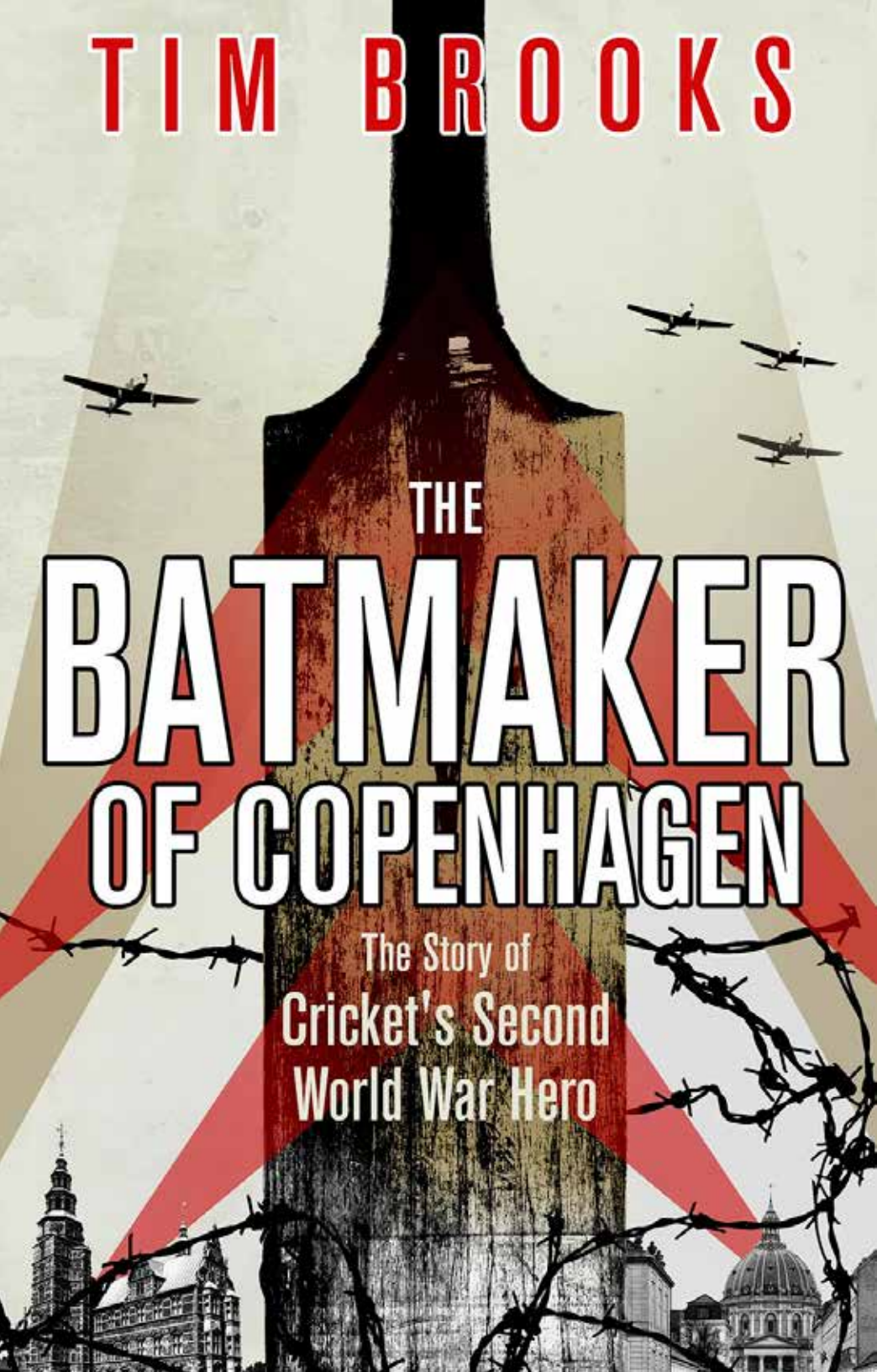


TIM BROOKS

THE  
**BATMAKER**  
**OF COPENHAGEN**

The Story of  
Cricket's Second  
World War Hero



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## CHAPTER 1



A SLIGHT chill in the air made a man walking his dog do up a button on his summer coat as he slowly walked around the edge of the park. It was still light but he could see a faint glow of red in distant clouds as he threw a stick for his dog to chase. He liked this patch of green on the edge of the city; its unassuming emptiness appealed to him. It was an echo of a more rural childhood perhaps, before industry had pulled him, like many others of his generation, away from the countryside.

His dog, having chased the arc of the stick, had been distracted by a ball that had rolled over the rope that framed the play and guided his circumambulation. A tall man in white flannels who was puffing after running hard slowed in dejection as he crossed the rope and vied with the dog for possession of the ball. The dog's owner gave one of his kindly admonishments to the terrier and turned towards the small wooden clubhouse in the distance. Men were running from the benches that sat under its eaves towards the two

batsmen, who were embracing in the middle of the wicket. As they ran, they passed fielders sat, shoulders slumped, on the closely mown grass. The dog owner was not familiar with the game but recognised the arcane rituals of victory and defeat he was witnessing. There was something familiar in the unfamiliar that resonated with him, momentarily, before he called his dog and set off towards the allotments beyond the ground.

As others had bounded on to the field a single figure remained in the clubhouse, sat on a cushion by the window facing the wicket. With studied precision he recorded the delivery that marked the end of the game and with it the end of the season. As the batsmen reached the steps to stirring applause he still did not look up. His eyes darted imperceptibly between the scorebook and the notes he had scribbled on a pad. At last satisfied with the accuracy of the bowling figures, he took a neatly folded handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and gently brushed it across the page to remove any residue of lead that might smudge the memory of the match. He then picked up the heavy green book and lifting his trousers at the knees, drew up his tall, angular frame and reverently placed the book on a shelf to his right.

The players had each taken a seat around a cluster of tables and there was a burble of chatter as they relived the controversies of the match and reflected on the season. Claus, the captain of the Akademisk Boldklub team, the oldest in the city, was behind the bar, busily

pouring glasses of Tuborg beer and handing them out. The scorer was rubbing his glasses with the triangle of his club tie, a habit that had become something of a post-match ritual for him, marking the transition from the unbroken concentration of the match to the ease of the early evening.

Claus, who was still sporting a rubicund complexion after his exertions, passed the older man a bottle of ginger ale. The two men found themselves looking at an old photograph, one of many hung around the bar showing key figures and moments in the club's long history. Claus stooped to look closer.

'Is that you, Frederick, third from the right?'

The older man peered through his glasses and gently nodded in assent. In neat black ink below the photograph it said: 'First XI, 1909'.

'Well, well ... you were young once,' said Claus, turning towards his companion with a wry smile.

Frederick put down his glass of ginger ale on a table and looked closer at his younger self. He was 17, awkwardly tall and though not evident from the photo, of very modest ability. A year before, he had broken into the senior team. It was his commitment rather than his talent that had been rewarded. Although he must have glimpsed this image a thousand times in recent years, it was the first time he had looked at it closely. As images often do, it summoned a memory from the dusty vault we all carry with us. He recalled that it was taken to mark the tenth season of the league.

'You were the first of us,' said Claus, noting with interest the different style of clothing and equipment to those he was used to. He had always admired the pioneers who came before, who had introduced an English game to Denmark and battled through scepticism and indifference to establish it for future generations to enjoy. It was their legacy he was so determined to honour. Frederick was the link back to those pioneers.

Just then Carsten, the batsman who had struck the winning runs, approached and showed Frederick his bat. It was in a sorry state, multiple twists of frayed twine around the handle attempting to keep it wedged into the blade. He held it in his hand and bent the handle from the blade, demonstrating at least an inch of play. His eyes scanned down the blade itself. It had splintered in several places, the cracks getting wider with every match. No wonder the sound off the bat had made him wince from his scorer's chair. No wonder the scores had got lower and lower as the season progressed. He handed it back to the man with an unspoken apology.

'And that is the best we have,' Carsten said, shaking his head.

Frederick nodded. He knew better than anyone how hard the season had been. With no new supplies, players had made do with broken bats. It had got so bad by mid-June that the umpires kept a ball of twine in the pocket of their jackets and almost every over would attempt to repair a widening crack. The balls



had become misshapen and frayed, sometimes deviating wildly off the seam or scooting dangerously along the ground. Each time this happened fielders would look at each other in dismay but not a word was said. You might call it determination to keep playing but you could equally call it plain, stubborn denial. If no one said anything then perhaps it didn't matter after all. It was as if the whole cricketing community sensed that if a single doubt was aired then it would raise the spectre of an uncertain future. And to many, cricket had become their certainty. A part of their lives that the occupation had not, could not, break.

It was now 50 minutes after the game and still no one had left. Usually by now most would have waved farewell and set off across the city to meet their wives or girlfriends, but not today. The last match of the season always marked a moment of sadness. Teammates became like a second family over the summer and although some were friends away from the game, most lived very separate lives beyond the summer and wouldn't greet each other again until the spring. Claus sometimes described it as like a summer romance 11 men all shared. A romance with the game that would draw them back together when the days grew longer again. That explained, perhaps, why they chose to linger in the bar, enjoying another glass of Tuborg. But there was something else. It wasn't just a reluctant farewell. Frederick glanced around the room once more, focusing on the expressions of the men and their conversations.

The anecdotes were familiar, heavily embellished feats of heroism drawn from recent seasons, but he detected a slight hesitancy in the laughter that greeted these familiar tales. But it was the eyes that made his heart sink. After observing closely for several minutes, reflecting on the expressions of those he knew so well he intuitively recognised what he was witnessing: they were scared that if they left now, they might never come back.

He left the clubhouse, stood on the paved terrace outside and lit his pipe, looking out over the city. The reddish purple of the sunset was gently ebbing into dusk. A breeze saw the door behind him slam shut. His fingers felt cold. In the final weeks of the season it was always an act of will to extend the warmth and fair weather of the summer until the final ball was bowled. But this far north in the cricketing firmament it was futile to keep autumn at bay. It was here at last and biting winds would soon roll over the Baltic and hold the city in its grip. He suddenly flinched at a noise behind him. Turning, he saw that the long line of bicycles had toppled over. Some members of the Svanholm team had cycled to the match, a 40-mile round journey. It was a far safer form of travel, much less conspicuous. If you were lucky you could slip past the checkpoints, where grim Gestapo guards made you empty your pockets while they checked your identity papers. Cars would often be stripped. Any bags were thrown into the street along with spare wheels and tools from the boot in a search for false documents or guns. The more frequent

the checkpoints, the more severe the reprimands, the greater the resolve to resist.

Frederick sought his refuge in routine. His aim was to become invisible and he reasoned that if his movements were predictable and unchanging then he would pass through each day unseen. He was just a shadow in his own city, like a ghost drifting through the changing seasons, leaving as little trace as he could. Variation is what they preyed on. But there is always something, however modest, that a man will refuse to cloak. The small chink of light needed to nourish the soul, to remind you who you are. Without that, what was there? Without that, the subjugation was complete. The club was his salvation. But it was also his variation.

Over the years he had made many acquaintances through cricket when teams from the continent and from the English shires had toured and friendships were forged. There had even been regular fixtures against clubs from Berlin years ago. Sometimes teams from across the border in the provinces of Schleswig and Holstein would be incorporated into the Danish league. Earlier that week he had received a letter from a good friend, a scorer of a club in The Hague. They had enjoyed a long correspondence on whether to strictly apply the rules of MCC or allow the game to assume a local character to attract more players. They had both taken great pleasure in the game spreading from historic centres like The Hague and Copenhagen to outlying regions. They saw themselves as missionaries, spreaders of the gospel. But

over the last three years the conversation had turned to survival rather than expansion. The ground in The Hague had been commandeered as there was a fear it would be used as a landing site for agents crossing the Channel. Whether this was on the basis of intelligence received or the natural suspicion cast on a pursuit with such deep English roots was impossible to say. What was clear to Frederick was that in a context where anything different or distinct was under suspicion, a cricket club would be a natural target. Everyone associated with the club was placing themselves at risk, however invisible they could make themselves beyond the gates of the clubhouse. Despite the difficulties the whole community faced in continuing to play, with the travel restrictions and curfews that had been enforced, there had been no fall-off of players. All fixtures had been played and every club had been able to field a full XI, week on week. In the circumstances that itself was heroic. It suggested, Frederick reflected, that there were other risks at play with perhaps greater significance. The risk of losing their culture. The risk of losing themselves.

A scraping of chairs inside jolted him from these reflections and he instinctively looked up at the pavilion clock. 7pm and the sun was starting to sink below the horizon, the lights of Tivoli Gardens sparkling in the distance. He felt taps on his shoulder as people started filing past, picking up their cycles while saying farewells. Frederick was ready to leave himself when Claus lightly took hold of his arm:

‘Can we speak before you leave?’

They walked back into the room and took a seat in front of the small trophy cabinet and an old photo of a touring MCC team.

‘Well, we made it through. I’m not sure how, but we made it,’ Claus said after a short pause. There was something about his manner that put Frederick on his guard. Where there should have been relief and pride, there was resignation. Frederick could see that he was holding something in his hand, nervously spinning it through his fingers.

‘I received this letter this morning,’ he continued, holding out a small white envelope. He leaned forward in his stance and held it out. A tear began a slow, weaving course down his cheek. ‘From England.’

Frederick closed his eyes for several seconds. When they opened, he took off his glasses and rubbed them clean with the corner of his tie.

‘I’m afraid it isn’t the news we were hoping for,’ Claus went on.

‘Our order was dispatched on May 12th. The ship was lost to a U-boat raid halfway across the Channel. Another was sent in early June, but that too was lost. They have doubled the number of U-boat patrols since the spring and very little is getting through. Mr Crowther says the risk is too high and he can’t afford to lose more stock. You and I know that was our last hope.’ He stood up and paced slowly towards the window that looked out over the ground. ‘Today’s game was our last.’

Frederick had known that it might come to this. The blockades were cutting off all goods from the west. He had hoped, as they all had, that by some miracle the lifeline from England would get through, but over the course of the year the Nazis had strengthened their grip and as acceptance turned to the first flickers of resistance, they had strangled all outside contact. They could not make do and mend any longer.

There were no words, not even of consolation. The two men embraced, their breathing slowing. Frederick's chest absorbed the impact of each sob. They stood, suspended in time, suspended in their grief. Dusk had succumbed to night.

Claus locked the clubhouse and the two men shook hands. Frederick watched as Claus pushed his bicycle several yards before swinging a leg over and cycling towards his home in Christianshavn. When he had gone out of view, Frederick turned and walked towards his tram stop. As he approached, he saw a man in a long coat walking very slowly up the other side of the road before stopping, feigning to get an umbrella from his bag. He had become an astute observer of variation too and he walked past his stop. He felt the first few drops of rain and tightened the belt around his coat. He saw in the reflection of a cafe that the man was still putting up his umbrella. His usual routine was to catch a tram back to his small flat in Hellerup, put some Dvorak on the record player and cook himself a modest supper. But despite not eating anything since breakfast,

he was not hungry. He walked past the next tram stop too and turned down the Norre Farimagsgade towards the botanical gardens. He saw a checkpoint ahead. A car was ushered to stop by the side of the road by a very young officer brandishing his gun aggressively. A man got out of the car and was pushed against the bonnet, his arm painfully forced up behind his back while the young officer took his wallet. Frederick paused and stood against an old building in a shadow between the streetlights.

‘You may go,’ he said. As the man got back into the driver’s seat, the officer took out a pistol and shot each of the four tyres, the sound echoing off the tall buildings. The noise saw several groups of pedestrians quicken their pace, or quickly duck into one of the bars that lined the street. The driver got out of his car clasping a small bag, carefully locked the vehicle and walked calmly down the street.

Frederick waited until the officer, laughing heartily, walked away from the car with several other men in uniform speaking mockingly in German. Over recent months, Frederick had witnessed similar scenes of brutality, made mundane by being so commonplace. Like everyone else he had become inured to it. It was the lot of an occupied country to pretend that life carried on as normal. Within a few minutes another car had pulled to a halt a few feet away. A couple got out and were greeted by a smartly dressed man in the doorway of a flat.

He walked into a park and sat on a bench, lighting his pipe. A group of boys were running a stick along the railings. A man in a suit admonished them silently, removing the stick from the boy's grasp and, anxiously looking over his shoulder to see if the commotion had drawn attention, threw it into a bush. The man looked ashen as he passed Frederick, leading the boy by his sleeve. It was the frozen translucency of fear. Is that what life for his countrymen had been reduced to? He had hoped that he could use routine to disappear and in this way life could go on as normal but it was clear to him now: this wasn't normal life, this was paralysis. On this bench, in this park, he made a silent resolution. He stood and walked purposefully towards his home.