

Obituary Nigel Hart

Bernard Whimpress
Adelaide Oval Museum

As a student at a St Joseph's Convent School in the 1950s and the 1960s we used to pray for (among other things) a happy death. It made no sense to me then. It does now. Nigel Hart's death at the early age of 48 was not happy. It robbed me not only of a close friend but also a writing partner.

Although not an active member of ASSH, Nigel maintained his membership from 1984. He was interested in the activities of the local chapter we formed in Adelaide last year. Unfortunately his illness prevented his attendance at meetings.

I first met Nigel as a stranger on a train, a phrase I'm sure he would enjoy me employing because it was the title of a 1940s film, I think by Alfred Hitchcock. Nigel was wearing a South Australian Cricket Umpires Association tie and our conversation inevitably turned to cricket. The year was 1967.

We had some contact for a couple of years but then lost touch. The next time I saw Nigel a couple of years later he was a national TV quiz star winning the top prize on *Coles' \$6000 Question*. The category was Test Cricket and sitting at home I remember bombing out on the penultimate \$3000 question.

We lost contact again until the early 1980s when a chance meeting led to Nigel indexing my first book, *The South Australian Football Story*. Our writing partnership began the following year with *Adelaide Oval Test Cricket 1884-1984* and our friendship has been maintained ever since.

The collaboration was limited to three cricket books though we outlined plans for many others. The critically acclaimed *Test Eleven* appeared after a ten-year hiatus in 1994 and the privately published *Australian Eleven* this year.

The broad aim of our work was to produce what Bill Mandle once called 'good straight sports history'. We were unashamed in writing for the intelligent general sports reader. In the last two books, especially, we felt we developed a new genre of cricket writing, using reports of a number of individual Test Matches as a springboard for discussion of wider issues. As one perceptive English critic noted, 'we wrote as much about the game as the games in particular'.

People often asked us how we wrote as a pair and the answer was we overwrote. No chapter was ever produced by one of us and it is rare to find even a paragraph one can identify as one's own. We sought to create a seamless style. However, while doing this it is occasionally possible to still find bits of our own work. Here is piece of Nigel's from *Australian Eleven* which I love:

Queensland Cricket Association secretary Ted Williams had asked New Farm businessman W Stewart to leave the members' enclosure for failing to meet

appropriate standards of dress, only to be met by vice-regal intervention. The following day the Queensland Governor Sir John Lavarack sought out Mr Stewart to deny an involvement in the move. Mr Stewart was pleased, 'It was mighty of him to condescend to make me a personal explanation' he said, an outmoded use of the word 'condescend' that echoes Mr Collins' early nineteenth century usage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Then again, this was the Deep North, it was 1950, and Stewart's offence was serious: wearing shorts and carrying his coat over his arm in the members' enclosure.

The reference to Austen was the fruit of Nigel's enormously wide reading which covered not only English literature but history, sociology, politics, philosophy, classics, religion and popular culture. Such reading informed his observations (including cricket) and enriched mine.

Nigel was born in Essex and migrated to Australia in the early 1960s but retained his Englishness which gave a balance to our writing. He was a member of the Yorkshire County Cricket Club for over 30 years and a supporter of Leeds United. He named his house in Woodville 'Kirkstall Lane End' (after a road outside Headingley), and including the names 'Verity', 'Rhodes' and 'Kilner' (all Yorkshire left-arm spinners) among the given names of his three daughters.

Nigel admired battlers and living in Glenrowan Avenue was a constant reminder that Australia had its own. Nigel also admired quality and this produced the paradox of a Marxist subscribing to *The Spectator*. In other ways it explained his membership of the Port Adelaide Football Club which disappointed him less frequently than Yorkshire.

Nigel's work as an educator saw him teach a wide range of courses on subjects as varied as classics, history, communications, detective fiction and not forgetting the popular Mills and Boon classes he ran for several years for the Workers Education Authority.

Nigel continued his own battle against his disease throughout the last year and delivered lectures on Tolkien, Buchan and Graves to the University of the Third Age only a few months before his death.

Beyond his writing and teaching Nigel was a great conversationalist and the most mind-alive person I have known. He had a tremendous ability for generating and bouncing ideas around, especially about books.

Writing is a solitary process and the American novelist Richard Ford in his superb book, *The Sportswriter* stated that all writers were members of clubs with one member. The peak experience of writing with Nigel was sharing the joy of the process of creation and being a member of a club with two members.