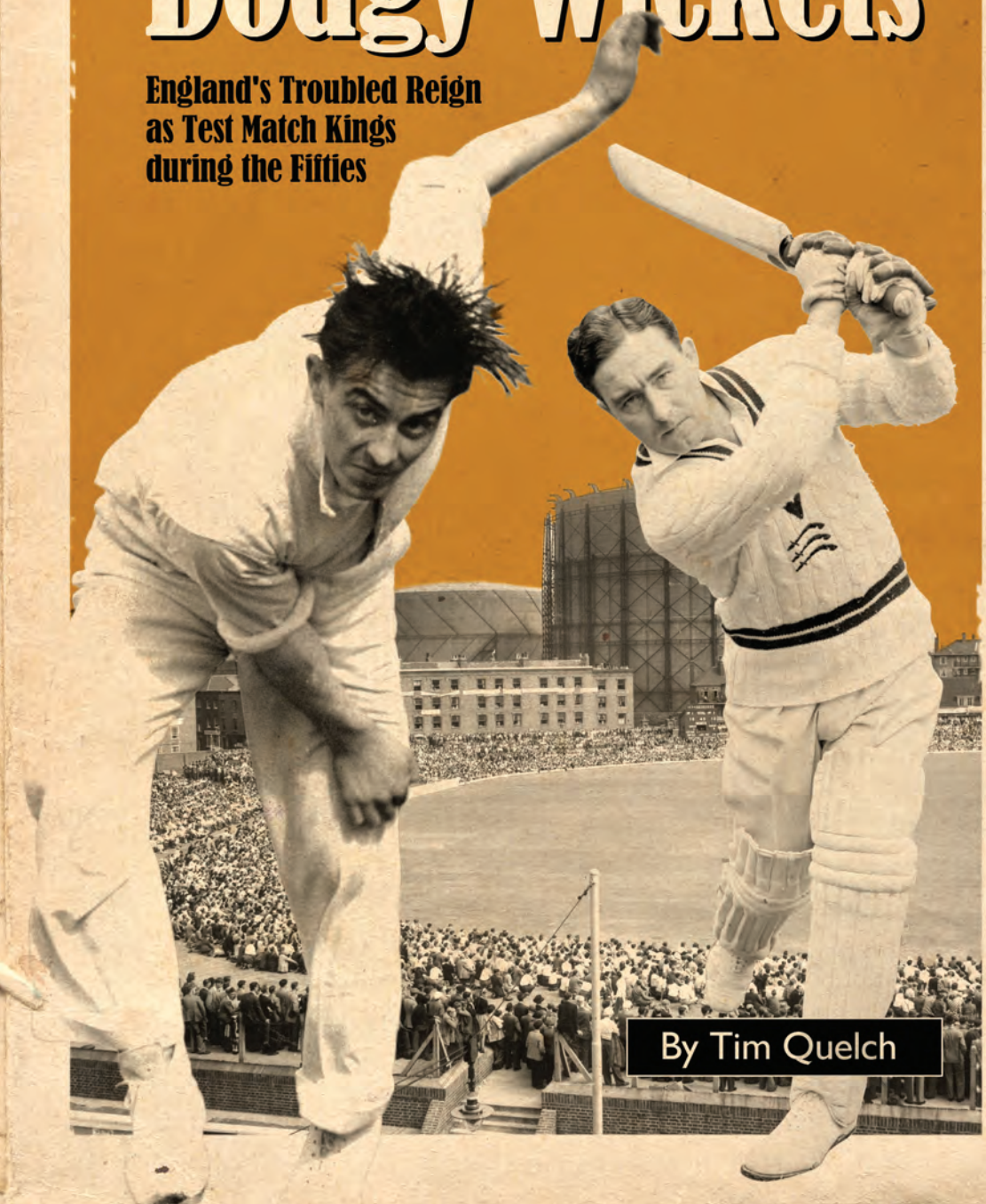
Bent Arms & Dodgy Wickets

England's Troubled Reign as Test Match Kings during the Fifties



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‘REELING IN THE YEARS’: AN INTRODUCTION

When Andrew Strauss’s team seized the world Test match number one position in the summer of 2011 they finally recovered what had been lost at the Adelaide Oval in February 1959. England had previously been top of the world during the mid 1950s. In *Bent Arms and Dodgy Wickets* the story is told of English cricket’s slow recovery from the dislocation of the Second World War, of its time of triumph after Queen Elizabeth II’s Coronation in 1953, and of its undignified fall from grace five-and-a-half years later.

It is a tale of fluctuating fortunes recounted with reference to the memoirs of some of those who took part. For England, these include: Sir Len Hutton, Freddie Brown, Peter May, Colin Cowdrey, Trevor Bailey, Brian Statham, Bill Edrich, Denis Compton, Fred Trueman, Frank Tyson and Jim Laker. The Australian view is represented in the recollections of Ray Lindwall, Keith Miller, Ian Meckiff and Alan Davidson, while West Indian and South African perspectives are provided respectively by Sir Everton Weekes, and by Roy McLean and Jackie McGlew.

The book’s title refers not only to sporting controversies of the time – notably suspect bowling actions and poor pitches – but also to the political sensitivities and class constraints impinging upon English Test cricketers’ lives. Hampered by class snobbery, anachronistic fixations, and an uncompetitive domestic game, compounded, too, by unreliable playing surfaces, and limited coaching opportunities, England’s post-war spell in the sun was destined to be short-lived.

This is a story of English cricket’s rise and fall set against a backdrop of imperial decline; when Britain was about to lose an empire but had

yet to find a role, to paraphrase the words of Dean Acheson, a former US Secretary of State. For cricket, like any other major sport, has always been more than a game. Celebrated cricket writer Sir Neville Cardus thought that "it somehow holds a mirror up to English society". However, cricket offers more than just a reflection of English society for it has also promoted social, religious and political change, albeit mainly abroad.

During the Victorian period, Australian national pride was stirred by its cricketing feats, as its leading players began to beat their English opponents regularly and decisively at their own game. Bradman's crushing batting successes during the 1930s and 1940s seemed to provide the perfect riposte to British cultural snobbishness. As Australian novelist Thomas Keneally observed: "No Australian had written *Paradise Lost*, but Bradman had made 100 before lunch at Lord's."

Cricket incentivised reform in pre-war India, too, enabling Palwankar Baloo, a shunned Dalit or 'untouchable', to rise from despised obscurity to become not only a hugely popular player, but in time a respected politician also, capable of challenging caste discrimination, alongside Gandhi, and supporting his campaign for Indian home rule. As with the Hindi film, cricket helped knit a newly-independent India, encouraging the emerging nation to rise above its class and religious divisions. Former broadcaster and journalist, John Arlott, concluded: "To say that cricket has nothing to do with politics and you say that cricket has nothing to do with life."

In the West Indies, cricket provided a means by which its black people could challenge white, colonial domination, complementing Caribbean campaigns for independence during the 1950s. Sir Frank Worrell not only became the first regular black captain of the West Indian side, he was also elected to the newly-independent Jamaican senate upon leaving the game in 1963. Here, he followed the example set by Lord Learie Constantine, whose popularity as a cricketer helped boost his political ambitions.

Lord Constantine served as Trinidad's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom during the 1960s, helping to combat racial discrimination and contributing to the passing of the first British Race Relations Act in 1965. West Indian CLR James wrote in his seminal work, *Beyond a Boundary*: "I haven't the slightest doubt that the clash of race, caste and class did not retard, but stimulated West Indian cricket. I am equally certain that in those years, social and political passions, denied normal outlets, expressed themselves so fiercely in cricket (and other

games) precisely because they were games." When examining cricket, it is important to take a view 'beyond a boundary', as CLR James so aptly put it.

That said, the game of cricket has been commonly caricatured as a bastion of political and social conservatism. In Britain, during the two decades which followed the Second World War, this charge has considerable truth. For cricket's national and international ruling body, Marylebone Cricket Club, or MCC, continued to cling fervently to its Victorian and Edwardian principles. It seemed as if MCC's predilection for its illustrious past inhibited its ability to address its more challenging present. At home, these unanswered challenges included: fading public interest, suspect bowling, poor pitches and inadequate coaching.

MCC appeared to be in a state of denial about growing social mobility in Britain during the mid 1950s, and also about the inevitability of multiculturalism. Similarly, it sought to insulate itself from the implications of decolonisation. Most controversially of all, MCC attempted to turn a blind eye to South African apartheid until the D'Oliveira affair of 1968 forced upon it a cessation of sporting links. That said, even during the 1950s, MCC was not able to resist all forces for change.

Despite its obsessions with reviving the supposed 'golden age' of the heroically cavalier amateur, the Test team it selected found success with a contradictory, tough, combative, professional style of play that was practised as dutifully by its leading unpaid players as it was by its paid ones. It seemed as if this team's Test triumphs were achieved almost in spite of the actions of MCC's cricket administrators.

According to Karl Marx: "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce." Having spent over half a century recovering the long-lost world crown, England's Test cricket team relinquished it again 12 months later, to South Africa, in the saturated summer of 2012. England's celebration of restored glory was even shorter since Strauss's men had been thrashed by Pakistan in a three-match Test series played in Abu Dhabi and Dubai during January and February 2012. While England's sudden and unexpected demise against the itinerant Pakistanis had hardly seemed farcical, at least in the eyes of English supporters, there did seem to be a certain irony that Strauss's side should encounter, in microcosm, the fate which befell Peter May's side 53 years before.

For once again, English hubris was shattered on the back of complacency and, arguably, inadequate preparation. And once again the spectre of "chucking" was thrown into the mix as a possible explanation for failure,

despite the obvious riposte of "sour grapes". Even in this vastly different 21st century world, in which Britain no longer had the world status it had in 1945, it is perhaps tempting to ask: "What's new, pussycat?"

‘TOMORROW IS A LOVELY DAY’: 1945-1951

“Come and feast your tear-dimmed eyes on tomorrow’s clear blue skies...”
Tomorrow is a Lovely Day, written by Irving Berlin.

“*The [Victory Tests] left me...with an unpleasant awareness of England’s bowling weaknesses...*”
Wally Hammond, 1945.

“*Train? I just stubbed out my cigarette and ran...*”
British Olympic athlete, 1948.

‘WE’RE SO SHORT OF EVERYTHING’

‘Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!’

Great Britain concluded its part in the Second World War battered, barren and bankrupt. After suffering six years of heartache and hardship, its working people were eager for something brighter and fairer, with greater protection against want and disease, better standards of living, and improved education. It was their deep-seated sense of entitlement, fed by 1930s impoverishment, which brought about the Labour landslide of 1945.

On the back of the excited VE Day celebrations, the British public flocked once again to our sad, neglected seaside resorts, and turned up in their thousands for the five vibrant Victory Tests of 1945, in which a creaking England side took on a scratch Australian Services XI. Wally Hammond recalled the occasion, in his 1958 book *Cricket My World*, with uncharacteristic euphoria: “There was a feeling of peace and happiness in the air that was very delightful to me. It seemed as though after years in the shadows, England was marching into the sunshine again.”

Britain’s cinemas, dance halls, race tracks, athletics stadia, boxing arenas and football grounds became packed, too, as the grim war years were cast aside with almost febrile glee. Writer and former diplomat Bruce Lockhart exclaimed in 1945: “Never have I seen a nation change so quickly from a war mentality to a peace mentality. The war [in the Far East] has disappeared from the news. Sport and the election now fill the front pages.”

Nevertheless, the carefree mood did not last long. The country was £3bn in debt. Capital and overseas investments had taken huge hits. The

nation's infrastructure was in tatters. Bombed-out housing had yet to be replaced. With servicemen about to return to their estranged families, and the first wave of 'baby boomers' already voicing their needs, there was an enormous and urgent housing shortage to address.

As an emergency response, 30,000 prefabricated dwellings were erected from kits financed by United States subsidies under the Lease-Lend programme. When that programme ceased in 1945, Britain had to cadge another £4bn loan in order to meet its "financial Dunkirk", as John Maynard Keynes so aptly put it. This wasn't charity. With the Cold War pressing ever closer, the Americans needed Britain to maintain its position as head of the Commonwealth in order to help stem the spread of international communism. In a statement resonant of Britain's position today, Labour minister Herbert Morrison declared: "We are in danger of paying more than we can afford for defences that are nevertheless inadequate, or even illusory."

Pumped up with wartime heroics, Britain professed to be still a world power. Its leading politicians continued to attend world summit conferences, and its servicemen undertook global policing duties in Malaya, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. These servicemen also helped defy the Berlin blockade and fought in Korea, too. Meanwhile, Britain was struggling to make and pay its way. Industrial production needed to be modernised, diversified and ramped up to deal with the vast balance of payments deficit.

The state of British agriculture was dismally primitive. Almost 80% of West Country farms lacked electrical power. Milking was done mostly by hand. The situation was scarcely better closer to London where only 50% of farms had electricity. With home-produced food needed also for export to help pay the huge national debt, a depressingly long list of rationed items was retained until the 1950s. The railway network was in a decrepit state. Because the railway companies found the remedial costs too high, the government stepped in. As radical as the welfare state reforms were, they had to be delivered on the cheap. The ascetic-looking Stafford Cripps seemed to epitomise the Labour government's grating self-denial.

David Lean's film *Brief Encounter* got the message; family duty came before passionate indulgence. Morale was worse than during the war years, not helped by the Arctic winter of 1947. Coal was short, so were other fuel supplies. Production halted, household pipes and geysers froze, and many shivering occupants took to their nightly beds in heavy woollens and balaclavas.

This was the scene as the country returned to its sporting life. If the

VE and VJ-celebrating crowds thought that military victory inferred prospective sporting triumphs, too, they were sorely mistaken. After all, the war had not been won by Britain's efforts alone. Without the colossal resources supplied by the USA, USSR and, indeed, the British Commonwealth, this nation's brave, lone stand in 1940 would not have resulted in victory.

Not that this inhibited the jaunty Pathe team, who flew the patriotic flag in Britain's smoky cinemas. Their message was that British was still best when it came to manufacturing, design, fashion and sport. At least the England football team was on message as it thrashed world champions Italy 4-0 in Turin in 1948. Nevertheless, a stern reality check came in the World Cup, two years later.

As for English cricket, at Lord's the Union Jack hung limply at half-mast. Both war and age had withered it. MCC's selectors were forced into picking "Dad's Army" to face a visiting All India team – the last of its kind – in the sopping summer of 1946. The average age of this England team was 34 years. Even its 'bright young things' – Alec Bedser, Godfrey Evans, Jack Ikin and Denis Compton – were nearer to their 30th birthdays than their 20th.

English county cricket ignored the wartime relaxation of class boundaries by preserving a hierarchical division between its amateur 'gentlemen' and its professional 'players', whereas the Indian visitors of 1946 managed to rise above the subcontinent's sectarian politics and religious and class divisions, selecting a unified team of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Not that this achieved any political traction at home as India lurched towards partitioned independence.

The All India team included the imperious strokeplayer, Vijay Merchant, who scored a superb century in the drawn final Test at the Oval, and a gifted all-rounder, "Vinoo" Mankad, who scored a half-century at Lord's, and took seven wickets at Old Trafford with his probing left-arm spin. Their efforts were in vain, though, as the Indians were crushed in two of the three-day Test matches played in this series.

As emphatic as this victory was, MCC officials remained doubtful about sending what appeared to be an under-strength England side to Australia during the following winter. They knew how much had been lost to war. Fast bowler Ken Farnes had perished when his bomber crashed on take-off, and left-arm spinner Hedley Verity had been killed in action in Italy. Pace bowler Bill Bowes survived, but returned from three years as a POW in poor health. Fellow 'Bodyline' tourist Freddie Brown had also been detained at Hitler's displeasure.

The selectors were not spoilt for choice because younger, fitter talent was thin on the ground. Beating a novice Indian Test side at home was one thing, competing with a vibrant Australian team, including Bradman, was quite another. However, MCC eventually bowed to Australian political pressure, and reluctantly agreed to a hastily arranged tour.

England captain Wally Hammond, aged 43, wasn't even sure that he should be going. He had considered retiring after the Victory Tests, having realised how much the war years had diminished him. Nevertheless, having decided to commit himself to a further season, he enjoyed a magnificent summer in 1946, averaging 85 runs per innings.

Joe Hardstaff junior, another pre-war star, also gave him encouragement after hitting an immaculate double century against India. It was a glorious innings, full of wristy cuts and elegant drives. Len Hutton had apparently overcome his career-threatening injury, albeit with a shortened left arm which made batting uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, Compton and Washbrook had signalled their return to form by recording half-centuries against the Indians. The big, burly debutant Alec Bedser became the summer sensation, though, as he took 24 Indian wickets with his medium-fast bowling at a cost of only 12 runs each. It seemed as if a successor to Maurice Tate had been found.

Nevertheless, Hammond was doubtful about whether his bowlers carried enough punch to trouble Bradman et al. While the unstinting, stout-hearted Bedser bagged 16 wickets in the intense Australian heat, they proved costly at 54 runs each. This was a salutary experience for Bedser, but not one that daunted him as he learnt to deliver a lethal leg cutter on the parched Aussie pitches.

Brilliant stumper Godfrey Evans was in a good position to judge, recalling in a later BBC interview: "Alec rolled his fingers over the ball as he delivered it, and as it swung it pitched on the seam and became, as it were, a leg spinner."

Alec Bedser told Alan Hill, author of *The Bedsers: Twinning Triumphs*, that the sharp spin he imparted with his hefty fingers left a callous, a raw reminder of his long, sweated labours. He had some recompense, though, when he delivered the ball of the series at Adelaide, an in-dipper which jagged back to castle the great Don Bradman for a duck. Bradman reckoned it was the finest ball ever to take his wicket.

Doug Wright also performed well with his springy, quick leg breaks. Like Alec Bedser he bowled long, long spells in England's cause, deservedly taking 23 wickets, the best aggregate of any bowler in this series. Despite incurring a high average cost, as Wright's wickets came at 43 runs each,

his command of vicious spin and bounce drew Bradman's respect. Had Wright been supported by more attacking fields and better catching, he might have exerted greater pressure. His highly impressive figures of seven wickets for 105, in the final Test, helped secure a narrow first innings lead. However, because Hutton was indisposed through illness, his splendid effort came to nothing.

As for Bill Edrich, Bedser's gutsy new-ball partner, his nine Aussie scalps were equally expensive. And, while medium-paced Norman Yardley managed ten at slightly improved cost, helping slow the run rate with his containing leg stump line of attack, this did not stop the Australians from stacking up formidable totals. Bradman averaged almost 100 runs per innings during the series, followed by openers Arthur Morris and Sidney Barnes, and all-rounder Keith Miller, each of whom recorded averages in excess of 70. Miller dominated with both bat and ball. His batting average of 77 was complemented with a 16-wicket haul at only 21 runs each.

Bill Voce, the 37-year-old 'Bodyline' veteran, made no impact at all, although Bradman controversially evaded his clutches at Brisbane when an apparently legitimate slip catch was turned down by umpire George Borwick. Bradman stood his ground, claiming that he had squeezed Voce's yorker into the turf before it ricocheted to Ikin at slip. An incensed Wally Hammond thought otherwise, hissing: "What a fine f***ing way to start a series!" At that point Bradman had only 28 runs to his name. He ended up with 187 as he and Lindsay Hassett (128) put together a 276-run stand. Australia racked up a devastating first innings total of 645.

Len Hutton recalled in his 1956 autobiography *Just My Story:* "Bradman could put the ball exactly where he wanted. His footwork was still so quick, his balance so perfect, his sighting so early, putting himself in the best position to make the shot he wanted. He aimed for the maximum result from each stroke, seeing no advantage in producing hard shots that might find a fielder. He could shut out everything except the task in hand."

According to David Hopps, author of *A Century of Cricket Quotes*, Harold Larwood added: "They said I was a killer with the ball without taking into account that Bradman with the bat was the greatest killer of all."

In terms of pace bowling, Bradman had much greater firepower at his disposal. He had the venomous speed and movement of Ray Lindwall, the steepling bounce and startling versatility of Keith Miller, plus the nagging accuracy of Ernie Toshack's swerve and spin. These three strike bowlers shared 51 England wickets during this unequal series, at a combined average of around 22 runs each.

Bradman deployed their greater potency ruthlessly. Norman Preston, then a journalist with Reuters, cabled home: "This was indeed bodyline. It showed that the Australian bowlers can exploit the short bumping ball to intimidate batsmen." It seemed a deliberate policy to curb Len Hutton who was considered vulnerable to short-pitched bowling.

Miller had noted this potential flaw during the Victory Tests. Lindwall sensed it also during MCC's match with New South Wales. Bradman did not think Hutton lacked the necessary technique. He considered it was Hutton's appetite that was in question. "The Don" thought that Hutton did not play the hook shot because he was discomforted by the quicker stuff. This was untrue. Hutton was reluctant to play the shot because it was harder to execute after his arm injury.

Having averaged only 20 runs after six Test innings, Hutton was told by his former team-mate, Bill Bowes: "Tha' knows what they're saying, Len? That tha's afeard on 'em." Hutton bridled at the very suggestion. In his next Test innings at Adelaide, Hutton immediately laid into the bumper barrage, scoring 94, as England posted 460 runs, their highest first innings total of the series.

When he followed this up with a second innings knock of 76, he had helped secure a worthy draw. Hutton carried the fight to the Australians in the final Test, too, scoring a brilliant 122 out of a first innings total of 280 runs before being struck down with tonsillitis. A temperature of 103 enforced his hospitalisation, and then an early return to England. However, it was not before he had confounded his doubters.

Denis Compton also made a spectacular return to form at the Adelaide Oval, scoring a brace of centuries in the hot, sticky conditions, but with the Aussie opener Arthur Morris following suit, England was unable to capitalise on a fine start. In fact, England's second innings collapse almost gifted Australia the game. Thanks to a plucky, unbroken 85-run partnership between Compton and Godfrey Evans the retreat was beaten. Renouncing his impish, breezy batting style, Evans dug in tenaciously, remaining scoreless for 95 minutes while Compton guided England to safety. This was 'Dunkirk' cricket, the calibre of resilience that England would need to produce, in tight spots, if the Ashes were to be recovered.

Australia was also better equipped in the spin department. Leg-break bowlers Colin McCool and Bruce Dooland, together with teasing off -spinner Ian Johnson, shared 36 wickets during the series. According to Gerry Cotter, author of *The Ashes Captains*, Denis Compton was critical of Hammond's instructions to play the Australian spinners from the crease. Compton thought this clamped-foot batting style played into

Australia's hands. It certainly hamstrung him. Not until the fourth Test, at Adelaide, did Compton throw off these shackles and show what damage he could inflict by playing his natural game.

It seemed odd that Hammond should have been so defensively minded. In the pre-war years he had been lauded for his daring, powerful stroke-play that had devastated the very best bowling attacks. On this tour, though, he seemed plagued with insecurity. His faltering batting ability troubled him greatly, as if his self-belief depended upon his supremacy at the crease. Besides, he deeply resented Bradman's greater success.

He distanced himself from his players, choosing to travel by car while his team took the train. He disliked his players fraternising with the Australians, instructing them not to share a drink with them. Like Bradman, he was experiencing regular pain on account of fibrositis. Then, there was the unwelcome publicity about his impending divorce. With the responsibility of captaincy weighing heavily on his sagging shoulders, he became increasingly introspective. Joe Hardstaff junior observed: "There was a worried look on his face when he failed. I thought it was a big mistake to make him captain: it was more than he could take."

This tour of Australia and New Zealand marked the end of Hammond's illustrious Test match career. Although he top-scored with 79 runs in his final Test innings in Christchurch, his finest display on this tour was given in the first Test match on a spiteful surface at Brisbane, where an apocalyptic tropical storm had made batting almost impossible.

In his 1954 autobiography *Flying Stumps*, Ray Lindwall expressed his admiration for Hammond's innings of 32 runs, remarking upon how the England captain used his longer reach to pick up the ball on the half-volley and lift it to the boundary. Lindwall considered this to be vintage batting that few Australians could match in such adverse conditions. Despite fading into melancholy retirement, Hammond later wrote in *Cricket My World*: "I revelled in the sight of Australia's dauntless, picturesque and happy youth, giving to the game we love something we older players could no longer offer it."

While Bradman did not pursue a deliberate 'Bodyline' policy to inflict humiliating defeat upon his old rivals, he made no attempt to restrain his head-hunters. Australian journalist Jack Fingleton reckoned that Lindwall and Miller bowled as many bouncers in 1946/47 as Larwood and Voce had done during the 'Bodyline' series of 1932/33. As a veteran of this infamous series, he was well-placed to judge. An unrepentant Ray Lindwall remarked: "There's no sitting duck like a scared duck."

Keith Miller testified to Bradman's unyielding pursuit of victory.

He told Mihir Bose, author of *Keith Miller: A Cricketing Biography*: "At Brisbane, where one ball would hit the batsman's ankle and the next endanger his head...I thought I was going to kill someone and eased off."

Even with Lindwall indisposed with chicken pox, Miller and Toshack managed to decimate the English batting by bowling medium-paced spinners on this hideous, spitting surface, but Bradman was not satisfied. "'Nugget', bowl fast," he told the reluctant Miller. "It makes it harder." Miller did as he was told, but later confessed to Bose: "If this is Test cricket, I don't like it. But I did bowl faster and Bill Edrich just stood there and took it. He scored 16 runs and it was one of the greatest innings I ever saw. It was worth 200 on any other wicket."

Although a fierce competitor, Miller did not subscribe to the 'cricket is war' mantra. After all, he'd experienced war at first hand having piloted a Mosquito on bombing raids at the end of the Second World War. He reckoned: "Pressure is a Messerschmitt up your arse. Playing cricket is not." Actually, Miller was never attacked by a Luftwaffe fighter, although he'd had several 'hairy' moments, including an enforced pancake landing which left him with a troublesome back.

Miller regarded Bill Edrich DFC as a kindred spirit. Both men had been RAF bomber pilots. And both men counted their blessings. They had survived, whereas many of their former RAF pals had not. Both men loved to party. They were determined to live life to the full. Perhaps Bradman did not understand this mentality, having been medically discharged from the RAF, allegedly on account of poor eyesight! Rumours circulated that he had been a war dodger. Whether this was true or not, Bradman often irked Miller. It was not just Bradman's pitiless attitude to winning. Bradman was, on occasions, officious, petty even, in enforcing his authority. While Bradman was hugely admired, he was not loved to the same degree, even within his own country.

According to Alan Hill, author of *Bill Edrich: A Biography*, in keeping with his wartime instincts, Edrich chose to go out for several drinks on the eve of the second Test match at Sydney. He caught up with an old RAF pal and together they sank a fair amount of alcohol. Bill did not return to his hotel until the morning of the match. His room-mate, Denis Compton, had to cover for him.

When an early wicket fell, a still groggy Edrich pulled himself together and marched out to face the rampant foe. True to form, he rose to the occasion splendidly. It didn't take him too long to find his feet or his pull. Edrich batted defiantly for over three hours. However, when he was in sight of a well-deserved century, McCool trapped him lbw. Wicketkeeper

Evans chirped: "Magnificent innings, Bill. But what did you get out for, you were playing so well." Wry as ever, Edrich quipped: "Godders, I think I'd sobered up by then."

Despite Miller's sobering view of what real pressure was, this did not lessen the intensity with which the games were played. Gone was what writer CLR James described as the "golden age of cricket". James was referring to the late Victorian and Edwardian periods when the game was supposedly played with an adventurous flourish, without the cramping fear of failure, when batsmen thrust or skipped forward to drive with confidence. The First World War, and its impoverished aftermath, destroyed that optimism and gallant sporting spirit, pressing not only the cricketers onto their back foot. As the dole queues multiplied, and wrecked nations sought restorative pride and economic salvation through hideous totalitarianism, cricket began to reflect the harshness of those times.

Arguably, the 'Bodyline' crisis was its ugliest manifestation. However, the legacy of 'Bodyline' was to confirm rather than decry the hard-nosed pursuit of success, despite MCC's hypocritical condemnation of Larwood's feats. The grinding accrual of gigantic scores, during the late 1930s, said as much.

During the hungry, vindictive 1930s, the primary objective of Ashes cricket seemed to be the demoralisation of the opposition, not just the seizure of victory. Journalist Jim Kilburn believed this was not just a reflection of the troubled times, it was a legacy of the Bradman phenomenon. Kilburn wrote: "Some challenged like Trumper, some charmed, like Ranjitsinhji; Bradman devastated – deliberately, coldly, ruthlessly."

At the Oval in 1938, Hammond was given a rare opportunity to place his boot on the Australian's windpipe. As Hutton's gigantic innings unfolded, Hammond looked on with growing, malicious satisfaction. Hammond had no intention of easing up, even with the depleted Aussies wilting in the Vauxhall heat, angrily reproaching Compton for "throwing away" his wicket with 550 runs already on the board. Not until the England total had exceeded 900 did Hammond call off the dogs. His side eventually won by a record margin of an innings and 579 runs.

The Second World War did nothing to erode that savage spirit despite the breezy manner in which the Victory Tests were played. After all, this was merely a cavalier, 'de-mob' carnival, a joyful parenthesis. What the England team found in Australia, a year later, was a resumption of pre-war hostilities. Don Bradman may have toyed with the idea of retirement,

but once he'd decided to continue he went about his preparations as fastidiously as ever. His focus was undimmed, his appetite for runs as voracious as before, as was his relentless pursuit of victory. Despite his 38 years, he prowled the covers with predatory alertness and anticipation.

During the 1946/47 Ashes series, the Australians batted better and longer, bowled with greater penetration and fielded with superior athleticism and reliability. Crucially, their players were, on average, five years younger than the MCC tourists. They were also more accustomed to the suffocating heat. Alec Bedser, who sent down 246 eight-ball overs in the unforgiving conditions, lost six pounds during one scorching, humid day at Adelaide, not helped by the heavy woollen flannels he and his team-mates had to wear. It was no wonder that Bedser succumbed to heat exhaustion. England was well beaten in this rubber, losing 3-0, with Australia having the better of both drawn matches. Bill Edrich, who fought so bravely throughout this series, averaging 46 runs with the bat, concluded: "The Australian second and third XIs could give the England first XI very hard games."

That said, Hammond was true to his word when he promised his team "the happiest six months of their lives". Despite spending most of the winter chasing lashed leather on the sun-bleached outfields of Australia, the MCC tourists had been spared one of the coldest winters on record in drab, desolate, deprived Britain. And how they made the most of their reprieve!

There was fun aplenty to be had on the outward sea voyage, a trip which they shared with many wartime brides and fiancées of Australian servicemen. Party leader Bill Edrich was one to take advantage of the many opportunities for dancing and drinking. Denis Compton told Norman Giller, author of *Denis Compton: The Untold Stories of the Greatest Sporting Hero of the Century*, that on one evening Edrich had overindulged at the bar leaving Compton to haul him back to his cabin. Compton had his work cut out. Pausing for breath en route, Compton propped Edrich up against a cabin door, pressing himself against Edrich to prevent him from collapsing. A passing elderly woman must have misinterpreted what was going on, as she muttered disgustedly: "Quite disgraceful. Surely they could wait until they got into their cabin!"

When the team reached Australia they were astonished by the vast array of 'goodies' to be had. Australian broadcaster Cliff Cary wrote: "In between meals they were forever eating fruit, cakes and chocolates." Pace bowlers Bill Voce and Dick Pollard put on two stones in weight, while another player admitted eating more in one day than he had done in

a week in his heavily-rationed homeland. As they marched, or perhaps waddled, on their full stomachs, any lingering thoughts of spam, snoek (the vilified canned South African fish) and powdered egg were torn from their collective memories. Abject defeat had never tasted so sweet.