

[Cricket Society and MCC Book of the Year Award talk May 2014]

by Rob Steen

A couple of years ago, Scyld Berry addressed this august gathering and insisted that the one thing cricket writing was not was cricket reporting. While I bow to Scyld on most things – well, he did start covering the game, and ghosting Len Hutton, when I was bowling an irresistible mixture of tripe and filth for John Lyon Under-14s, and he has co-written an award-winning book with a descendant of Ivo Bligh – we diverge wildly on this.

If nothing else, if cricket reporters weren't cricket writers, membership of the Cricket Writers' Club would be on a par with membership of the Surrey branch of the N. Srinivasan fan club. Besides, according to Scyld's rationale, having published several fewer books than me, he is a lesser cricket writer, which is as ludicrous, of course, as proposing that Harold Robbins's prolific output made him more of a novelist than J. D. Salinger or Joseph Heller.

Dickie [Rutnagur], Norman [de Mesquita] and Gerald [Mortimer], Martin [Searby], Frank [Keating] and CMJ: may your verbalised nouns never stop and dangling participles never drop. Bent as I am on obeying instructions to "keep it light", and presumably at least mildly pink and fluffy, it would be remiss not to mention that the Cricket Writers' Club has been doing an awful lot of mourning lately.

Memories of those departed colleagues that spring most immediately to mind are Martin Searby's extraordinarily accurate impression of Jackie Mason whenever he drove me to a train station in the northern extremities (how could a Yorkshire yok possibly capture a Jewish comic with such deft timing?) and Norman De Mesquita's insistence that the f-word – football – should not be uttered in his presence. Then there was Dickie Rutnagur's inimitable Saxon-like way with the c-word.

The only person who could possibly have got away with duplicating the Oxford Dictionary's least edifying entry so liberally and fulsomely, and without having his paddy whacked by yours truly, was a Zoroastrian émigré from Bombay. As a fellow devotee of Pimlico, Harry Morgan's salt beef bar in St John's Wood High St and Henri's Delicatessen at The Oval, how could I possibly let anger and indignation get the better of me? I don't think I've laughed more guiltily than when Dickie was in full expletive-undeleted flow - especially when the target was dear old Dick Streeton, the only person I've ever met who avoided an excess baggage charge flying home from cricket tours by tearing out the pages of novels as soon as he'd read them. Requests from the PA announcer for "Mr Dick Streeton of the London *Times*" or "Mr Hugh Jarse of *The Times* of London" never lost their capacity for reducing allegedly grown men to a puddle of schoolboy giggles.

Never, moreover, have I been in greater awe of a fellow hack than when Martin dictated 1500 words about Graeme Hick to the *Sunday Times* down a crackly line from the Harare Sports Club - without so much as a note to crib from. Bile can seldom have been so literary, though it would perhaps have been best left as either a monologue in a pub or a post-watershed edition of *Jackanory*. After all, to call Martin a schmoozer would be akin to classifying the Long Room Bar as a boozier.

Martin saw the world in black-and-white terms, acknowledged few if any shades of opinion. Not for him those trusty journalistic allies - the conditional, the fudge and the fence-sit; for him, there was no should, would and could, only shall, will and must. Martin dealt in tablets of stone and biblical certainty. In *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen's character Alvy Singer assures Diane Keaton's Annie that the world can be divided into the miserable and the horrible. To Martin, more or less everything could be categorised as either terrible or abominable (and, in the case of white southern Africans playing for England, both). Unsurprisingly, the Hick family were not amused in the slightest; a lawsuit ensued, endangering Martin's income from the *Sunday Times*. Such are the perils of writing under the influence. Ah, but how he adored the game – hence his determination to protect it from every

sling and arrow: selfish batting, timid bowling, negative captaincy, asinine administration and, worst of all, un-Yorkshireness.

Those of you who know me know I, too, love sport far too well - and none too wisely. So slavish is this devotion, I have just completed writing a book about all sorts of ballgames that would have been thicker than the average brickie had those sensible folk at Bloomsbury not rightly feared a writ from the Opticians and Optometrists Union. If anything, I love sportswriters even more. After all, fellow-obsessives are much more fun than those who snootily insist that taking sport the remotest bit seriously is the first sign of skewed priorities and downright idiocy.

Having spent more time in the company of racing writers, baseball writers, boxing writers, rugby writers and football writers than is strictly necessary for one's health or sanity, I can say with no hesitation whatsoever that cricket writers are the only branch of the profession with whom I could imagine spending the best part of a week in war-torn Sri Lanka, or even the wilds of south London. When my students or former colleagues ask if I miss full-time reporting I always say the only things I miss are the intimate, otherworldly outgrounds that are no longer part of the first-class fabric (especially Weston-super-Mare, Folkstone and Hastings) and the camaraderie of the cricket pressbox. If it is slightly less of a Boys' Own world than it was before my appearances began dwindling after I began teaching at the University of Brighton in 2005, my fleeting visits since then have confirmed how far and how quickly the world has moved on.

Where wit and wisdom once duelled for supremacy, today's pressbox is a hive of activity: how can all that emailing and surfing and blogging and tweeting and texting be conducive to mateship? I realise, of course, that this should not be the priority when one is working (allegedly), but then being a cricket reporter is a singular calling: only the exceedingly patient and tolerant need apply. David Foot once told me that the first question his wife would ask him after a day's play almost invariably centred on the human qualities of his press-box companions. That such a genial, gentle soul should find such pleasure among such a diversity of characters, many of whose views he did not share in the slightest, says everything.

How I miss that wit and wisdom. My favourite description of the common or garden professional athlete came from the biro of Mike Carey, biographer of that brilliant if luckless seamer Les Jackson, former cricket correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, and the Dickens of the Derby press-box. It was Mike, or so I was told, who refused to cover an outburst of racist abuse during a NatWest Trophy semi-final and was sacked from his post at the *Torygraph* – a paper that always seemed ill-suited to such an egalitarian spirit; then again, I did follow him there, so what do they know who only politics know? It was also Mike who observed that “most county cricketers play the game for the life rather than the living”. For them, he warranted, “it's the motorways of England rather than the jet lanes of the world. It's sausage, egg and chips at Watford Gap rather than vol-au-vent and small talk on the Governor-General's lawns in Barbados.” More than a generation after those words were written they still hold up.

Much the worst thing about Mike was his dog, a sweet, beautiful old Labrador who seemed to have mislaid his bark: walking him through parks and along riverbanks during lunch and tea was always a treat, but for some reason Mike had never apprised him of the benefits of roll-on deodorant. That four-legged companion could do more damage to a press-box than an Alastair Brown on-drive, or even a week-old prawn sandwich.

I once cost Mike a day's work. One Saturday morning in some distant summer at the fag end of the last century, we both turned up at a county ground whose identity eludes memory, both expecting to work for the *Independent on Sunday*. The prospect of losing a day's pay horrified me, but it didn't faze Mike a jot. “That's OK,” he said cheerfully, “that means I can umpire a club match.”

I started out writing about cricket for the loving; then I learned how to do it for the living. Now I do it primarily for the loving again. Needless to add, it doesn't always love me back. Quite what any of us has done to deserve its current administrators I'm not sure, even if we can console ourselves that it was almost certainly never thus. Perhaps it has something to do with that superiority complex: billing yourself as the best game ever played beyond a bed or kitchen table is fraught with risk; for a game that was codified in order to settle betting disputes to tout itself as the epitome of ethical gamesmanship is surely the very height of hubris.

Cricket writers of my vintage count their blessings. We were the last pre-Twitter generation to whom a day's "work" at New Road or Wantage Road comprised six hours of convivial chat, a liquid lunch, a few dutifully scribbled notes and a leisurely 400-word report at 7pm (or even beyond 8pm, during that ludicrous summer where teams were expected to toil for 117 overs per day), closely followed by a few pints with the players, littered with non-attributable yarns and unprintable moans. We didn't know how lucky we were, not really.

How tempting, then, to imagine a trans-generational culture clash. Imagine a press-box where Neville Cardus, noted admirer of Lancashire and Franz Liszt, and Malcolm Conn, the legendary Australian Staffordshire bull terrier-cum-journalist, sit side by side. Picture the scene: Lord's, opening Ashes Test, 2015. Let's eavesdrop – but please forgive my cowardly reluctance to even attempt an Australian accent: I'd probably wind up sounding like Alan "Fluff" Freeman and peppering you with references to "pop-pickers" and "Emerson, Lake and Palmer"...

Enter Cardus, borne aloft on a bath chair by four muscle-bound Ethiopian eunuchs. He is wearing a laurel wreath, a pair of tight-fitting bell-bottoms, a "Greatest Cricket Writer Ever" t-shirt and a "Bradman Sucks" cap – back-to-front, naturally. Moments later, a besuited Conn strolls in, whistling a long-forgotten Men At Work hit, swagbag and billabong over his shoulder. In his arms he cradles his pet Tasmanian devil. In memory, apparently, of the finest player he ever saw at the Bellerive Oval, he calls it Flat Jack.

"Oy, Hans Christian Andersen," grins Conn, issuing his customary morning greeting. "How about some actual facts today?"

"In actual fact, young man," replies Cardus, chomping on a salt beef ciabatta and leaning back in his seat with the air of a chap satisfied that he has just delivered the last word in contemptuous rejoinders, "I've got one already."

"Oh yeah," Conn snaps back, trying with some difficulty to keep his sides from splitting. "You mean you know this year's the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt?"

Cardus smiles the smile of a man convinced of his innate superiority. "In actual fact, young man, I've made a discovery. I bet you didn't know that Beethoven was a cricket fan. Indeed, I have it on the very best authority that the Pastoral Symphony originally had a very different title that reflected this wisest of passions: Watching WG Bat."

"Look, mate," says Conn testily. "I don't care if Mozart wrote the 1972 Overture in homage to Bob Massie. Why don't you do something useful, like watch the game? Or tweet something? Or blog something?"

"Tweet?" harrumphs Cardus. "I'm not a flippin' starling you know. In fact, I rather liken myself to that monument to ornithological purity, the dodo."

"Look mate," says Conn, now multi-tasking - tweeting with his right hand, blogging with his left and Skyping with his eyebrows. "A tweet is like a news flash. Now I realise that news isn't exactly your

forté, my dear old thing, but it's dead simple I promise you. Just sum up the key development so far and press send."

"How many paragraphs would you recommend?" wonders Cardus.

"Paragraphs!" exclaims Conn. "I'll give you bleedin' paragraphs. One-hundred-and-forty characters – given your predilection for multi-syllabled adjectives, I'd say that's about six and a half words to you, squire."

Cardus is growing increasingly bemused, not to say agitated. "And what, pray, is a blog? I must confess it sounds worryingly like an American word for something normally found secreted up one's nasal passage."

Shifting almost imperceptibly from impatient to exasperated, Conn takes a deep breath, trying with all his might to resist firing back a double-barrelled blast of paint-stripping sarcasm. He succeeds, albeit barely. The steam emerging from his ears would have powered the Flying Scotsman for at least two return trips to Glasgow.

"A blog is the same as a column, an opinion piece," he explains, lowering his voice to the borders of a whisper, the better to contain his incredulity. "You know, the basic template for everything you've ever written. Why not try something fresh, like having a dart at England's woeful incompetence? Or a tribute to Colin Ingleby-Mackenzie's audacious single-minded commitment to early nights and dreary batting?"

Cardus grins the grin of a man suddenly spotting a neon sign for McDonald's at the end of the Channel Tunnel.

"Oh really, my dear young thing! That doesn't sound too terrible. I think I could cope with that. But who to write about? I don't really know any of these chaps – not one of them has even responded to my invitations to tea at Fortnum & Mason. Even when I consented to switch the venue to Claridge's not a soul replied."

Fast approaching the end of his tether and beating a retreat to the loo, Conn realises he has to do something to calm down and thus enable him to do the fraternal thing. After all, to leave this elderly ingénue thrashing about and unable to hit his first deadline of the day would be an act of treachery. Hell, it was part of his morning mantra. "We journos must stick together," he would remind himself as he washed what remained of his teeth. "If I let the side down, I run the risk of word getting out and being kept out of the loop – what happens if I'm unavoidably detained getting to the ground because my alarm didn't go off? Unless you've got a genuine exclusive, stay inclusive and loyal."

Calming down meant tweeting. Fortunately, so efficiently had he organised his templates, he could fire off half a dozen while considering his response to Cardus's query. As ever, the first one made him feel miles better:

"Is there any creature less deserving of compassion than a Pom?"

The others reinforced the general message:

"Will nobody rid me of this burbling buffoon?"

"W. G. Grace was a tub of lard."

"I'd give you 10 Brian Stathams for one Paul Reiffel"

"The Gabba is to Lord's what the Beatles are to Boney M."

And, finally, that trusty coup de grace:

“Shane Warne’s birth parents were the Duke of Kent and Nellie the Elephant.”

Taking a slurp from his Victoria Bitter-sponsored flask, Conn digs into his battered 1989 tour bag, rummages around for a few seconds and pulls out a book that has clearly never been opened.

“Why not write something about the worst book titles in history? I’ll even give you a few to be getting along with - *Chucked Around* by Charlie Griffith, *I Don’t Bruise Easily* by Brian Close, *Wasted?* by that avid drug fancier Paul Smith and this one, the punniest of the lot, *Hick and Dilley Circus*? I’m sure you can conjure up something semi-readable, old bean.”

Suddenly Cardus’s smile looks capable of stretching across the Thames. It’s as if he had just been informed that Surrey had fielded an ineligible racoon in the final match of the 1950 season, handing retrospective victory, and hence the outright Championship, to Lancashire.

“I say, you clever little convict, what a dashed good idea. Mind you, I’m not all that sure that those particular titles warrant your opprobrium. After all, Griffith really was the victim of a racist witch-hunt, Close suffered all manner of snobbish and unjustified criticism and, whoever they were, Hick and Dilley really do rhyme rather splendidly, even ingeniously, with Piccadilly. In fact, come to think of it, I think I’ll write something about the best cricket book ever written. Or maybe the worst...”

Conn sighs heavily. “Look mate, I don’t have the time to get into a debate about this – if I don’t file 800 words on the first over in the next 12-and-a-half seconds my editor will have me on the next flight home in leg-irons. I’m not your bleeding babysitter. I’ve given you an idea – whatever you decide, just get on with it.”

Duly chastened, Cardus takes the cover off his battered 1969 Olympia typewriter and begins tapping away.

“Cricket books are like women and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. How fondly I remember the eagerness with which I opened my copy of Wally Hammond’s *Cricket My World* only to throw it out of the window as soon as I had completed the first two sentences, which read (and how I shudder to repeat such an horrendous insult to the literary craft): ‘Half a million miles playing cricket? Well – I wonder?’

“The second of those sentences ends in a question mark. How can you possibly invest any more time in a book that so wilfully and grievously abuses the essential tenets of punctuation? I cannot say for certain that the great batsman did not employ a ghost-writer – none, certainly, is credited – but there was less compelling evidence of editing than there is proof that Hirst and Rhodes vowed to gather those famous final runs against Australia in singles.

“At the other extreme stands a production of such undimmed quality, unimpeachable genius and impeccable mastery of the form that Shakespeare himself might have been humbled by its magnificent eloquence, sinewy prose, bottomless well of insight and timeless relevance. Had Schubert had the wit to read it – or should I say the wherewithal – his final symphony could hardly have gone unfinished.

“Yes, it would be all too easy to decry it for its irreverent approach to sentence structure, sub-clauses and prepositions, not to mention its somewhat indolent approach to spelling, but as that charcoal-complexioned protégé of mine C.L.R. James might have expressed it, what do they know who only convention know?

“Consider, rather, the consummate manner in which the authors – and here, most assuredly, is a tome that could not possibly have been composed by a single hand – create a world that would not merely endure, but flourish, for centuries.

“The first two sentences are everything Hammond’s overture was not, and hence bear daily, mantra-like repetition:

“‘The Pitching the first Wicket is to be determined by the Toss of a Piece of Money. When the first Wicket is pitch’d, and the Popping-Crease cut, which must be exactly Three Feet Ten Inches from the Wicket, the other wicket is to be pitch’d directly opposite, at Twenty-Two Yards Distance, and the other Popping-Crease cut Three Feet and Ten Inches before it.’

“Since it may be that the more philistonical among you require elucidation, I should reveal, less than exclusively, that this is the opening paragraph of the original Laws of our bounteous obsession – or, to give the bejewelled document its official title, *The Game at Cricket*. Had its authors had the sense and taste to ask me, I would have chosen something more decorous and fitting: *The Finest Ruddy Activity That Ever Drew Breath*.”