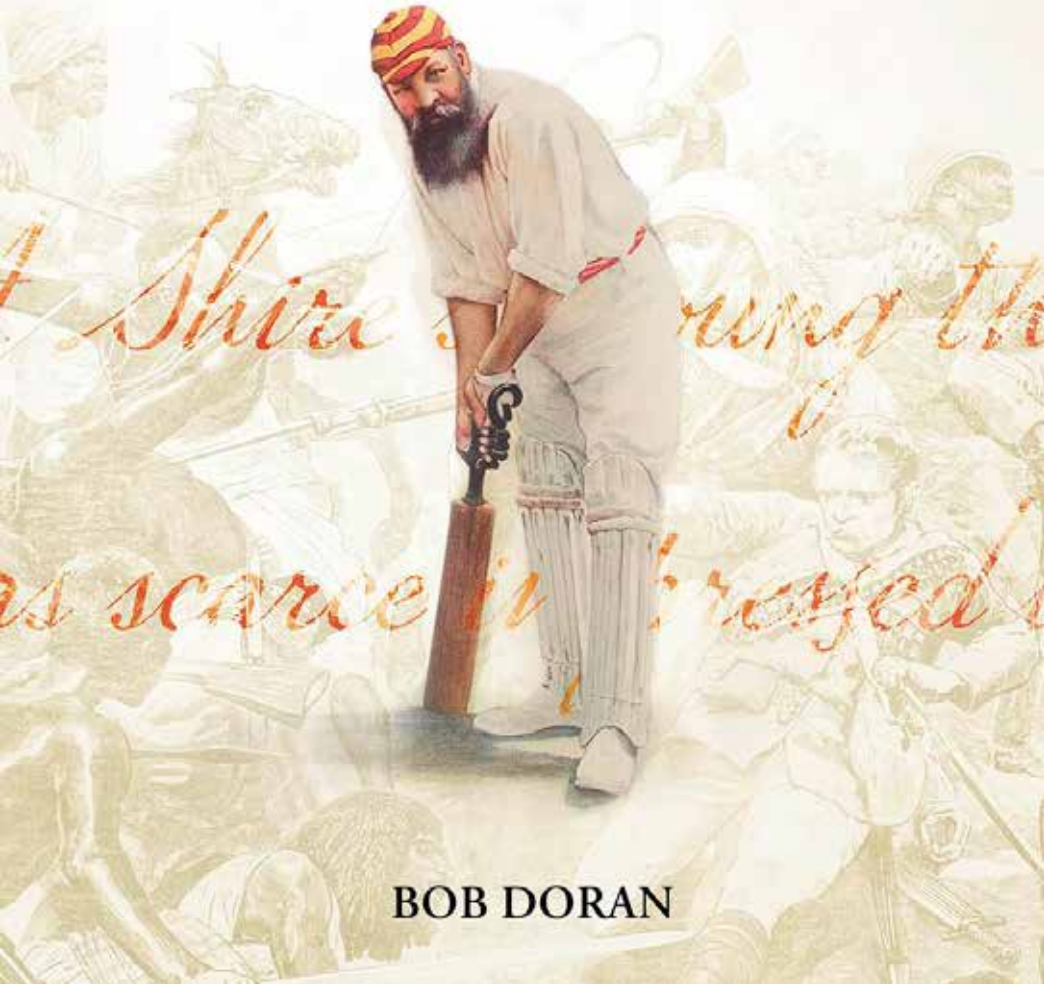
CRICKET IN POETRY

Run-Stealers, Gatlings and Graces



BOB DORAN

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pitch

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INTRODUCTION

'SOME OF the great cricket prose is poetry.'

So wrote the New Zealand-born spin bowler, Clarrie Grimmett, who played in 37 Test matches for Australia. Grimmett played cricket (and golf) alongside another great Australian spinner, Arthur Mailey, some of whose prose fitted Grimmett's description.

As a boy, Mailey hero-worshipped the great Australian batsman Victor Trumper. Young Arthur never saw the legend bat, though he did spot him passing through the entry gate to Sydney Cricket Ground and once managed to sit opposite him on a train. A few years later, as

a young man, he found himself down to play for his club, Redfern, against Paddington, the team of Victor Trumper.

In his book *10 for 66 and All That*, Mailey recounts how, after an anxious few days, Saturday came and he found himself brought on unnervingly early to bowl at his hero. His first few deliveries were shrugged to the boundary or nudged aside, so Mailey decided to try a 'Bosie' or 'wrong 'un'. Trumper leapt forward to attack but found the ball drifting away from him. He was stranded and the bails were whipped off. As he walked past Mailey on his way to the pavilion, he smiled, patted the back of his bat, and said, 'It was too good for me.' Mailey concludes, 'There was no triumph in me as I watched the receding figure. I felt like a boy who had killed a dove.'

This last line is cricket poetry as cricket prose, and it's hard to imagine it in any other sport, not Muhammad Ali on knocking out Sonny Liston

in the first round, or John McEnroe on defeating Bjorn Borg (or vice versa).

George Bernard Shaw reportedly observed that the English were not a very spiritual people, so they invented cricket to give themselves some idea of eternity. (He did get his comeuppance. The American humorist, Will Rogers, suggested that Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* had the same feeling of endlessness as a Test match.) It may be cricket's gentle pace, the literary tastes of its early supporters and its rural beginnings leading to pastoral nostalgia, which give the game its timeless, contemplative quality. This in turn inspires its followers to produce a literature which, at its best, leaves the game itself far behind.

Other sports have their prose. Baseball has novels like W.P. Kinsella's *Field of Dreams*, Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, and Philip Roth's modestly titled *The Great American Novel*. Football inspired Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*.

Rugby League has David Storey's *This Sporting Life*. But cricket has produced poetry unequalled since the Theban poet Pindar celebrated the achievements of ancient Olympians.

Not all cricket poetry is memorable. Some of it is funny or moving, some arch or dull. A fair proportion of writers can't resist rhyming cricket with wicket, though John Galsworthy avoids it in the White Monkey instalment of *The Forsyte Saga*.

An angry young husband called Bicket
Said 'Turn yourself round and I'll kick it;
You have painted my wife
In the nude to the life,
Do you think, Mr. Greene, it was cricket?

There's also a great deal of nostalgia for seasons and heroes past. As the composer and author Humphrey Clucas puts it,

Of course it's all
Decline and fall;
The Snows of yesteryear
Increase the thirst
For Rhodes and Hirst
And older, rarer beer.

So here's to Peel,
And Studd and Steel;
Turn off the TV Test,
And let the page
Improve with age,
Whatever was, was best.

Two poems stand out, Francis Thompson's *At Lord's* and Henry Newbolt's *Vitai Lampada*, though both go beyond the game itself. *Vitai Lampada* moves from cricket to war or, as Newbolt would see it, to chivalry. *At Lord's* echoes with age and sadness. The two poets

were born two years apart, both in industrial towns in Victorian England. Both were sons of prosperous and religious families. But one became a drug addict and sometime rough sleeper, much of whose poetry is religious, but who was added to the list of Jack the Ripper suspects. The other, by contrast, was a pillar of society, a friend of literary greats and a confidant of prime ministers and governments.

But both produced cricket verses which have survived in a way unequalled until Lord Kitchener and Lord Beginner's 1950 *Victory Calypso*, celebrating the first West Indies Test win in England:

Cricket, lovely Cricket,
At Lord's where I saw it;
Cricket, lovely Cricket,
At Lord's where I saw it;
Yardley tried his best

But Goddard won the Test.
They gave the crowd plenty fun;
Second Test and West Indies won.
With those two little pals of mine
Ramadhin and Valentine.

A note to students of Latin, who may be wondering why it's *Vitai Lampada*, not Vitae. Newbolt lifted the phrase from *De Rerum Natura* by the Roman philosopher poet, Lucretius. His 'torch of life' was a reference to the ancient Olympic relay contest in which athletes passed on a torch and tried to reach the finish while it was still burning. Lucretius made it Vitai because he needed three syllables to fit his poem's dactylic hexameters.