up everything in his path just the same. No one could hit him. No one could stop him. Both visiting teams were in tatters. Then one evening, second ball of an over, a young Abdul Razzaq hit him for four.

The Pakistan all-rounder would go on to some brilliant 50-over knocks, but he wasn't known at the time. McGrath was not a character who endeared himself – in this one-sided era, I found satisfaction on the side of the underdog. Even a boundary against him was a victory. Take that, I thought. Then, whack. Razzaq did it again. You could hear the crowd pick up. It was January. Dad and I were on holidays, driving to get fish and chips. A third boundary.

"I have to hear this," I said urgently as we pulled up near the shop. So we sat with the keys in the ignition, doors open, branches of a ti-tree arching freshly overhead and the thick summer sunset coating everything gold. Here comes McGrath, he bowls. Four. I sat in disbelief. The crowd sounded like the ocean, the world's biggest shell held to my ear.

I haven't gone back to look at the scorecard. The innings is on YouTube, but I've resisted. I don't remember what

he made, or where those shots went, or exactly what was said, and I want to keep it like that. The details may be different, but this version of my memory is set. It will live on regardless.

What I remember is the pause, recognition of the moment. Leaving space for the crowd to tell the story, then only when it was needed, the voice chiming in with urgency. Last ball of the over. McGrath, raging, fuming, bowling, smashed for four. Five in a row from Razzaq against the game's implacable master. The audacity. With nothing but words, in the front seat of a station wagon, in a side street of a seaside town in southern Victoria, we had seen a mortal challenge a god. Only this time, Marsyas was the one doing the flaying.

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As time went by, I preferred listening without visuals. This can be practical; the pleasure of driving or doing housework or sitting in a pool with the cricket on is legend. But when I was really into a game, relying on voice made me concentrate in a way that watching couldn't. I would be completely absorbed by the description. Radio, too, makes you wait that bit longer. On seeing, you know for yourself what happened. Audio gives a delicious second of anticipation. Here comes the bowler, and... pause. Bowled, you say! Out for 64. That's the breakthrough. But how did it happen? You know nothing but the result. A jaffa? Played on? A reckless swing? As you wait, the rest of the lines are sketched in, commentary doubling back, the full picture emerging from a mess of charcoal swipes.

The best commentators know they are storytellers, and the best cricket produces

stories hard to match. India and Australia in 2001 was the form at its highest art. It came not long after the aforementioned thrashing in Australia, and Waugh's team were still conquering all. Sixteen Test wins in a row in Mumbai, then that most dramatic of turnarounds in Kolkata. All of it in a distant land, quarantined to a pay-TV service that no one had.

It was my first year at university. In Australia, games in India go through to 10.30 at night, so I sat in evening tutorials with one earpiece surreptitiously plugged in, my Walkman switched to AM, listening to every ball of Laxman and Dravid batting across three days. Maxwell was there. As were Tim Lane and Peter Roebuck, and a young Harsha Bhogle with a keen edge. Greg Matthews sounded like he was on liquid lunches throughout, but perhaps his garbled interjections made it more memorable. In a way he fitted the chaos of the series, ISDN lines constantly dropping out, Maxwell and Lane ringing through for hours on patchy mobile phones.

On the last night of Eden Gardens, I sat in my room alone and listened. Australia starting out thinking about the win, Langer rattling along, wickets starting to fall, Harbhajan in his menacing rhythm, the switch to rearguard, finally McGrath batting with a handful of overs to face. And getting through a chunk of them, tension rising every ball, until the crescendo peaked with him given leg-before.

In that moment, I knew everything. I could see the fires being lit in the stands, smell the smoke. The sound was overwhelming, more than any game since. Was it the effects line, or just pouring into the commentary box? The whole soul of that game was pumping from my stereo,

from the glowing green screen reading 774. There was no clearer picture of the carnage. When I saw photos in news reports the next few days, none surprised. They were exactly what it had looked like.

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Over the next decade, the ABC's camaraderie came into its own. Lane stayed a while before being tempted by football on TV. Glenn Mitchell stepped up, with his gravelly enthusiasm and ability to riff with anyone. Perennially, Maxwell, a voice worth the John Gielgud description of a "silver trumpet muffled in silk". Roebuck, who sometimes played the snotty Pom but commanded a surprisingly strong Australian following. Then came Kerry O'Keefe, underrated in being remembered for his jokes, but the best prepared and most insightful technical analyst I've heard. To that roster, add the relationships developed with regular visitors: Bhogle, Fazeer Mohammed, Neil Manthorp, Jonathan Agnew, Roshan Abeyesinghe. Every summer, it was genuinely a case of flicking the switch and being among old friends.

It makes sense. If you think about the amount of airtime a summer's cricket entails, you can spend more time with these voices than with anyone you know in real life. *Test Match Special* listeners have their equivalents, bonds forged over years or decades. That ABC team had a good few years, though years too few. In 2011 it was a picture of permanence; within a couple of years Roebuck was dead, Mitchell had a breakdown, and O'Keefe retired. The ABC box in 2014-15 sounded a desolate place, Maxwell trying to hold it together. The sadness was real.

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It never occurred to me that commentary was something I might get to do. A dream job, of course, the way you watch 50,000 people howling at a band and think that must be incredible. But both were as distant and impossible; most people at rock concerts don't go home for guitar lessons. That said, I did practise, without thinking about it, my whole cricket life. When the radio was on, I absorbed it. When it was off, I commentated, either in my head or muttered aloud. Absent-mindedly, like thumbing rosaries, year on year. The first time I opened my mouth to call a game for listeners, on the online station White Line Wireless, the mechanics were already there. After a couple of years of alternative broadcasting, they were fit for purpose.

This is what gets me through the Derbyshire debacle. Because somehow it goes alright. I work out how to gauge the side-on delivery using the batsman's feet. I start to tell the players apart. I'm concentrating like a madman, and filling around it with patter to give the opposite impression. But I've got that capacity, because by now the patter is second nature. What could have been a nightmare is manageable because of the basics drilled into me by a DIY start. We make it to evening, though exhausted. If this is radio, I think, it's not likely to get much harder than that.

It hasn't, and it's been an adventure ever since. Calling in Sri Lanka, where you split three ways with Tamil and Sinhalese, and have ads blast over you every boundary. Barbados, where the local fried-chicken sponsor gives you a feed any time you walk in. New Zealand, where the imperious Jeremy

Coney incongruously holds court from a Hamilton shipping container. Back to England this year, for a Women's World Cup that broke every conceivable expectation. Through all of it, the privilege of being some small part of that radio story, that beautiful endless chatter that drew me in so long ago.

In the end we come full circle, back to Derbyshire's County Cricket Ground, a couple of years on. In Bristol at the start of the tournament, we call Chamari Atapattu smashing one of the best solo innings in the game's history. It is breathtaking, adrenaline-soaked, but in a group game for a low-profile team that goes on to lose, it still feels like one that will be left to the enthusiasts.

Three weeks later, Harmanpreet Kaur produces its equal, 171 not out, but this innings puts India into a World Cup final. She crosses into a broader public consciousness, carting sixes among the surrounding architecture, carving over cover and flicking from two feet outside leg, ridiculing anyone who has ever ridiculed her sport. It feels as significant as any of cricket's biggest moments, one when you can feel the world start to change. On this day, *Test Match Special* is chronicling history.

The commentary box at Derby is now behind the bowler's arm, a nice new pavilion having been built. It's a sunny afternoon, the players glowing gold and cornflower blue, numbers firmly visible. India are in the field, having invited the reigning champions Australia to chase. We tell their story, and people are transfixed to the end. So this is radio, I think. It's not likely to get much better than that.

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RANJI OFFERS UP MORE SECRETS

Simon Wilde makes a startling discovery about one of cricket's greats

When you write a book about someone who has been dead for many years, you come to accept that the relationship with your subject is going to be a long-distance one.

When I worked on a biography of the legendary Ranjitsinhji, the first non-white sportsman to achieve global celebrity, I handled letters he wrote when staking his claim to the throne of the princely state of Nawanagar and during his subsequent questionable management of that state after his appointment as Jam Sahib. I corresponded with descendants of the Reverend Louis Borissow, Ranji's tutor before entering Cambridge University, who confirmed rumours that Ranji had been romantically linked to Edith Borissow, one of Louis' daughters. And when I went to India to visit Ranji's state and spent several days as a guest of the present Jam Sahib, Satrusalyasinhji, his great-nephew, I explored Ranji's palaces and held objects that were once his.

The Jam Sahib was born five years after Ranji died in 1933 but he introduced me to an old man, who sat cross-legged on the floor, whom he described as his court historian and who he said had actually known Ranji. He was the only person I ever met for whom this claim was made.

At times like these, I felt I came close to Ranji. But they were only fleeting moments. For the most part, the gulf in time remained, stubbornly refusing to narrow.

Then a couple of years ago – and almost a quarter of a century after my book was first published – I received a phone call that suddenly made Ranji feel very close indeed. On the line was an Englishwoman who introduced herself as Catherine Richardson, before adding cheerily: "I'm Ranji's great, great-granddaughter." To say this was a shock would be an understatement. To my knowledge, Ranji had never married



and never had children, which was why he nominated a nephew to succeed him as Jam Sahib. I thought Ranji had given up all his secrets. It seemed not.

Several more phone calls followed before my first meeting with Catherine and members of her family. We met at a pub only a stone's throw from the Taunton cricket ground where in 1901 Ranji made his highest first-class score of 285 not out (in true "Golden Age" fashion, after a night's fishing and not much sleep). It transpired that they had conducted a fair bit of research of their own and what they told me, and what I subsequently found out, produced more surprises.

Ranji, it appears, had secretly fathered a son who was born on 22 May 1897 when Ranji was 24 years old and at the height of his fame. The previous year he had made his dazzling first appearance in Test cricket, scoring 62 and 154 against Australia at Old Trafford, when the very fact of an Indian playing the game at the highest level, let alone for England, was sensational; that year he had also set records for most runs and centuries in an English season. These achievements had prompted Cambridge to hold a dinner in his honour at the Guildhall, attended by 300 people including many local dignitaries and cricketing celebrities. Although Ranji had begun playing for Sussex in 1895, he retained his student lodgings in Sidney Street and was regarded as one of Cambridge's own: he had, after all, lived there since leaving India in 1888 to complete his education in England.

Sidney Street would have been where Ranji was when, towards the end of

1896, he probably first learned about the unexpected pregnancy, and it is probably no coincidence that in the months that followed he made himself scarce. First, amid reports of him being in poor health, he availed himself of the hospitality of a local landowner, Henry Wright, on whose acres at Kneesworth Hall near Royston he sometimes went shooting. Ranji stayed at Kneesworth for ten weeks, during which he wrote most of his famous *Jubilee Book of Cricket*, part-history and part-textbook, which would be published in August 1897 and dedicated to Queen Victoria in her diamond jubilee year. After this, in the spring of 1897, he went travelling around Europe with CB Fry, the Sussex teammate with whom he was to forge a long-standing friendship. They were back in the time for the start of the season, Ranji showing his health had recovered by taking 260 off MCC in his second game and 157 off Lancashire in his third. On 22 May, the final day of Sussex's match with Surrey at The Oval, he scored 55 before being bowled by Tom Richardson.

Had it become widely known that Ranji had fathered an illegitimate child, the scandal could have seriously damaged his reputation as arguably the finest cricketer in the world. It would certainly have ended his hopes of securing the Nawanagar throne, a claim he actively began to pursue the following year when he stopped off in India on the way back from touring Australia, where he personally enjoyed great success even though Andrew Stoddart's side were well beaten. He missed the 1898 season as a result. That it did not become public was the result of

another surprise I learnt in Taunton: the role of Lord Hawke, one of the most influential figures on the MCC committee which effectively ran English cricket, Yorkshire's long-standing captain and soon to be (from 1899 until 1909) England's first chairman of selectors. Hawke was a friend of Ranji's, having played several MCC and festival matches with him at Lord's and Scarborough, and would long remain so, and seems to have been happy to protect him. When Ranji gave up regular cricket in 1904 to return to India to lobby further for the Nawanagar throne, Hawke joined him that winter and again in 1905-06, Ranji taking him to hunt tigers and panthers. Hawke would make several more visits to India before Ranji's death. Hawke himself died in 1938.

Just as importantly, Hawke appears to have done the right thing by Ranji's son.

It was a classic Establishment cover-up and a classic Victorian scandal. Although there was no concrete evidence as to the identity of the child's parents, the circumstantial evidence is persuasive - once it was pieced together.

I was not surprised to discover that the family believed Edith Borissow to be the mother. She and Ranji, who was only a few months older than her, had clearly had a close relationship that lasted into the 1920s. But when they told me that the birth was registered in Bradford, it created a genuine puzzle. What connection did Bradford have with the family of a Cambridge clergyman and a cricketer who, when he was not in action, spent most of his time in Cambridge, Brighton and London?

The answer was that, although Edith lived with her father in Cambridge, the wider Borissow family was settled around West Yorkshire. Louis Borissow's late father Christian Ignatius Borissow, who emigrated from Russia, had been a noted scholar and language teacher at Bradford Grammar School, and Louis himself was married in Doncaster. In 1897, Louis' elder brother Albert was a successful stuff merchant in Bradford ("stuff" being materials not made of silk). Edith, it seems, was spirited away there to have the child out of sight of friends and acquaintances. The address on the birth certificate, 2 Hanover Square, was only a short walk from where Albert lived.

The house in Hanover Square was owned by a Michael Trueman, a hide and skin merchant who may have been known to Albert through business. The mother's name on the certificate was given as Kirk but no one of that name lived at Hanover Square. The certificate failed to identify a father, a common indication that the parents were not married or the father unknown. The child was identified as Bernard Kirk.

He did not stay Bernard Kirk for long. He was soon given out to adoption and would be raised as Bernard Beardmore by a shoemaker Paul Beardmore and his wife Jane, who lived at 185 Westgate, near to Hanover Square. There were others in the Beardmore household: Samuel, also adopted, who was listed as 12 years of age in the 1901 census, and Lily, then aged 23. In the same census Bernard is still listed as Bernard Kirk, adopted son, aged three.

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence that Bernard was Ranji's child was

that Bernard himself believed it to be the case. "Various bits of information have been passed down through the family about my great-granddad but the story with us was always that Ranji was his father, no doubt about it," said Catherine. "My great-granddad was convinced it was him."

Bernard also believed there was a clergyman on his mother's side of the family. "My grandfather said that he was given for adoption through a reverend," said Sean, Catherine's uncle. "He also said that his mother tried to come and see him as a young boy but he didn't want to see her. She was well dressed, perhaps middle to upper class, and said to be of independent means."

Bernard trained as an apprentice welder and boilermaker and according to the family's account his mother twice turned up at the factory gates where he worked, only to be turned away. He married a local millworker called Clarice Brayshaw when he was 20 and about ten years later they moved south with their two young children, chiefly for the benefit of their son Clifford who (like Ranji) suffered from asthma. Bernard worked in the Plymouth dockyard and played percussion in local orchestras. He died in 1976 at the age of 79. Family photographs show a young man with dark, wavy hair. Call it wishful thinking, but I think I can see more than a passing resemblance to Ranji in his features.

Bernard's daughter Irene, Ranji's granddaughter, was 92 when I met Catherine and Sean in Taunton; she had recently suffered a stroke and it was the thought that the link with Ranji might be weakening that prompted the family to get in touch.

Ranji appeared to want to have no direct contact with his son but this is where Hawke stepped in. Based at the family seat at Wighill Park near Tadcaster, he was well placed to keep an eye on Bernard Beardmore in Bradford without arousing suspicion.

Hawke's reputation has been tarnished by his infamous remark, "Pray God, no professional shall ever captain England," but this comment was made in the 1920s when the fortunes of English amateur cricket were in irreversible decline, and it should not mask his tireless work before the First World War improving the conditions of ordinary professional players, who were routinely treated as second-class citizens. He helped improve the terms and conditions of their contracts, introducing winter pay and the practice of two-thirds of a player's benefit money being invested on his behalf. He also captained a Yorkshire team largely made up of professionals to eight Championship titles between 1893 and 1908. Hawke could see beyond the interests of his class, even if he defended them to an embarrassing degree in his later years, and he appears to have acted benignly in this instance. He wrote several letters to Bernard and even kept in touch with him after Bernard moved south, notifying him of Ranji's death in India. That said, the family believes Bernard endured a hard upbringing.

"What was striking was that Lord Hawke always seemed to know where my grandfather was," Sean Beardmore said. "We don't know the full story behind what happened. Pieces of the puzzle are missing but the circumstantial evidence points to Edith

Borissow being the mother and I'm sure any DNA test would show a connection with Ranji."

Ranji's contact with the Borissows picks up in the winter of 1900-01 when he was known to have spent lengthy periods at their home in Cambridge; he went with Edith and her sister Beatrice to watch Queen Victoria's funeral procession. As chance would have it, in 1901 Louis Borissow became rector of Gilling East near York, a development that would have made it easier for Edith to turn up at those factory gates in Bradford. EHD Sewell, the former Essex cricketer who knew Ranji well but was not always an accurate witness, suggested in *Cricket Wallah* that Ranji and Edith may have become engaged around this time, and the Borissow family has endorsed the idea of a private engagement. Ranji visited Gilling East several times and shortly after becoming Jam Sahib captained his own team there against a Yorkshire Gentlemen XI. Edith and her brother Frank went to India with Ranji following that visit; Frank served in the Indian army and became Ranji's aide-de-camp. Another brother Theo had already been out to India, working as a tea planter and marrying a Bengali woman with whom he had three children between 1904 and 1908; she died in 1912 and he later returned to England. Edith was with Ranji when he lost an eye in a shooting accident on the North Yorkshire moors in 1915. After Louis Borissow's death in 1917, several of the Borissow children, including Edith, moved to Staines, where Ranji had bought a house in 1912. Edith later moved again, back to Cambridge, where she died in 1942, like Ranji having never married.

As ruler of a princely state, Ranji would have been taking a huge gamble by marrying a foreigner. It may have been all right for Theo Borissow to wed an Indian, but for Ranji such a move was fraught with political risk. There were Indian princes willing to fraternise with western women but the story of these liaisons only served as a reminder of the treacherous diplomatic waters they were navigating.

Ranji would certainly have been aware that the Maharajah of Patiala had incurred vice-regal displeasure by marrying Florry Bryan, sister of his stud manager. Florry, already pregnant at the time, was shunned by Indian and European nobility. Her child died in infancy and she herself had died, probably from pneumonia, in 1896. Patiala was mad about sport and had imported two professional county players, William Brockwell of Surrey and JT Hearne of Middlesex, to coach him and his men, and he became a close ally of Ranji's after they were introduced during Ranji's trip to India in 1898.

Similarly, the Maharaja of Kapurthala's marriage to a Spanish dancer in 1908 proved short-lived, while the British authorities declared the marriage of the Maharaja of Pudukkotai to the Australian socialite Molly Fink in 1915 to be morganatic following a protest from George V himself. The Maharaja formally gave up the throne in 1921 and died seven years later in exile.

The need to produce an heir and safeguard the security of the state left the princes under intense pressure to find suitable brides. This inevitably meant marriage to an Indian. Shortly after becoming Jam Sahib, Ranji wrote

to Percy Fitzgerald, a local British official, who had urged him to produce an heir: "As you know I hope shortly to marry... I mean to marry and have children of my own." But it never happened.

Ranji's problem was that, having spent so much time in England, he was more emotionally attached to Britain than India. Sewell claimed that after the war, following the death of the father, Louis Borissow, "Ranji returned to England with the hope and intention of marriage. He brought (he told me) £100,000 to settle on the lady, who was to live, I think, in England. The lady, however, had transferred her attentions... and refused. Ranji was terribly upset... That was the end of it, but the two always remained friends."

This seems an unlikely scenario. For a start, Ranji, though wealthy as Jam Sahib, did not have that sort of money. He also seemed to envisage a marriage that would, like the birth of a child and an engagement, be kept from public scrutiny.

Subsequently, and as revealed in Anne Chambers' book *Ranji: Maharajah of Connemara*, published in 2002, Ranji had a 13-year relationship with a Welsh nurse known as Mrs Williams, a niece of his doctor Thomas Prosser. After Ranji bought a castle at Ballynahinch on the west coast of Ireland in 1924, Mrs Williams regularly accompanied him on annual

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visits there and to Geneva where he was a delegate at the ill-starred League of Nations. It is likely that their relationship was based more on companionship than anything more amorous. Anthony de Mello, first secretary of the Indian cricket board, searching to explain why Ranji failed to support India's nascent sporting ambitions, wrote in *Portrait of Indian Sport*: "Ranji's mind did not dwell amongst us in India. It was in England. And it is my understanding of this great and strange man that his heart was in England also... There was talk, too, of an unhappy love affair; and certainly, as an Indian prince, Ranji could not have married an English girl... Towards the end of his life Ranji gave the impression that he was disillusioned. Always, it seemed, he was waiting for something... which, deep within himself, he knew he would never have."

What was not recounted in Anne Chambers' book but came to light thanks to a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in 2006 from Gareth Homfray-Davies, a nephew of Mrs Williams, was that her mother wrote a series of romantic novels for Mills & Boon under the pseudonym Alice Eustace based on her own visits to India. These included one published in 1927 called *Flame of the Forest* about an Indian princess in love with a British man for whom marriage was impossible because of their different racial backgrounds. The book was dedicated to Ranjitsinhji.





LET'S SETTLE THIS

Daniel Norcross prepares to get his dice out once more

Don't believe that guff elite sportsmen tell you - "it's not about records". It's always about records, about the numbers, about milestones and averages. I know because I've been there. And I remember the moment with digital-photographic clarity.

It was 3.17pm on Sunday 18 November 1979 when I hooked another livid, angry bouncer from Brad Spofforth (great-grandson of the "Demon" Fred) between the deep backward square leg and long leg that Chad Bradman (grandson of "the Don") had carefully placed there in a vain attempt to staunch the flow of runs that were flowing from my murderous blade. The boundary took me past 400 and brought up the Dulwich College Under-12-and-a-half's 600 into the bargain, in front of a packed Lord's. People had come out in their thousands, curiously, to watch a game of age-group cricket between the best England had to offer and their Australian national counterparts. These were odd days, for sure. Thinking about it from the gloomy vantage point of the 21st

century I suppose it was the availability of cricket on free-to-air television that assured healthy crowds and a fanatical devotion to the game.

I'd prepared for my record-breaking moment in much the same way as I usually did on a Sunday. A spot of *Thunderbirds* to kick things off, then an episode of *The Persuaders*, followed by a tediously attenuated roast lunch with my family during which my parents insensitively interrogated me about homework and what I intended to do with my afternoon - as if representing my school, and de facto my country, in front of 25,000 spectators was not enough to be getting on with. Protestations that I was resuming on 289 not out and was targeting the first-ever quadruple-century in international cricket were met with derision. They quite simply didn't care that they had a cricketing immortal in their midst.

After 15 minutes of washing-up I slipped up to my bedroom, put on my pads and played the Aussie attack to all



parts. At the other end, my teammates weren't faring too well against Lennie O'Reilly and Scott Lindwall. The two Toms (Scholar and McCarthy) were run out and bowled but I kept nabbing the strike and plundering boundaries, taking a particular liking to the part-time off-spin of Wayne McCabe (whom Bradman had a bit of a thing for). There was a moment of panic when I was on 397. Alex Cherawani was bowled by Bruce Grimmett to bring our No.11 Simon Chattoo to the crease; a boy who could no more hold a bat than a seance, but as luck would have it there was only one ball left in the over, which he safely negotiated.

Then came the moment. Well, three moments. I rolled a five. In NSC (Norcross Series Cricket) this was good. I rolled a six. This was really good. Anything other than a five now and I at least had runs. I rolled... a four. Cue pandemonium, spectators on the pitch, backs being slapped, humble nods from me, waving of bat and so forth. (No crying, it must be noted. For some reason no one cried when things went well in 1979.) John Arlott delivered a panegyric in the commentary box, comparing me favourably to Bradman, Hobbs, Trumper, Ranji, Hutton, Zaheer Abbas and Alan Butcher (in that order - he could see what only I and he, and maybe Alan Butcher's dad, could see about Alan Butcher).

Truly the most remarkable aspect of my innings was that I genuinely didn't cheat. I had cheated in the past. During a particularly fraught deciding Ashes Test match (timeless Test, naturally) in the little-documented 1979 series in England, I re-threw a five that would have kept Greg Chappell in with

Australia needing just 27 for victory with two wickets in hand. The resultant six gave me my only ever Obstructing the Field in NSC.

It was pretty easy to bat for long periods of time in my form of dice cricket, but you seldom scored quickly. My rules, you see, were carefully and intricately devised to mirror as near as possible the conditions of Test cricket. And much like real cricket, the rules kept being ever so gradually revised.

It all began in 1976 when I was given, aged seven, a set of Owzthat dice for Christmas by my Aunt Ethel. This was the first set of Owzthat dice I was given. I was subsequently bought this epically hopeless game for my birthday in 1977 by Uncle Walter, by Aunts Dinah and Enid for Christmas 1977 and again by a woman we only knew as Miss Parchment for Christmas 1978. It is a rubbish game. It is anti-cricket. It tells you everything you need to know about the giver of the gift; namely that they know nothing of cricket. Based on pencil cricket, each metal, hexagonal tube/dice has six sides. The one you roll first has the numbers one, two, three, four and six on it as well as an appeal (Owzthat, catchily). The second determines how you're out or whether you get a reprieve via a no-ball. Thanks to occasional BBC contributor, mathematician and one-time scribbler for *The Nightwatchman*, David Franklin, I can reveal precisely why Owzthat is so exasperatingly wretched.

David has put into actual mathematics what my seven-year-old brain could sense but wasn't capable of working out. On average, a wicket falls every nine balls in Owzthat so - allowing for

an average of two or three no-balls per innings - each innings lasts just 14.3 or 14.4 overs. The average team score is 242.5. On this basis an average Test match using Owzthat would be over just after tea on day one.

So, it's clearly rubbish. OK, the actual totals aren't too absurd, but where are the dot balls? Where are the periods of digging in after losing a wicket? Play a game of Owzthat now and you find Gary Ballance coming in with the score 48 for 3 after three overs and hitting his first ball for six. And no, not even in T20 does that quite happen. Not quite. And in any case, this was 1977; our brains didn't do T20. You went to the moon powered by a computer that took two weeks to work out the square root of 256. Sunday League was as outré as you got in those days, and 240 in 40 overs was an impossible target.

Something had to be done and I set about doing it. You see, in 1977 as the youngest of four siblings by quite some margin, playing dice cricket on my own in a draughty attic bedroom was by some considerable distance the most fun to be had. But only if it was possible to suspend my disbelief.

Let's be really clear here; an eight-year-old can comfortably entertain the possibility of single-handedly breaking a siege at his local church, picking off Irish Nationalist terrorists armed only with an air rifle. He, like Joe 90 before him, can infiltrate the Kremlin, steal nuclear secrets and prevent World War III. He can pretend that the white of the fried egg on his breakfast plate is Poland, being invaded by the fried bread that is Germany, only to be beaten back by

the worthy forces of Great Britain, represented by the bacon, who come in just as the yolk, France, is being attacked. (On especially lavish days, the sausage becomes the USA, the mushrooms are Italy - of course - and the baked beans are Japan. In later life, I've allowed potato waffles to be the plucky Greek resistance in Crete. It is, however, necessary that the last bite remaining is always bacon.) What he can't imagine is a side being bowled out for 240 in 15 overs in a Test match. And that is because it breaks all the most fundamental laws of nature. And by "nature" I mean cricket, for what is there of nature that is not cricket (something, incidentally, that CLR James kept meaning to say but never got round to)?

I began to rectify the heresy that is Owzthat by working both backwards and forwards at the same time. I had to allow for the possibility of a Handled the Ball but knew that, up to that point in the whole history of the universe, only New Zealander Russell Endean had succumbed to this most foppish of dismissals. Similarly, I needed to allow for the correct proportion of dot balls. In 1977, this meant roughly nine dot balls in every two overs. Conveniently, using six-sided dice, if you make numbers one to four equivalent to dot balls you get on average eight dot balls per two overs. So now if I rolled a five or a six, that was when "something happened". Invariably what happened was that a run was scored, but since boundaries were less prevalent in those days, it wasn't as simple as just rolling again and taking that number as the number of runs. You had to roll four, five or six to have a chance of getting a boundary. However, roll a

four or a six and you were more likely to have an appeal against you, which could yet be turned down in favour of a leg-bye, a no-ball, a wide or a bye if you rolled a three. You then rolled again to determine the nature of the extra with allowance being given for the further possibility of a dot ball. In order to get a probability factor into the early millions, which I needed for *Handled the Ball and Obstructing the Field*, I figured that you had to roll the same number eight times. This gave me my parameters.

There were various combinations for all eventualities that I tinkered with over the years in an effort to make it mirror real Test cricket as closely as possible. For example, it irked me that I wasn't giving sufficient wicket-taking bias to the new ball, so made it slightly more likely that you could lose wickets in the first 20 overs by the simple expedient of adding an extra appeal to the third roll of the dice (assuming that was required, which it was if I'd rolled a five or six, followed by a four a five or a six – isn't this fun?), and commensurately less likely in the remaining 65 overs (85 overs per ball in those days). Indeed, one of the main reasons I was reluctant to give any credit to the genius Pakistan invention of reverse swing was that I was by then in my twenties and couldn't bear the thought that all my childhood endeavours had been based on at least one false premise.

It also seemed more likely that you would be forced to retire hurt against the new ball, so I introduced that possibility if you rolled five four times in a row in the first 20 overs but five times in a row thereafter.

It wasn't perfect, alright – despite the intricate weighting system I adopted for all players based on their current Test match/first-class averages – but it was a damned sight better than Owzthat. And most importantly it allowed me to be in complete control of my own world. In my world, I decided who played against each other and where they played. I decided on the weather. I was captain of every side. I made the bowling changes. I determined the batting order. I did break for lunch and tea, but only because I needed lunch and tea. I filled scorebooks with England tours to every country in the Test-playing world. I gleaned my sides from *Wisden*. I even branched out into limited-overs world cups.

Dice cricket became my imaginary friend. I grew impatient with any attempt to distract me from commencing the upcoming third Test at Port of Spain; like trudging round the Victoria & Albert museum with my mother looking at 19th-century corsets, or going to school. Apparently it became “a problem”, though for whom I wasn't sure; most likely the global super-industrialist creators of Owzthat who were worried that my game would surpass their pitifully feeble offering and deny them the billions of pounds they made from infantilising the world with their inane garbage. After all, if I had four copies of Owzthat, how many must they have sold worldwide?

But suddenly it all stopped. I can't say with absolute certainty what it was, though a glance at my old scorebooks tells me that an England side featuring Surrey's David Thomas, Alan Butcher (of course) and Monte Lynch with me

opening the batting, beat a full West Indies line-up by an innings at Sabina Park in late June 1982 and never took to the field again. I went to Paris in July of that year, discovered cider, steak frites and a beautiful girl called Antoinette who had no interest in either me or cricket, devastatingly.

Dice cricket was no more. My imaginary friends were now real living humans who attended the girls' school in Dulwich Village.

And it would have remained no more had I not been given a copy of *The Universal Baseball Association* by Robert Coover at a time in my life when I was working in a miserable and unrewarding job for a boss so moronic he would have struggled even to come up with Owzthat. In this most magnificent of books, the main character, J. Henry Waugh invents his own baseball league and plays out numerous games according to his own rules using dice. It is a moving and affecting work about loneliness and self-determinism. And it inspired me once more to pick up my dice.

The difference this time was that I played it with colleagues and the teams we constructed featured no cricketers. In the inaugural Test my openers were Eleanor of Aquitaine and Madame Bovary. Marty Feldman kept wicket and Herbert Lom scored a century. Released from the shackles of a child's logic, suddenly my imagination could soar. Why was I letting Boycott score yet more hundreds when I could let Rosa Luxemburg get her first? (Wristy player, since you ask. Very much in the Azharuddin mould.)

We had whole Test series between teams of classic novelists battling against 1970s TV sitcom actors. Michelle Dotrice proved to be a very handy leg-spinner, while Emile Zola was actually dropped after a run of low scores. His replacement, Wilkie Collins, made a handsome 74 on debut to bring home victory by four wickets in the final Test. Nerys Hughes finished up as leading catcher (she was wicket-keeper after all) and Richard O'Sullivan finished top of both the batting and bowling averages.

In the rather tetchy Good Germans v Bad Germans series, hard as we tried we could never get Dietrich Bonhoeffer to dismiss Hitler (who, like the cowardly dog he was, always came in at No.6 after the new ball had worn off), but Rommel and Immanuel Kant repeatedly and cheaply knocked over a top order that comprised Herman Goering, Martin Boorman and the controversially selected Albert Speer.

And in the one-off Prudes v Exhibitionists match, never was more joy to be had than when Mary Whitehouse was caught by Gilbert off the bowling of George for a duck.

Inevitably though, life once again intervened or improved – or both – so once again dice cricket went back into the cupboard. Until this year.

Why now? Well, 2016 year has been without a single redeeming feature. It began with Bowie dying and then began careering towards full-on 1933 awfulness. Demagogues prowl the airwaves, spewing racist and sexist bile, the pound is plummeting, all truths are derided as tactical gambits

in a giant conspiracy theory to rob us of our freedom and plucky little Britain is assailed from all sides, and, according to many of those sides, even from within.

So, if sport is war without the fighting, let's have this out once and for all. Let's decide the future of this great nation through a game of dice cricket, played by NSC rules. The teams will be made up of the finest men and women Britain has had to offer in the history of all time, against the most dyed-in-the-wool Anglophobes that ever walked the earth. Fictional characters are allowed. This is what post-Brexit Britain is about. It's Us v Them.

And since I invented this game, I get to pick the teams. There will be no parliamentary vote. The match is to be played in neutral Norway, and if we win, we get to have whatever version of Brexit we want, like tariff-free access to the single market and the forced repatriation of all European Nobel Prize winners to Barnsley where they can kick-start a northern powerhouse. If we lose? God help us.

Picking these teams has not been easy. You will note, for example, that Hitler has been left out of the Anglophobes for being a little too nice to us in the mid-1930s. The bar has been set seriously high. As for the England team, Winston Churchill was instantly debarred, despite his excellent work during World War II, for contemplating the gassing of striking dockworkers in Liverpool. Yes, even thought crimes are taken into consideration.

So here goes. In batting order, here are the Anglophobes:

Eamon de Valera: a man so consumed with his hatred for all things English that he sent a message of condolence to the German people on the death of Adolf Hitler. For an apparently intelligent man, this takes quite some doing. He is tasked with seeing off the new ball.

Thomas Jefferson: this was a tough call between him and John Adams (senior), but as architect of the Declaration of Independence, a document unambiguously rejecting the nobility of paying eternal obeisance to Britain, he squeaks in.

Gough Whitlam: let me be quite frank. Whitlam is my favourite Australian prime minister by some distance. A constant thorn in England's flesh, it took an act of profound skulduggery by governor-general John Kerr to oust him, and replace him with Malcolm Fraser. This left him with a lasting detestation of the English, and with good reason. He was also the victim of the notorious Night of the Long Prawns in 1974 and for that alone should get a place in any team.

Mel Gibson: little needs to be said about this fanatical Anglophobe. Just watch *Braveheart*.

Joan of Arc: the first of a quartet of Frenchies, Arc slots in at No.5 ready to tackle the spinners as they make use of a raging Bunsen. If it wasn't for her, we'd still have France. Or at least, we'd still be sending 18 per cent of the male population aged between 18 and 35 to plunder and subjugate it.

Robert Mugabe: it was a toss-up between him and Idi Amin, but in

the end, Amin's desire to be King of Scotland looked like protesting too much. Mugabe particularly hates the BBC. The BBC is what makes Britain great, along with the NHS and cricket.

Napoleon: an absolute shoo-in. You were wondering where he was all this time? Well, he was miniscule and therefore keeps wicket and bats in the traditional No.7 slot for wicket-keepers. I've no time for the modern fad of letting them bat up the order.

Saladin (or Salah ad-Din Yusuf): this lad can play. First sultan of Egypt and Syria, he vanquished the crusaders decisively at the Battle of Hattin in 1187, and thereafter nabbed Palestine for himself. Very much in the Imran Khan mould, possessed of a steely temperament, able to control his Anglophobe tendencies and channel them to devastating effect, he captains my side and is without doubt the most dangerous player on the team.

Alex Salmond: the traitor in our midst and the worst kind of Anglophobe. After all those bridges we let them build, they want to run off and keep them for themselves. Off-spinner, I'm guessing.

Taunting French Guard in Monty Python and The Holy Grail: not content with farting in our general direction and telling us our "mother was a hamster and our father smelled of elderberries", he claims actually to have a holy grail of his own. This holy grail is clearly, symbolically, France, which by rights is ours. And is much nicer than the country we actually possess. We'll play you at dice cricket to win it back.

Charles de Gaulle: bringing up the rear - as he should have done, quite frankly, in 1944 when the Allies wrested back possession of Paris, instead of leading the cavalcade through the Champs-Élysées - is bloviating hate-speaker de Gaulle. We put him up in Mayfair during the war and he repaid us by complaining about the food and vetoing our entry into the EEC. I see him as an opening bowler with no more than four overs in him per spell.

Some of you may be wondering where all the Germans have got to. Truly it was tough leaving out both Kaiser Wilhelm and Franz "the Kaiser" Beckenbauer, but I suspect that Germans all really want to be English deep down. As for the likes of Putin, Pol Pot, Chairman Mao and Fidel Castro, let's not kid ourselves. It's the Americans they hate. They're not even sure where England is.

Who will repel these perilous mountebanks? These are the heroes I have selected with exactly that in mind:

King Arthur: the quintessence of Englishness. Consensual, heroic and monogamous. Just what we need in these dark Trumpian times. And apart from anything else we'll find out once and for all if he really existed.

William Blake: two reasons for this selection, both of them tactical. Firstly, he'd be the only person in the ground who understood the real meaning behind the lyrics to "Jerusalem", which will inevitably be blaring out pompously as the teams assemble before play. Secondly he was a deep admirer of Napoleon. Know your enemy, I say.

Michael Palin: an internationalist and national treasure. He's the best of the Pythons by a country mile, and has been around the block. No one, not even the Olympic champion of truculence that is de Gaulle, could fail to like him. He will confuse the enemy and, crucially, know how to track down King Arthur's agent.

Owain Glyndwr: a Welshman with no vowels in his surname. The Welsh keep claiming that they are the true Britons, and we're administered by the England & Wales Cricket Board. A feisty fellow who evaded capture, he'll be able to adapt to conditions. Look, if Henry V couldn't get the better of him, what chance does Alex Salmond have?

Alfred The Great: a sickly prince but the unifier of all England. I see him as the Peter May of this outfit. Able to hunker down in the marshes when the going gets tough, he can suddenly spring a surprise, and before you know it the war is won and Vikings are switching sides like ex-Remainers in Theresa May's cabinet. He won't be in charge of making the teas.

Douglas Jardine: the greatest Briton of all time, bar none. He is our captain (which may miff Arthur, but he'll get over it). The man who slayed the dragon that was Bradman gets the nod well ahead of St George. "Cricket is battle and service and sport and art," he said, and that wasn't even his best line. "All Australians are an uneducated and unruly mob" was his best line. He is also the only player on either side to have a Test century to his name. Take that, Arc.

Peter Sellers: keeping wicket and sledging everyone. Not only was he

the greatest actor to have agreed to work with Blake Edwards, he was the world's greatest mimic. I expect him to disrupt Saladin's plans when he's at the crease, and to drive the opposing batsmen into a furious rage with his incessant noises behind the stumps.

Victoria Wood: a reluctant but effective leg-spinner. Wood is a sentimental pick, maybe, but embodies all that is good about England. A highly intelligent, funny woman, comfortable in stand-up, sitcom, serious drama and on the piano, she will confuse the opposition who are mostly male chauvinists. She is also a northerner and I was lacking one of them.

Tom Paine: England's greatest political theorist. Yes, he defected from the UK to America, but we were run by Germans then. And he will be able to read Jefferson like a book. Upon our expected victory, I will task him with treaty negotiations which he will carry out in a very even-handed manner, without undue gloating. He is particularly adept at reverse-swing.

Elizabeth I: the founder of modern England and vanquisher of heretics. Elizabeth, like a lot of the best pace bowlers, had a rough upbringing. Her dad killed her mum and she was sent away to be brought up by strangers. But, by Jove, she came back strong. Originally selected to counter the threat of Philip II of Spain (who was dropped after Eamon de Valera made himself available), there are no skeletons in her cupboard. She is also highly unlikely to have to miss the tour to oversee the birth of any children.

Idris Elba: the most handsome man in the world. Elba, a lightning-quick fast

bowler who can swing it both ways, will frighten Napoleon at the mere mention of his name. Embodying all that is great about our once-noble empire, a match-winning five-fer in this game should seal the deal on that James Bond contract.

So there you have it. It was tough leaving out such paragons of English virtue as Delia Smith, Barbara Woodhouse, PG

Wodehouse, Jenni Murray and Clare Balding. They will travel with the team in case the notoriously brittle Alfred picks up an injury, but I'm confident in my selection. If we come out on top, I should be able to put my dice away for another year or two at least. If not, and in perfect harmony with the spirit of the times, maybe I'll just cheat and roll them again until I get the result I want.

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A MURAL IN TIME

Jonathan Liew dreams up Shane Warne's ultimate party

The film crew had been through almost every room of the house, and were just about to leave when the producer spotted the mural. At first, she thought nothing of it. Shane Warne's house in the Melbourne suburbs was like a shrine to bad art. The motivational posters featuring tropical sunsets and soaring eagles. The Matisse rip-offs that looked like a child's school macaroni project. The Barack Obama "Hope" poster, but with Merv Hughes in the main role. This, however, was on an entirely different scale.

The cameras started rolling. "I'll run you through a couple of the names," Warne said. "So there's Bruce Springsteen and myself just chilling in the corner, having a drink. Springsteen's got a cricket ball in his hand, he's just asking questions about cricket. The legend Mick Jagger, he's just sitting in the pool chilling. Then you've got Frank Sinatra and Muhammad Ali having a bit of a tune, just singing along. Then JFK's just mixing with Sharon Stone and Marilyn Monroe. Two of my closest friends, Chris Martin and Michael Clarke, just

having a bit of a chat. I tell you what, the artist has looked after Pup with those guns!"

When the programme eventually aired on Sky Sports in 2015 under the title "Shane Warne: Living the Dream", Warne was widely ridiculed for his vanity. Warne feigned indifference, but deep down he allowed himself a wry chuckle. Sure, he could be a touch outspoken at times, perhaps even unsubtle. But vanity was the last thing you could accuse him of. Besides, he knew the truth. The mural was not some fanciful imagining of an idealised poolside reverie. It had been painted from life.

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Darkness washed over The Oval like a cruel sea. The champagne corks on the outfield would not be seen again until morning. The confetti danced alone. Moths flapped at the pavilion window, the only square of light left in the ground. Inside the Australian dressing-room, however, illumination offered no solace.

For much of the evening, they had laughed and drunk away the pain. The English came in to visit, but had not stayed long, eager to clamber into their waiting taxis and begin the festivities in earnest. And so the Australians commiserated alone, flipping open the bottles of Victoria Bitter that had been purchased for victory but would do just as well in defeat.

A taut and awful silence gripped the room. Simon Katich stared at the backs of his hands. Shaun Tait blew a one-note tune across the neck of his bottle. The silence was momentarily broken by a cricket ball rolling off the bench and hitting the floor with a thud.

"Well, fellas," Adam Gilchrist began suddenly. "At least we can tell our grandkids we played in the greatest Test series of all time."

Ricky Ponting harrumphed. "How can it be the greatest of all time?" he retorted. "We lost."

The click of a cigarette lighter interjected before Gilchrist could respond. From behind a tall stack of pizza boxes, the slumped and cetacean figure of Warne slowly winched itself upright. Warne inhaled slowly and exhaled with violence, an angry cloud of smoke pouring from his mouth.

"Yeah, we lost," he spat. "But we're still Australia. They won, but they'll wake up tomorrow morning and they'll still be England. Ian Bell will still be Ian Bell. Ashley Giles will still be Ashley Giles. The ginger bloke who came in and made seven, he'll still be the ginger bloke. Who's going to remember these guys in 20 years' time?"

Warne paused for effect. "Nobody, that's who," he said. He had developed a habit of answering his own rhetorical questions, a trait that grated on colleagues to an unfathomable degree, and which they would occasionally remark upon when he was out of earshot. But before they could dwell on their irritation, Warne continued.

"Yeah, they're having a bit of a party tonight," he said. "But if Warne throws a party, it's going to be the greatest party the world has ever seen."

Already, Warne's mind was racing quicker than his tongue could follow. Warne was often this way when a grand idea seized him: catalysed, almost to the point of breathlessness. "In fact," he continued, "that's what I'm going to do. Soon as we get back home. Biggest party in the southern hemisphere. Who's coming?"

Again, there was a certain sceptical silence. Every single person in that room had first-hand experience of one of Warne's "mega-parties". Invariably, they failed to live up to their advance billing. Often, spectacularly so. One time, the promised "A-list celebrities from the world of acting" had turned out to be Alf and Ailsa from *Home and Away*. Then there was the time, a few years earlier, when most of the Australian team and their partners had turned up in anticipation of a "sumptuous moonlight dinner". When they arrived, they found that Warne's hot tub had been drained and filled with chips.

But it had been a long summer. Playing in the greatest series of all time takes a toll on the body, but it takes a toll



on the mind as well. Nobody was in the mood to arrest Warne's flight of fancy. Many were already allowing their thoughts to wander homewards, to their own beds and home-cooked food and towels they had chosen themselves.

"You know those games where you have to pick your ideal party guests?" asked Warne, to nobody in particular. "Of course you do. Well, it'll be like that, except for real. Elvis Presley. James Dean. Frank Sinatra. Bruce Springsteen. Muhammad Ali. JFK. Marilyn Monroe. Princess Di."

It was at this point that John Buchanan, the coach, piped up: "Shane, you do realise half of these people are dead?"

Warne glowered at him. "Now that," he retorted, "is the sort of negative thinking that's been holding back Australian cricket for years. 'No nightwatchman.' 'No Hooters the night before a Test.' 'You can't invite this bloke to your party, mate, he's dead.' That's your problem: it's always 'can't' with you, John."

An unidentified yawn from the back of the dressing-room - it may have been Justin Langer, who had been up since 4am doing tai chi - seemed to spread like contagion. One by one, the Australians started stretching and rubbing their eyes and picking up their bags and drifting towards the door. "We'll have a barbecue," Warne announced as their descending footsteps cast echoes back up the stairs. "How's second week of October suit everyone?" But nobody was listening any more.

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"Have you ever read *A Brief History of Time*?" Jason Gillespie asked. "Basically, it says that all time is a form of matter. It has a frequency and a position and a weight all of its own. If you could somehow create a gravitational field stronger than any field that currently exists in the universe, you could enter and exit the time curve at any point you choose. Are you going to have that side salad?"

Warne pushed the plate across the table, rapt in thought, or perhaps the lack of it. It was six months after the Ashes defeat and his party plans had yet to find any kind of definite shape. October had been a non-starter; most of the team had discovered immovable prior arrangements that prevented them from attending. So too November. December and January, at the height of the summer, were no good for anyone.

Meanwhile, a quick blast on Wikipedia had proven Buchanan right. Many of the prospective guests were now dead. But over a hastily arranged lunch in Fitzroy, Gillespie was enthusing about a potential solution.

"You know when you fizz one three feet outside leg stump?" Gillespie said. "And the ball kind of stops in the air? And it seems like time is standing still? That's not an effect. That's the gravitational field created by the revs on the ball. If you harness that, find a way to keep the ball spinning indefinitely, then essentially time is your servant. You can go wherever you want, in whatever direction you want, for as long as you want."

Warne looked unconvinced. It was not that the prospect of time travel was

unappealing to him, or that the science underwhelmed him. It was more that he did not see the point. Why live 200 years in the future when you could live now, with the certainties of the present, when you knew where everything was in your fridge, and you had a pretty good idea what would be on TV that evening? Besides, people in the past would never have heard of him, and people in the future might already have forgotten him. He banished this last thought with a violent, involuntary shake of the head.

"What that means," Gillespie continued through a mouthful of rocket, "is that you can delve into history and grab anyone you want for this party of yours. JFK. Elvis. Leonardo da Vinci. Genghis Khan."

Warne nodded, a gesture that concealed a comprehension that was only partial. Over the months, the guest list had grown in his head. It now included Marlon Brando, Martin Luther King, Buddy Holly and Mother Teresa. But in his head it had remained, until Gillespie had called up out of the blue and asked to meet. Now he was talking about valvetrains and drive belts and hooking a spinning cricket ball up to his motorcycle engine.

"Remember the time I won a motorbike in that tour game in India?" Gillespie asked, spearing a radish with his fork. "It's still in the garage. So you attach the ball to the drive belt - that keeps it spinning - rig it up to a capacitor, beef up the hydraulics, spark it up, lift the throttle, and suddenly you're surfing the highways of time."

Warne pondered as he lit a cigarette. All sorts of thoughts were running

through his head. What if Dizzy could actually pull this off? Even if he could go back in time and find JFK and Elvis Presley, how would he convince them to come to a party in Melbourne? And who was Genghis Khan? He could have sworn he had heard that name someplace. Indian? Off-spinner? 1950s? "Not famous enough," he thought to himself, and mentally scrawled his name off the guest list.

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Once Gillespie got the bike running, things started to move pretty quickly. Warne sat pillion and operated the spinning motor: leggie to go back in time, slider to go forward. "It's so quiet," Gillespie remarked breathlessly as the years began to tick away, as the sharp edges and definite shapes of the garage around them began to blur and melt and warp and fade. The only sound was the ambient fizz of the Kookaburra ball behind them, wobbling furiously on its own axis, held in place only by its own eerie volition. "It's like a county game," Warne scoffed.

Some guests were easier to persuade than others. Mother Teresa refused on grounds of taste. Princess Diana offered her apologies, but she was due to be appearing in a haunting in Bristol later that afternoon and she had always prided herself on being a lady of her word. Buddy Holly had, for some reason, developed an aversion to long-distance travel. Monroe was sceptical, but agreed to come when she found out Kennedy would be there. Kennedy instantly agreed to come when he found out Monroe would be there. He told Jackie he was going to a Pacific trade summit.

But the big fish was Elvis Presley, who agreed to meet them at Graceland in 1972. Sprawled across his luxurious white-leather sofa, Presley refused point blank to accompany Warne and Gillespie to the future. The present was where his life was, and it contained all the food and prescription drugs and heartbreak he could ever want.

It took all Warne's powers of persuasion to lure Presley off his sofa and into the 21st century. "What are future generations going to say," he said in a vaguely scolding tone, "when they find out that the end of the world was coming, and you could have prevented it?" He paused for effect. "I think they'd find that pretty ordinary, if you ask me," he added.

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And so, there it was. The weather was glorious, as glorious as it is in your dreams. Mick Jagger and Sharon Stone arrived first, having shared a cab together. "Incredible who you bump into in cosmetics," Stone remarked. Next came Jack Nicholson, bearing a giant slab of Victoria Bitter and with his 1998 Oscar for Best Actor in his pocket. He was followed in close order by Sean Connery. "Let me guess," Warne beamed. "Martini, shaken not stirred?"

"I'm driving," Connery grumbled. "Do us a Diet Coke for now."

Chris Martin was simply delighted to be there. Everyone he met was greeted with a fusillade of effusive compliments. "You're a fucking legend!" he shouted to Kennedy on meeting him. "I saw that Kevin Costner film about the Cuban Missile Crisis. I

mean, what an amazing experience that must have been. Just, you know, knowing how close we were to nuclear war. It would have been major. So fucking... fair play, man. Fair play. Do you like cricket?"

"Not as such, no," Kennedy replied.

Dimitri Mascarenhas looked, if anything, a little lost. He tried to strike up a conversation with Presley, but seeing as Mascarenhas had never listened to Presley's music and Presley had never watched a Hampshire CB40 game, their chat quickly fizzled out, and Mascarenhas spent most of the afternoon picking at a bowl of Doritos and wondering what on earth he was doing there.

Sinatra requested some music: "Connie Francis, if you have it." Warne said he would search his iTunes library but might have to resort to one of his playlists. Sinatra, polite to a fault, had no objections. And so it is that in the painting, the tune that Sinatra and Ali are belting out is "Somebody Told Me" by The Killers.

Warne circled the party in quiet contemplation, quietly marvelling at the tableau he had brought together. It all felt too surreal for words. Was that really Muhammad Ali reaching for the prawn skewers? Was that really Angelina Jolie lounged half-naked over a chair he had never seen before in his life? Was that really Anthony Hopkins in the character of Hannibal Lecter, flipping brains over on the barbecue?

In a funny way, he still had his doubts. Ever since he was young, he had always had a vivid imagination. It helped him

as a bowler, too: not until late in his career did he realise that his ability to envisage what a batsman would do before he did it was not a skill all humans possessed, but a preternatural, almost supernatural, talent. There were times when he felt like an actor, in a film he had already seen many times before.

His reverie was broken by Martin, grabbing his shoulder and gushing about the ball that he had bowled to Andrew Strauss at Edgbaston. "It was fucking awesome," he said. "We were on tour all that summer and we've got the cricket on in the tour bus, and I'm sitting there thinking, 'fuck,' but it was an absolute genius ball. Seriously, what a genius. You, Freddie Flintoff and Curtly Ambrose are my absolute favourite cricketers of all time. And Botham, obviously. Martin Crowe. Lara. Shaun Pollock. Kumble. Sachin Tendulkar. What's he like to bowl at? I mean, Tendulkar, what a fucking genius..."

It had all gone more perfectly than Warne had dared to hope. Everybody was getting on famously. Sinatra and Michael Clarke exchanged telephone numbers and agreed to go for a drink the next time they were passing through the same spacetime. Bruce Springsteen learned how to bowl a googly and promised to teach the E Street Band when he got back home. Everybody was having so much fun, in fact, that nobody even noticed the two

large trucks pulling up outside the back gate; one bearing a giant water pump, the other carrying 150 industrial-sized bags of chips.

Later, after the last of the guests had left and the sun was finally receding, Warne went back inside the house. He saw his phone on the dining table, and instantly a cold dread settled over him. Even before unlocking the home screen, he knew what he would find. There were 19 missed calls and eight unread texts from Gillespie. He had been at the front door all day, pleading for someone to let him in.

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"OK, that'll be a wrap," the producer announced, checking her phone for the time of her next shoot, a bunch of AFL players visiting a petting zoo in Collingwood. "That was great, thanks. We'll just take some cutaways of the exterior, and then we'll be out of your hair."

"No worries," Warne said, but the film crew were already opening the door by that point. Warne fancied he saw a couple of them smirking conspiratorially to each other. They left promptly and without a second glance, and so they did not see the cricket ball above the garage door, hovering a few inches below the ceiling, still furiously spinning.

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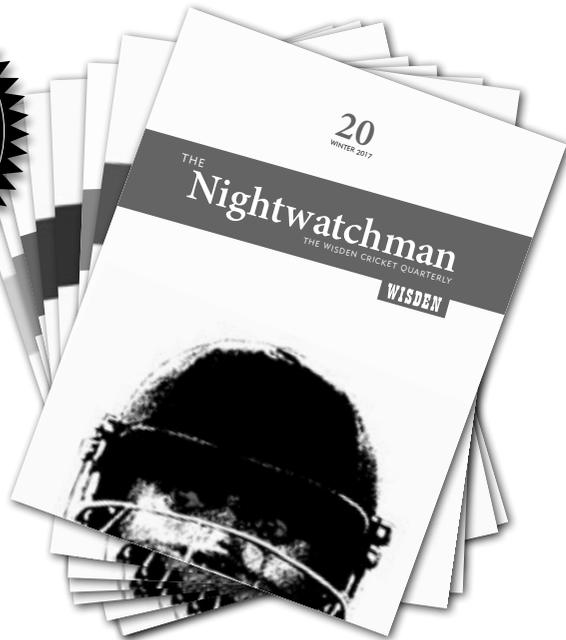


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Ian McMillan is a writer and broadcaster who presents *The Verb* on BBC Radio 3. He's written poems, plays and a memoir, *Neither Nowt Nor Summat*. He watches Darfield and Yorkshire Cricket Clubs and the only time he played cricket, at Low Valley Juniors in 1963, Mrs Hudson told him to take his balaclava off or she'd make him wear his mother's Rainmate. @IMcMillan

Simon Wilde was hooked on cricket from the day in 1972 his father won tickets for Lord's in a *Radio Times* writing competition to pick England's best post-war Test XI. He joined *The Times* in 1984, first handling John Woodcock's copy as chief sub, then being mentored by Alan Lee before moving to the *Sunday Times* as correspondent in 1998. His books include biographies of Ranjitsinhji, Shane Warne, Ian Botham and Kevin Pietersen, as well as *The Biography: The Story of English Cricket*. @swildecricket

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