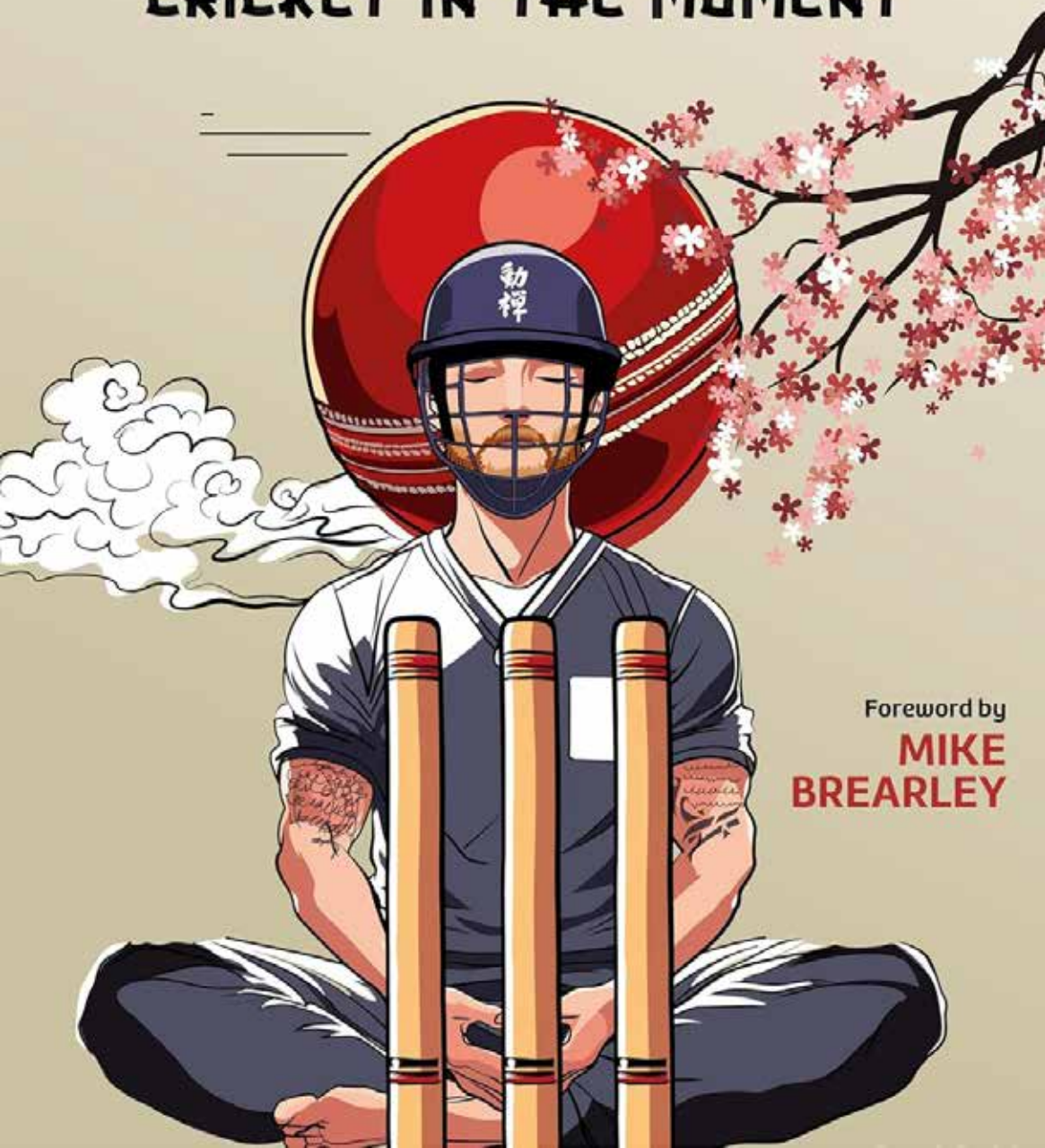


JIM GREEN

THE ZEN of BEN

CRICKET IN THE MOMENT



Foreword by
**MIKE
BREARLEY**

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THE
ZEN of BEN
CRICKET IN THE MOMENT

JIM GREEN



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Beginning: The First Test

THE FIRST Ashes Test match I ever went to was a long time ago and it ended in a death. It also happened to be the first cricket match I had ever been to. The last Ashes Test I attended – in 2023 – was one of the most joyous experiences I've ever had at a sporting event, or – to be honest – in any public arena.

The first was at ...

Old Trafford, Manchester – 6 June, 1968

I couldn't believe that this was actually happening. I'd discovered cricket properly in the summer of 1966. Aged ten, I had found that the best possible way to spend the long summer holiday was to watch our new portable black-and-white television on which the BBC was showing slightly grainy images, needing frequent vertical and horizontal hold adjustments, of Test match cricket. The opposing teams were England and the West Indies. From knowing hardly anything about the sport, I quickly became a statistical and biographical obsessive, gathering together all the information I could about Wes Hall, Seymour Nurse, Garfield Sobers, Colin Cowdrey, John Snow, Geoffrey Boycott – and everyone else who had played, or might conceivably play for either of these teams, particularly, and abidingly, England. Over the next two years, the magic of this distant spectacle – on the small wavering screen, in the pages of *Cricket Monthly*, transformed into poetry through the fizz of a radio in the middle of the night – continued to be potent and compelling. But now, on this very day, my father and I were going to drive the

hundred miles from Carlisle, on the borders of Scotland, all the way down to Manchester, to fabled Old Trafford, to actually be present at a Test match.

The sensations of that day were bewildering and overwhelming. Getting up in the stunned silence of an early summer morning. The long, grinding, pre-motorway journey over Shap Fell. The sudden noise of the crowds and the traffic three hours later in Manchester. The surge of unknown people, the drift of unfamiliar smells – cigarette smoke, early morning beer-breath, the waft of onions and sausage from the steaming hot dog stands. And then the shock of the huge green expanse after the turnstile, the stairs and the terracing. The vast sky that arched and glared down over this immense patch of close-cropped grass. The players, impossibly life-sized, tanned, relaxed, casually radiant in the cream of their jumpers and flannels.

It was the first day of the first match of another Ashes series. To my disappointment, Australia batted throughout the day, a day that I spent straining to see the ball from our sideways-on position, and pointing my father's German army binoculars at the England fielders who occasionally thudded up to the boundary near us, chasing the suddenly and shockingly visible blood-red cricket ball all the way to the rope. It was a long day, sitting on hard wooden benches in the pale but relentless Manchester sunshine. I had been issued with no hat, no suncream, and by the time we left – before the end of play, to beat the traffic – I had been stupefied into baffled silence by this day of long and glaring exposure. I was mystified by what I had seen and what I had failed to see. As we drove in silence through the suburbs of north Manchester, I told my father that I needed to get out of the car. Outside again, I leant over the pavement and vomited the whole of the day – the cheese and tomato white-bread sandwiches, the Blue Riband chocolate biscuit bars, the crisps and the orange juice – in a vivid splash on to the pavement.

We completed the three-hour journey back to the borders in what I can only assume was a deepening silence. When we arrived

home in the fading light of the summer evening my mother came out of the house looking pained and sombre. She told us that in far-away America, Robert Kennedy, the Democratic nominee for the presidency, and the brother of a president assassinated only five years before, had himself been shot in the head at close range. The news had just come through that he had died from his wounds.

The day had held much more than it was able to contain. Every day does, if we are brave – or foolish – enough to see it steadily and to see it whole. Exposed throughout that early summer's day to the suddenness of a vivid reality, I think I tasted just how uncontrollable, unexpected and puzzlingly strange it all was. And somehow cricket became forever associated with the mystery – the joy and the terror – of what we call life and what we call death.

And the last Ashes Test I saw was at ...

Edgbaston, Birmingham – 19 June, 2023

The heady brew that was this thing called Bazball, along with the captaincy and the mystique of Ben Stokes, had made the first three days of this match – and all the other matches in the series – instant sell-outs. The cricket-watching English public were already on an uncontainable high from the logic-defying miracles that Stokes and Brendon McCullum had been routinely pulling off together since this new world of Test cricket had been created. Though it wasn't so much a heady brew that was on offer – not even swigs of game-changing Bazball Kool-aid. It felt more like someone had ripped open Test cricket's chest guard, plunged the needle of a massive hypodermic syringe hard into its sternum and pumped it full of raw and shocking adrenaline. Test cricket woke up with a gasp and leapt into uncontainable life. It had already been quite a trip.

I was with my partner this time. (My dad had died in 1997, less than four years after he had gone to his last Ashes match – with me again, at Old Trafford again, where, through the fading light of his early onset dementia, he had been astonished, like the rest of the world, by Shane Warne's 'Ball of the Century' to Mike Gatting.)

Here at Edgbaston in 2023 we had managed to get ourselves a couple of seats in the alcohol-free family area on the side of the ground opposite the infamous Hollies Stand where the drinking starts well before play and continues without let-up for as long as the day, or the drinkers, last.

The beginning and the end of this extraordinary day's play exemplified something strange and shockingly new that was happening – something that fans and commentators alike struggled in vain to put into words. The first ball bowled was actually the fourth ball of the over from Pat Cummins, the Australian fast bowler and captain. Bad light had sent the players off the previous evening and the over was being completed on this bright new morning. As he had countless thousands of times before, Cummins rocked through his run-up towards the bowler's end. As he reached the bowling crease, Joe Root – on nought not out like Ollie Pope at the other end – suddenly jumped into a square-on crouch – part drunken crab, part sumo wrestler – and wafted extravagantly at the ball, which sped over his shoulder, just past his stumps and on into the gloves of Alex Carey, the Australian wicketkeeper. He had tried a reverse ramp shot off the first hurled-down ball of the day! Root laughed, the wicketkeeper and bowler stared up at the sky in disbelief, everyone watching in the ground and around the world looked on in delighted puzzlement. Joe Root had broken every conceivable rule there was about batting and about how to manage this serious business of negotiating an entire day of Test cricket – and he had a look of uncontainable glee on his face.

The tone had been set. The day fizzed on until England were all out at tea, setting Australia a total of 281 to win the match with four sessions to do it in. Towards the end of the day's play, with the singing and cheering, the flinging of beach balls and the building of beer snakes getting ever more raucous on the opposite side of the ground, we decided – like those two other spectators 55 years earlier – to leave early and beat the traffic. To howls from the Hollies Stand, David Warner (particularly deafening) and Marnus Labuschagne

had already been dismissed. Usman Khawaja and Steve Smith were at the crease, looking to dig in.

As we stood up, shouldering our bags and coats, I felt a reflex urge to say goodbye to our hosts – the people who had thrown the party. Because this had felt like nothing so much as a celebration – a bunch of friends getting together to have as much concentrated and good-humoured fun as possible. It felt to me somehow wrong to be leaving such a joyous, almost intimate occasion without saying cheerio and thank you to someone. I looked over at the England captain, fielding not so far from our position, and at his team-mates – all still utterly focused on every dart of the ball, every twitch of the Australian batters – and said my silent goodbyes and thanks.

Away from the terraced seating, still on the concourse that runs round the perimeter of the ground, we were heading for the exit. We could no longer see the playing area but we could certainly hear the baying and chanting of the crowd – getting louder and louder as we approached the back of the Hollies Stand. Suddenly there was an explosive roar – the loudest noise I'd ever heard at any sporting event. We were next to the bottom of a flight of steps that obviously led up to the seats in the Hollies. We looked at each other and, with no words spoken, dashed straight up to emerge into a pulsating field of humanity, dancing, singing, falling over in ecstatic drunkenness, hugging each other and joyously baying at the lonely white dot that was Steve Smith – the most precious scalp of all – trudging across the seeming acres of grass towards the shelter and the shame of the pavilion. Looking across the stand we saw – and realised that we were now part of – a seething mass of people, howling, laughing and staggering in unison as one immense body of unstoppable energy. It was more than just sporting rivalry. This was a Saturnalia – a joyous feast of misrule with all barriers between people utterly broken down. We had all come to the party that Ben and Baz and the boys had thrown, and nobody really wanted to leave; who knew we had so many friends? This was the blissful taste of uncontainable life.

In the years between those two occasions, what cricket – in particular, international Test match cricket – has to say quite by accident about life and about death, while remaining ‘just a game’ – and a wonderful one at that – remained for me an abiding preoccupation. With its long history and its unpredictable evolutionary bursts, cricket seemed to offer me (and, I sensed, countless others) a kind of language for the urgent questions that hide themselves in the mystery of our lives. They are questions to do with the nature of winning and losing, isolation and relationship, struggle and surrender and, yes, of life and death, as symbolically acted out over and over again in the codified rituals that make up a game of cricket.

It’s not the only game that organises itself around the abiding concerns and anxieties of humanity. To a greater or lesser extent they all do. If we look as far back as the Mesoamerican Ball Game – played by Mayans and Aztecs for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived – it’s clear that much of what we call ‘sport’ is that game’s contemporary descendant. It has evolved into another form of collective rite, but its roots are clearly in warfare, in fertility ceremonies, the life and death of the people, the life and death of the land. In the ancient and often blood-soaked rituals, the ball itself was a potent symbol – standing in for the sun, or the enemy, or the vegetation god who must be sacrificed to ensure that the harvest comes again and that life will continue: will bounce back. The deep memory of all those rituals still lies beneath the grass on which our ball games are played today – at Twickenham, the Bernabéu, Wimbledon, Augusta, Lord’s – even though to almost everyone taking part or watching, it is, of course, ‘only a game’. It’s just that this game – cricket – seems to get closer to acting out the kind of jeopardy that we human beings are constantly in, immediately alongside the kind of glorious opportunities that are always there just in front of us. The batter about to face the onrushing ball; the bowler about to release it. Life or death, right there. The human predicament. The continuing human moment.

* * *

And then there's Zen.

Although in Zen there is no *then* – everything in Zen is given to making sure we're in the *now*, and that the now is in us. Plus: Zen is determined to expose anything you might say about Zen (including this statement) as utterly foolish and mistaken. Reality happens too quickly, and too slowly, to be captured by any of our words or ideas. You just have to live it, and to do that it helps if you have some way of constantly escaping from the dead hand of the past, with its bad habits, its fears, its clichés and its complacency.

I discovered Zen when I was at university, studying English and feeling ever more intensely the imperative – thoroughly internalised – to keep on achieving, staying ahead of the game, impressing, and generally doing everything I could to stave off the catastrophe of any form of failure. It made for a life that was deeply unrelaxed. In a little book that a friend passed on to me – a slim American-published volume called *The Gospel According to Zen* – I came across these lines from Basho, celebrated Zen practitioner and poet:

Sitting quietly, doing nothing,
spring comes
and the grass grows by itself.

This was like news from another planet – another universe. As I read it – and each time I revisited the oasis it seemed to offer – I felt myself able to breathe again, the horizons of my tight little world rolling benignly away, infinite space opening up. It helped to get me through.

That was then (which *does* exist – whatever Zen says – in its own peculiar, transient way). And since then I have come to know that Zen is not just a therapeutic escape from personal conditioning and from a neurotic fixation on success and winning approval – though it can be helpful for me, and for an increasingly insane world, with managing that particular issue. I have also learned the foolishness

of saying too much about Zen. (Try describing the taste of a mango to someone who has never tasted one.) Zen doesn't tell us anything; it simply tries to show us what is there, by waking us up. And what it delights to show is that everything is always beginning – and that you can't hold on to *any* of it.

I was woken up a little bit more, and then thrilled, when in recent years I watched – along with the rest of the world – a cricketer and a way of playing cricket that seemed to instinctively know what Zen knows and, even better, didn't really want to say very much about it. He and his team just got on and joyously did it. They played. They weren't exactly sitting quietly, doing nothing, but spring *did* come, the grass grew by itself and the cricket season began again. What I seemed to see was something that I risked calling *the Zen of Ben*.

Everything is always beginning, so ...