

Writing the modern game

Like its subject, cricket writing might be divided, however simply, into two ages: imperial and post-imperial; the first dominated by English publishers and pens for the best part of three centuries, the second by an internationalism that removed England as the centre of attention. Was it mere coincidence that 1963, the year that saw Frank Worrell's West Indies team confirm the end of Test cricket's historic Anglo–Australian duopoly by trouncing England on their own pitches (two years later they would win a series against Australia for the first time), also saw the publication of *Beyond a Boundary* by C. L. R. James, the first internationally acclaimed cricket book by a non-Caucasian?

To James, familiarity with life beyond the boundary was essential to understanding what went on inside it, making him the first modern cricket writer. 'The first to see beyond the two-dimensional were Sir Neville Cardus and Raymond Robertson-Glasgow', attested the latest admirable editor of *Wisden*, Scyld Berry, whose own blue-sky thinking and dedication to the cause for *The Observer* and *The Sunday Telegraph* have been a blessing for close on four decades (his 1982 book *Cricket Wallah*,¹ furthermore, was remarkably prescient in anticipating India's ascent). 'They perceived the human side, the character, of a cricketer – Cardus as a subjective impressionist, Robertson-Glasgow from objective experience ... Neither, though, went beyond the field of play to see a place where the cricketer was born and brought up, where he went to school or what community he represented. The first to do this, in my reading of the game, was C.L.R. James.'²

Mike Marqusee, a fellow Marxist, is James's spiritual heir. A native New Yorker, he came to England to study in the early 1970s and stayed, growing to love the game and producing, in addition to iconoclastic and profound studies of Bob Dylan, Muhammad Ali and the Labour Party, two of the most challenging and vital cricket books of our time, *Anyone But England: Cricket and the National Malaise* and *War Minus the Shooting*; the former the finest book on cricket's role in society since *Beyond a Boundary*, the latter

a travelogue revolving around the 1996 World Cup and the author's burgeoning affection for South Asia, which saw him delve deep into the game's inexorable shift towards India. Nobody has better captured the pleasures, contradictions and complex issues that continue to swirl about the game's modern heartbeat and financial stronghold. We shall return to him.

The imperial age was marked by nostalgia, poetic licence and an almost supine reverence, for tradition, Lord's, MCC and authority in general. Only with the utmost reluctance was it consigned to history. Indeed, averred Stephen Moss in the 2000 *Wisden*,³ 'a hundred years ago most of the elements of 20th-century cricket writing were in place: the pastoralism; the belief in the rootedness and essential Englishness of the game; the obsession with figures; the co-opting of famous players in commercial enterprises ... and the defence of past against present.' At the dawn of a new millennium, nonetheless, Moss still felt the need to clamour for muscularity and global perspectives:

The rosy-eyed romantics should declare and let the revisionists into bat. Subvert the stereotypes of cricketing parsons and public schools, hymn the joys of global cricket, let writing play its part in re-energising the game for a new age, a generation less devoted to a dreamy past ... we want our prose in black and white, not purple. Its anglocentricity is absurd for a game where the balance of power now lies on the Indian subcontinent and in Australia. The commemoration of the past is dangerous for a sport which must quickly find a role for the future. Cricket writing, like cricket as a whole, must remake itself ... Wit, vision, a close reading of the game, a sense of its languor and lunacies, rather than unremitting reverence, should henceforth dictate the play, dominate the field.⁴

Laudable as such sentiments were, it was odd that Moss – who listed the writers he admired, Englishmen all – should exhibit so little awareness of those already doing his bidding within and beyond his own shores; even stranger that he should ignore one of cricket writing's comparatively new functions – to explain the game's geopolitical conundrums and economic intricacies. Fortunately, the advent of the World Wide Web and, more specifically, the emergence and development of Cricinfo as one of the globe's most popular sports websites, has enabled followers to access an unprecedented amount of writing, and hence a wider range of voices.

That it is now possible to read an edition of *The Hindustan Times* and *The New Zealand Herald* without having to leave one's laptop has broadened perspectives. Granted a global stage, the diverse talents of the Indians Rahul Bhattacharya, Pradeep Magazine, Sharda Ugra and Gulu Ezekiel, Vaneisa Baksh (West Indies), Richard Boock (New Zealand), Telford Vice (South Africa) and Osman Samiuddin (Pakistan) have surfaced and flourished,

augmenting our knowledge and appreciation, breaking down insularity and challenging received wisdoms. Reverence, moreover, is refreshingly unfringe. The result is more erudite and balanced writing. Aficionados, whether their source is the press, books, magazines such as *The Wisden Cricketer* and *All Out Cricket* or the all-seeing Cricinfo, with its correspondents in every port, are almost certainly better-informed than those who follow any other sport. Welcome to cricket writing in the post-imperial age.

Rising above information's noisy hum

From 1999 until 2003, I had the privilege of editing *The New Ball*, a conglomeration of themed essays promoted as 'the cricketing *Granta*'. The fifth volume, a celebration-cum-dissection of cricket writing, was subtitled *The Write Stuff*.⁵ Twenty-one selectors nominated their favourite passage and outlined the rationale, including Richie Benaud, Ted Dexter and a clutch of prominent journalists from England, Australia, India, New Zealand and Sri Lanka. The intention was twofold: to bring current sensibilities to bear on past masters while offering a primer to those familiar with contemporary practitioners but less well-versed in those rich traditions.

For one writer, distance and experience had diminished youthful enchantment. Kevin Mitchell, then chief sports writer of *The Observer*, nominated an interview with Wilfred Rhodes, conducted by Cardus in 1950 when the great Yorkshire all-rounder was in his seventy-second summer. Cardus remains the game's most celebrated chronicler but it is difficult not to suspect that this is partly because his quotable prose and classical references dignified the profession, elevating cricket writing, its exponents believed, above all other forms of sports writing. 'This is the best and worst of Cardus, which so often went hand in hand', wrote Mitchell. 'Our Neville was no infallible tape-recorder of history, though – more a notorious embroiderer of distant, uncheckable events, especially those that lent substance and colour to his own troubled youth.' Mitchell cites the passage where, discussing the 1902 Ashes Test at Old Trafford, Cardus claims to have been there himself, to watch his hero Archie MacLaren, the England captain. He recounts seeing the infuriated MacLaren throw his bat in the dressing-room after being caught, and even quotes his verbal outburst. 'Admirable forensic skills', as Mitchell put it, 'for a 13-year-old schoolboy.'⁶

Then again, noted Mitchell, Cardus 'lived in more detached times, not one like ours, so humming with information we can hardly hear ourselves dream'. That humming has changed cricket writing in ways that would have been unimaginable even twenty-five years ago. Satellite television, and latterly the Internet, have made experts of us all. Could Cardus have got

away with his *modus operandi* now? One doubts it. The loss of lyricism at the expense of accuracy, though, seems a reasonable trade. Fortunately, although the focus, led by the tabloids and emulating trends in football, is increasingly on news, personalities and quotes, the modernisation of cricket writing has not spelled the end of the match report as an art form. While fewer newspapers now carry extended descriptive reports that focus on the play – in good part because of the global obsession with football and the tendency of modern editors to fill their pages accordingly, but also because the action has already been extensively covered by television and the Internet by the time they are published – the slack has to an extent been picked up by websites, where space is far less of a constraint. In addition to the likes of the online incarnations of *The Times* and *The Guardian*, Cricinfo and the newly founded Test Match Extra are filling the breach, although the onus is likely to fall increasingly on the stand-alone websites as newspapers struggle for their future. Furthermore, while international coverage is more extensive than ever – editors often send three or more reporters to cover a Test match – only a supreme optimist would predict a revival in interest for domestic fare beyond the all-star Indian Premier League.

The closest to a modern *Cardus* is Frank Keating. Another *Guardian* man prone to sublime flights of fancy, Keating's inimitable style, part-colloquial hipster, part-folksy romantic, enlivened by his own adjectival nouns yet grounded in reality, could buoy even the most depressed crests:

Cardus saw WG Grace only once, but it was enough for him to tell how 'he played cricket with the whole man of him in full action, body, soul, heart, and wits.' And so say us who saw Botham in his pomp of 1985. On the cricket fields, we would not forget him if we could (and could not forget him if we would), as morning after morning the summer's sun rose for him and he went forth and trod fresh grass – and the expectant, eager cry was sent about the land: Botham's In!⁷

When that voluptuously vowelled actor Peter Ustinov read extracts from the paper in a television advert for *The Guardian* in the mid-1980s, Keating, quite properly, was the honoured sports writer. The best cricket writing, the best writing, merits recital, Keating's melodic prose above all.

Foot soldier

The writer most responsible for bridging past and present, for continuity, is David Foot, a gentle, genial West Countryman who has spent sixty years examining the humanity of this sporting life, painting vivid and insightful portraits of the giants and the garrulous, the humble, the unconfident and

the disturbed alike, most memorably in his books and his summer work for *The Guardian*. That generosity of spirit, questing mind and perceptiveness, untainted by age and underpinned by an appreciation of how the demands on the professional cricketer have mounted over the course of his journalistic career, have infused biographies of tragic West Country icons such as Walter Hammond and the suicidal Harold Gimblett, together with collections of essays such as *Fragments of Idolatry*. Foot's county reports, his bread-and-butter, lose nothing by comparison. Compressing the myriad aspects of a day's play into 400 words can be trying at best, but the artistry always shines through. Never in his immaculately crafted musings does one derive a sense of snobbery or nostalgic longing, both surpassingly rare traits. If you didn't know the following extract was written in 1993, you could just as easily guess at 1953:

If Caddick, sweet of action with the purring smoothness of a Rolls-Royce, was the ultimate match-winner, there were unlikelier heroes, such as Van Troost for his batting. He went in last when Somerset batted a second time and was top scorer. He spurned caution or the niceties of the game. The flying Dutchman generally thought of as the county's fastest bowler, really belongs to the halls when he goes to the wicket. He backs to square-leg and still, with that phenomenal stretch of his, manages somehow to reach the ball. He hit two sixes off Martin and, seemingly with blows from the base of his bat, reached 35 before succumbing to a catch at long-off.⁸

Witness, too, an interview with Gloucestershire and Pakistan's Zaheer Abbas. Foot's compassionate humanity, sense of proportion, temperate tone and elegant, recitable prose are all on parade:

Zaheer leaves Richards and Botham to corner the pages of *Wisden* with the more dynamic flourish. He goes into cricket almost by stealth. 'Where do you bowl to him?' asks his good friend [Indian Test spinner Dilip] Doshi, to no one in particular. 'What are you complaining about – you've just taken five Test wickets,' says Zed. Doshi grins and returns to his PG Wodehouse. Far away in Pakistan Zaheer is, at the age of 35, demonstrating once more the receding art of pure batsmanship. 'See you back in England,' he waves. I edge uneasily past the armed police – one of whom stops me taking some innocuous holiday cine film as if I were a fugitive from a *le Carre* novel – and I know indisputably in my heart that the bat is mightier than the gun.⁹

I once asked Foot what motivated him. 'I've been told I have a suicide complex', he giggled gingerly, almost guiltily:

Most of my books have either been about people who committed suicide or been on the point of killing themselves, which may suggest a slightly warped personality. I hope not, but ... I'm writing about someone I'm desperately

interested in, someone with a complicated life. I'm fairly complicated myself. If there was a war, even though I'm a pacifist, I'd be one of the first to sign on. I wouldn't have the courage to be a conscientious objector. I'd like to think I am [compassionate]. I think that's the nicest compliment anyone can pay me. And that perhaps comes from my background ... We might have had the wireless on but nobody ever spoke at our dinner table. I never learned the art of conversation. Which is probably why I write.¹⁰

Even in the summer of 2009, at the age of eighty, nothing, outwardly at least, had altered. If the palette was now dominated by the shades and hues of well-tended memories, the following passage from a *Guardian* column underlines the timeless appeal of that felicitous way with syllable and verb, that innate soulfulness:

Archie was often known as 'The Bishop', even if his ecclesiastical stature fell short of David Sheppard's. Teasing fellow amateurs were apt to change Wickham to 'Snickham', a snide description of his batting frailty. But no one could take too many conversational liberties when it came to his keeping. His stance, in distinctive grey flannels with a black cummerbund, was comic (if not acutely painful) as his legs seemed to stretch all the way from point to the square-leg umpire. But he must still have been nimble, not conceding a bye when Hampshire scored 672 for seven.¹¹

In another *Guardian* column, Foot availed readers of his least enjoyable cricketing experiences, among them Hammond's comeback for Gloucestershire in 1951, strictly, cruelly, at the cash-strapped club's request:

His stay at the crease, following the warmest of romantic welcomes as he strolled to the wicket, was brief and cruelly misplaced. He kept playing and missing; the coordination had gone. Up in the stands, the members and his once doting fans fidgeted. The Somerset slow bowler Horace Hazell, who had always idolised Hammond, swore that he tried to encourage him with half-volleys ... England's great batsman and captain had made a serious mistake in agreeing to play. When mercifully he was out, the big crowd, still palpably affectionate, was silent and only wished he had left them with merely his wondrous memories.¹²

Foot's 'saddest' experience was conveyed in three concise sentences, the compassion undimmed, the economy of expression still a model for aspiring journalists and fictioneers alike:

I found myself talking to a blind man for whom a companion was giving a running commentary. 'How I love cricket and desperately wish I could see the play.' He was George Shearing, the great jazz pianist who liked to be taken to a Gloucestershire match during summer visits to this country.¹³

Wit and wisdom

In the final third of the twentieth century, Alan Gibson (*Times*) and Doug Ibbotson (*Daily Telegraph*) elevated their reports above the norm with their penchant for wry observation. Humour, though, was in short supply until the early 1980s, when Matthew Engel was appointed chief cricket correspondent of *The Guardian*. His spare, conversational style, light on adjectives and full of waspish irreverence, transformed the landscape.

There is a graffito on the back of the players' tea-room at Hastings: Victoria 1066. Since the cricket ground is the only place in town not full of French students, this must have been put there by one of William's soldiers and could well constitute the longest-running gloat in history. The shortest-running gloat might have come from Northamptonshire after their victory here on Sunday.¹⁴

Engel, warranted Alastair McLellan, 'was the first to write about the game in a language and style that made it seem part of the late twentieth century'.¹⁵ In his approach to the divisive South African debate of the 1980s, moreover, 'he played a major role in challenging the partial and divisive view of cricket's place in the world'. Engel, most assuredly, was not one of those who only cricket knew. Eager to cover the so-called 'rebel' tours where others refused to set foot in South Africa while apartheid was in force, he was 'unusual', he admitted to McLellan, 'in that although I was opposed to the South African regime, I was riveted by its efforts to survive. This came down to the ambivalence that I have always had between being a sports writer and a political writer. The story was made for me. I was fascinated by it. I am always fascinated whenever sport moves into the real world. That's what really interests me.'¹⁶

In 1986, when *The Independent* was first being staffed, Engel was offered the post of chief cricket correspondent; he turned it down to write about politics and ultimately edit *Wisden* with passion and innovation, having had quite enough of the endless tour cycle. In his stead, Martin Johnson soon won a cult following that spread far and wide. Aided by the fact that the butt of his jokes and barbs were the England team of the Ian Botham era, a side one could depend on for soap opera rather than victories, Johnson made breakfasts snap and crackle. In 2009, his touch showed no sign of fading:

The [Oval's] groundsman would have been a strong contender for England's man of the series, had there not been so much competition from the umpires, and Ricky Ponting, having already received two fat lips during a fielding mishap, did well not to draw more blood from biting through his tongue when

stoically declining to point the finger at the officials. There is now a case for teams preparing a Justin Langer-style dossier before a Test series. ‘Billy Bowden. Don’t bother appealing to the first ball of a game, as he’ll still be fast asleep. Or gazing at himself in a vanity mirror.’ ‘Rudi Koertzen. Don’t just appeal for lbw if you hit the pad, ask for bowled, stumped, caught, hit wicket, handled ball, and obstructing the field as well. He’ll definitely give it out, but not for the right reason.’¹⁷

Blind eyes and clear vision

Cricket writing’s least admirable chapter remains its acquiescent response to apartheid, which can be interpreted as a key moment in the transition from the imperial era to the post-imperial. To maintain the pretence that sport could transcend political considerations, and thus ensure South Africa remained within the cosy, unquestioning fraternity of white sporting nations, why look further than Table Mountain and the *braai*? In Charles Fortune’s account of the 1956–57 MCC tour of South Africa, the word ‘apartheid’ is conspicuous by its absence. He mentions ‘Indian youths in the non-European stand’ in Johannesburg, writes sniffily of the inelegant ‘Zulu hoick’. Eventually, he talks to ‘a solitary African’.¹⁸ The only way one could tell that the ‘African’ might be coloured is from the word ‘sah’ with which Fortune peppers his heavily patronised quotes. Only then is one afforded the vaguest hint that South Africa was torn apart by racial divisions.

Reporting a demonstration against South Africa’s 1960 tour of England, undertaken shortly after the Sharpeville massacre, the Wiltshire-born Fortune described protesters as ‘no more than the cats-paws of certain churchmen who seized on the visit of the cricketers as an opportunity to gain for themselves some public notice’.¹⁹ Later a long-serving secretary of the South African Cricket Association, the media centre at The Wanderers was named in his honour. ‘Fortune was a conservative’, declared his obituary in the 1995 *Wisden Cricketers’ Almanack*, ‘and appeared to take South Africa’s exclusion from world cricket as something of a personal affront.’

A decade later, R. S. Whittington dedicated his book about Australia’s 1966–67 tour of South Africa to ‘the lonely land’. An Australian who had recently resided there, not until Chapter 7 does he begin to address the cause of the country’s isolation. Even then, perhaps understandably, he takes at face value Prime Minister John Vorster’s announcement, in April 1967, ‘that South African sportsmen could compete against non-white sportsmen abroad and that non-white sportsmen could be included in international teams making visits to South Africa’, thus seemingly clearing the way for Basil D’Oliveira to tour South Africa with England two winters hence.

Whittington called it ‘a triumph for quietly-conducted, well-reasoned argument and negotiation’.²⁰

Some, however few, were less easily or wilfully deluded. On his first visit to South Africa in 1948–49, John Arlott stopped outside the Nationalist campaign headquarters on the night the general election was won by the party that would impose apartheid. His companion expressed his dismay, whereupon Afrikaner party supporters covered his car in spit.²¹ Asked to state his race upon arrival in that benighted land, Arlott famously wrote ‘human’. One day he asked a black taxi driver to take him to a township: the poverty left a lasting impression. In 1960 it was Arlott to whom D’Oliveira wrote in search of employment in England, Arlott who befriended him and recommended him to Middleton Cricket Club.

Eight years later, during the so-called ‘D’Oliveira Affair’, Arlott was livid at the all-rounder’s original exclusion from the MCC party to tour South Africa that winter: to him, it was motivated entirely by politics. That anger, expertly controlled in his comments for *The Guardian* and even more effective for their smouldering passion, roused MCC members to revolt as well as guiding public opinion. A few weeks earlier he had told the BBC he had no intention of commentating on South Africa’s scheduled 1970 tour of England. He explained his reasoning in *The Guardian*, inspiring the young Peter Hain, the mainspring behind the resoundingly effective ‘Stop the Seventy Tour’ campaign. According to his son Timothy, Arlott had not wanted his friends ‘to wonder what side he was on’:

Apartheid is detestable to me, and I would always oppose it ... a successful tour would offer comfort and confirmation to a completely evil regime ... Commentary on any game depends, in my professional belief, on the ingredient of pleasure; it can only be satisfactorily broadcast in terms of shared enjoyment. This series cannot, in my mind, be enjoyable.²²

James was similarly unencumbered by wilful naivety, likewise Engel and Keating. Marqusee, the inspiration for a new wave of worldly, uncompromised cricket writing, has emulated their refusal to divorce sport from politics:

Much as we might like the game to become, once again, merely a game, any human activity as complex as cricket will always carry meanings and invite interpretation. Our aim should be to ensure that those meanings and interpretations are not a burden on but an extrapolation of the game’s democratic essence. We cannot return to a pristine cricket which never existed. Instead, we should see in the game’s inclusive premises, its autochthonous open-endedness, a rich realm of human possibility – a realm in which even England can find a place.²³

The value of the outsider's perspective was no less palpable in his description of the 1996 World Cup final between Australia and Sri Lanka in Lahore:

For this day only, the Pakistani fans had metamorphosed into Sri Lanka fans. Many said this was because the Sri Lankans had vanquished the Indians in the semi-final, and thus exacted revenge for Pakistan's defeat at India's hands in the quarter-final. But there was more to it than that. The Australian refusal to play in Colombo at the outset of the Cup had offended Pakistanis almost as much as Sri Lankans and had aggravated the lingering resentment in Pakistan over the bribery allegations made against Salim Malik by Shane Warne and other Australian players. Subcontinental solidarity had been fractured by recent events in the World Cup, but here, at the tournament's end, it made a welcome return.²⁴

Beyond Lord's

Australia's considerable contribution to cricket's written heritage has continued apace, spearheaded by Gideon Haigh, who combines literary eloquence and a reporter's eye with a historian's thirst for depth and context, bringing the present into sharper focus and the past to life, burying many a myth. No contemporary matches his breadth. His biographies of Warwick Armstrong and Jack Iverson (the latter stemming from an essay he wrote for the first volume of *The New Ball*) were resoundingly happy marriages of assiduous research, psychological burrowing and masterly storytelling. Primarily a business journalist, his understanding of global economics and boardroom chicanery, a decidedly unusual trait among cricket writers but increasingly vital in an age of franchises and blockbusting broadcasting deals, has been especially valuable, most notably in his journalism.

Born in London to a Yorkshire-reared father and an Australian mother, Haigh has spent most of his life in Victoria, reporting with flair and distinction for the *Melbourne Age* and other Australian publications while carving a vaunted reputation further afield with his columns in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and Cricinfo. His dissections of Iverson and Armstrong are worthy additions to the retro-modern biographical canon headed by Foot (Hammond and Gimblett), Arlott (Fred Trueman) and Charles Williams (Don Bradman), yet, like Foot, he is far from a nostalgist. Weightier and more invaluable still is his analysis of the Packer Revolution, *The Cricket War*, for which he interviewed scores of participants nearly two decades after that fractiously critical episode and found the lucid, unemotional tone that had eluded the often histrionic contemporary accounts. Even more important is *The Summer Game – Australia in Test Cricket 1949–71*, where primary research, social history and a novelist's flair combine to capture the

strained times that made Packer's intervention both desirable and necessary. The emphasis of the book, he avowed, is on 'people and period rather than games or scores ... there is as much attention devoted to areas previously glossed over: how cricketers lived and worked in a semi-amateur economy, how the game was run, how tours were organized, and generally the place of cricket in Australia'.²⁵ It succeeds on every level.

That the game's most respected contemporary historians are both Anglo-Australians seems fitting. To date the only writer to win the Cricket Society's Book of the Year award three times, David Frith, who entitled his autobiography *Caught England, Bowled Australia*, was born in London, moved to Sydney then returned to England in his late twenties, editing *The Cricketer* before founding *Wisden Cricket Monthly* in 1979. A prolific author, he has brought his formidable research and narrative skills to bear on matters ranging from fast bowling (*The Fast Men* was the first book devoted to the subject) to slow (*The Slow Men*), cricketing suicides (*Silence of the Heart*) to Bodyline (*Bodyline Autopsy* has now superseded Jack Fingleton's *Cricket Crisis* as the latest final word on that well-trodden terrain).²⁶ Nobody has done more to contextualise the immediate post-imperial age.

Over the past decade, as publishers on the subcontinent have sought to capitalise on the national obsession and mirror the subcontinent's emergence as the epicentre of the game, Indian writers have expanded their audience, from historians and essayists such as Mukul Kesavan and Ramachandra Guha to the precocious journalist Rahul Bhattacharya, who was just twenty-seven when voted Cricket Writer of the Year in the 2006 Indian Sports Journalism Awards, having previously written the acclaimed *Pundits From Pakistan*, a vibrant diary of India's 2003–04 tour. Witness his atmospheric depiction of the Karachi crowd:

The noise in the crowd arranged itself into properly deafening rhythms that were then never to cease. The slow-fast bursts of hand on hand, of feet on floor, of rolled-up paper on railing, of 33,000 pairs of lungs ... Ganguly would remark that his players could not hear each other.²⁷

Bhattacharya and his peers seek to capture this post-imperial landscape. No longer, they consistently remind us, is this a game run by England and Australia for Englishmen and Australians and filtered through their eyes. No longer are *The Cricketer*, *The Times* or *The Daily Telegraph* the first port of call for cricket obsessives; that distinction now lies squarely with Cricinfo, an Indian website. Founded in 1992 by Dr Simon King, a research scientist and MCC member who had relocated to Cornell University in upstate New York,²⁸ its original selling-point, ball-by-ball coverage of international matches, was soon supplemented by more considered reports, contemporary

interviews and historical features. Now run from India, edited by the estimable and judicious Sambit Bal and recently bought by the American sports channel ESPN, Cricinfo offers unprecedented global coverage of a game whose leading lights are no longer Englishmen and Australians but home-grown icons – Sachin Tendulkar, M. S. Dhoni and Yuvraj Singh. As such, India seems destined to be the launching-pad for tomorrow's most prominent observers.

The changing face of newsprint

Newspapers remain the one constant. Read a discursive day's report in *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Sydney Morning Herald* and it will not differ markedly from those of half a century, even a century ago. There is a greater informality of language, yes, and fewer references to classical music and poetry (albeit not to Shakespeare), but to read the magisterial E. W. Swanton in the *Telegraph* during the 1950s was not an altogether dissimilar experience to reading the endlessly fair-minded Christopher Martin-Jenkins in the 1990s. Both were better-informed, closer to the seats of power, than their rivals; both issued pronouncements and proposals that influenced decision-makers. Their recommendation could win selectorial approval for one player, hasten the dropping of another, set in train a revision of regulations. What *has* changed is the nature of reporting and the backgrounds of the leading correspondents.

The proliferation of tours and formats, allied to the increasing welter of newsworthy stories and column inches, has led to a division of duties, for the sake of health and sanity. Burn-out is not unknown. As was reflected in the rapid turnover of Australian correspondents at the outset of the twenty-first century, and the decision by *The Times* to bill Richard Hobson as 'One-Day Cricket Correspondent' in the mid-2000s. Television has erected another obstacle. With even overseas matches being beamed live to their desk, editors have become accustomed to second-guessing writers who once reported without fear of contradiction. Yet with racism, match-fixing, ball-tampering, on-field behaviour and administrative greed and incompetence perpetually jostling for attentions, runs and wickets have often been also-rans. Happily, match reports have benefited, evolving from bland scorecard recitations into colourful vignettes of people, time and place. And it was assuredly a sign of these globalised times when, one night in London's City Road in the spring of 1999, an over-excited sub-editor succeeded in persuading *The Independent* to relegate a story about the England captain's back trouble in favour of Brian Lara's majestic 153 not out against Australia in Barbados to secure an enthrallingly improbable one-wicket win for the

West Indies. The greatest innings of modern times took precedence over the national interest, and justly so.

No issue proved more hotly contentious than Hansie Cronje's association with gamblers. The pain of white South Africans, betrayed by their national captain, was summed up with barely suppressed fury by Luke Alfred:

In his handwritten confession ... Cronje wrote that after weeks of soul-searching he was finally able to look at himself in the mirror. But given all the evasions, the manifest inaccuracies, the lies direct and by omission, Cronje's economy of truth was beginning to look a little tattered ... If he was able to live with himself again after his confession ... how easy was it to live with himself in the first place?²⁹

The prevalence, from the mid-1980s, of former players among the chief correspondents of the English national papers, none of whom have ever had any formal journalistic training, led to a greater reliance, amid an era of often bitter circulation wars, on other reporters when it came to press conferences, off-the-field news and interviews. Igniting the omnipresent clamour for exclusive stories, those circulation wars have helped change the course of the game, not least in the summer of 1988. That was when the publication of a story in a new mid-market newspaper, *Today*, led to the sacking of the England captain, Mike Gatting. A liaison with a barmaid, chronicled with predictable luridness, was cited as the cause, though many suspected Gatting's employers, the Test and County Cricket Board, of being in cahoots with the paper. Gatting, after all, had hardly had an unblemished track record on tour, and the Board had regretted not sacking him after his shameful chest-prodding dispute with a Pakistani umpire the previous winter.

Long gone, though, are the days when reporters turned a blind eye to players' off-duty proclivities. And when cricket writers were deemed insufficiently disinterested to 'dish the dirt', general news reporters were enlisted, as on England's Caribbean tour of 1986, when a former Miss World boasted in *The News of the World* of having broken a bed while in the enthusiastic company of Ian Botham. All of which served to aggravate the growing mistrust between players and writers, one now echoed in the frostiness between active players and the ex-professionals, such as Michael Atherton, Nasser Hussain and Botham himself, who mix insight with unfettered criticism in the commentary box.

The invasion of the press box by ex-internationals is a peculiarly English development (albeit not uniquely so: Richie Benaud and Jack Fingleton were both journalists before they played for Australia, while Bill O'Reilly also regaled the press box for many years). Nor is this reflected in other sports: the opportunity Oxford and Cambridge University offer to combine

a world-class education with first-class cricket experience – for all that the latter is increasingly ill-warranted – is a singular boon, often leading, historically, to the England captaincy. Elsewhere, today's leading correspondents are, almost without exception, trained journalists. Indeed, in Australia, India and the Caribbean, the game's ingrained sexism has been splendidly overturned by the likes of Chloe Saltau, Sharda Ugra, Neeru Bhatia and Vaneisa Baksh. The perennial promise of the Oxbridge passport to career advancement, on the other hand, has seldom been better encapsulated than by the laptops lugged around the globe by Michael Atherton, Steve James, Vic Marks, Derek Pringle, Peter Roebuck and Mike Selvey. These erstwhile professionals have their critics – albeit drawn primarily from the ranks of embittered reporters confined to the donkey-work – but each has carved a niche for himself, and not solely by dint of technical expertise. As of May 2010, indeed, the sagacious but always lively Selvey, appointed by *The Guardian* in September 1987, was the sport's second-longest-serving correspondent in the national press.

Of these purported interlopers, only Atherton, who led England in more than fifty Tests, won worldwide renown as a player. He could well leave the deepest and most lasting impression. Succeeding Martin-Jenkins at *The Times*, an unenviable act to follow, he soon forged a reputation as a judicious judge while shedding his stoicism as an opening batsman to unfurl a fearless array of bravura strokes. Take his analysis of the dilemma facing Kevin Pietersen on England's tour of South Africa in early 2010:

It is almost as if, now, unlike before, Pietersen wants to get on with things quietly and anonymously. But once you have embraced the cult of celebrity, it is not so easy to retreat. But how far does quiet anonymity suit his game? It was a game that, previously, was based on self-glorification, the 'look at me aren't I brilliant?' attitude that culminated in the kind of wondrous strokeplay that, this observer at least, had rarely seen. Pietersen is not Ian Bell, nor should he try to be. Somehow over the next five days, the Brylcreem Boy has got to find his inner skunk.³⁰

The next day he turned his eye to the lamentable lack of a single black player in the South African Test XI:

Another cricket club opened their doors yesterday, to more pomp and ceremony, in the heart of Johannesburg ... But here in Gauteng, the home of the most desperate townships, cricket and rugby are just bystanders to football. Mind you, to stand on the Oval in Alexandra and look down into the slum below is to wonder that any kind of sport is played there at all. Sunshine and space are key ingredients for any sport and while there is plenty of the former, there is none of the latter.³¹

Not that the roll of honour stops there. The affectionately witty Tanya Aldred; the trenchant South African Neil Manthorp; Huw Richards of the *International Herald Tribune* and Sambit Bal, internationalists of the first order; Ed Smith, a searching, inventive iconoclast; the durable Trinidadian Tony Cozier; Christian Ryan, the young Australian whose wide-ranging 2009 biography of Kim Hughes is essential reading; David Hopps, the latest in the roll-call of distinguished Yorkshire addicts; academics such as Hilary Beckles, Richard Cashman, Boria Majumdar, Ric Sissons and Jack Williams: these and many more are prolonging a long and noble line. Better yet, they have branched out and chilled out. At last, cricket has a multi-national, multi-octave, multifaceted and distinctly *modern* voice, less constrained by reverence, formality, tradition and nostalgia, more willing to analyse the game's global and political dimensions, embrace its often dizzying pace of change, locate its funny bone and plot its future. Progress by any other name. Stephen Moss should be satisfied.

NOTES

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- 6 *Ibid.*
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- 8 David Foot, 'Caddick's Nine Wickets Demolishes Lancashire', *Guardian*, 15 May 1993.
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- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Matthew Engel, *Sportswriter's Eye* (London: Macdonald Queen Anne Press, 1989), p. 80.
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- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–67.
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- 28 Alastair McLellan, 'The Cricinfo Story', *The New Ball Volume 6* (London: Sports Books Direct, 2001), p. 150.
- 29 Luke Alfred, *Lifting the Covers – The Inside Story of South African Cricket* (Claremont, South Africa: Spearhead, 2001), p. 176.
- 30 Michael Atherton, 'Time for Pietersen to Get in Touch With His Swaggering Former Self', *The Times*, 13 January 2010.
- 31 Michael Atherton, 'Ntini's Absence Raises Awkward Questions', *The Times*, 14 January 2010.