

Mallett, Ashley R. *Bradman's Band*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000. Pp. 223. 67 black and white photographs, index. \$25.95 pb.

In late 1999, as the new millennium approached, a North American group of sports experts attempted to rank the top sports persons of the twentieth century. In terms of charisma Cassius Clay, otherwise known as Muhammad Ali, emerged as a leader. As for contemporary sports "greats" basketball maestro Michael Jordan was in first place. However, the selection for the premier performer in world sports from 1900-2000 was the American baseball icon Babe Ruth. One country, nevertheless, threw up its arms in disbelief! Australia, and Australians, were convinced that the greatest sportsperson of all time had to be one of their very own—the cricketer Donald Bradman.

Ashley Mallett's *Bradman's Band* is a pleasant, chatty story. Mallett, as a spin bowler played thirty-eight test matches for Australia from 1968 to 1980. He has written extensively on cricket (*Bradman's Band* is his twentieth book), and currently he coaches and works as a TV commentator. He was involved in a film documentary of the 1868 Australian Cricket Team, *The First Eleven*.

Mallett notes in his acknowledgments the extent of his familiarity with Bradman, Bradman's peers and Bradman's successors. It is a delight to be able to read what Woolley, O'Reilly, Oldfield, Tallon, Grimmett, Compton, Miller, Hutton, Larwood, Wright, Lindwall, Constantine, Miller and Edrich—all distinguished cricketers who have contributed much to the game—thought of the Australian batting phenomenon who, in his heyday, racked up unbelievable scores.

Bradman's Band happily goes some way to exploring and analyzing the complex and confounding personality of a man who seemed so focused on scoring runs that his whole life became transformed into a never ending test of his resolve, discipline, and mental toughness. Mallett quotes John Arlott, the doyen of cricket announcers, who said this of Bradman: "Not since W.G. Grace has cricket produced such a man who so combined technical skill, concentration, determination or who did so on a carefully planned course. I doubt that cricket will ever see another." And then Arlott wonders aloud and questions if Bradman was ever able to enjoy the simple pleasure of being happy, after erecting around himself an impenetrable armor of single minded intensity.

As a result of Bradman's near invincibility the English cricket tourists to Australia (1932-33) came up with a ferocious pace attack which came to be known, with a deserved degree of notoriety, as bodyline bowling. The English captain Douglas Jardine described this bowling tactic as "leg theory." In actual fact what it meant was that successive fast balls were aimed at the batsman. Sadly, Mallett's writing about the topic very nearly goes "over the top" as he describes Bradman as Australia's "shining light" (p. 90) and "human dynamo" (p. 90) with Jardine cast in the role of a "devious," "warrior general," "hell bent" on winning by "means foul or fair" (p. 90). Mallett is much more effective when he reins back his rhetoric and his analysis of Bradman's performance during this controversial test series—"Bodyline was a blot on the game" (p. 108)—is carefully constructed. Despite being

less than dominant against England Bradman only suffered one duck. His other run tallies were 103, 8, 66, 76, 24, 48 and 71.

By the time he retired, Bradman's cricket history was an unparalleled litany of excellence. In test matches his average was 99.94, and in every third innings, he scored a century. Although Mallett gives his readers an enormous amount of information about Bradman, the core of the man, and his connection with Australia and Australians remains a mystery. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* echoes Mallett in regarding Bradman as a man who "towered above his contemporaries like a colossus." *The Companion* then notes that Bradman "has had to cope with greater sustained public interest than any other Australian." The reasons for this are many and although Mallett gives some sense of why this came about cricket historians will look to the future for a Stephen E. Ambrose/David G. McCullough type of sweeping biography to develop a bigger, multi-faceted picture of a, literally, legendary figure.

That epic glorious biography will soon, rather than later, emerge. Sir Donald Bradman died on 25 February 2001, aged 92. *The Economist* obituary (3 March 2001) noted that Australian prime minister John Howard ordered a state memorial service, an Australian press headline spoke of the passing of "Australia's Churchill," and that Bradman, "a fairly ordinary chap," was an extraordinary cricketer—"the best of his time."

My favorite Mallett fragment is a work-in-progress in which Bradman's mythological icon status is scrutinized and fleshed-out:

The Don [Bradman] has not picked up a bat in 50 years, yet his fame has never been so entrenched in a nation's psyche as it is today. As well as his stupendous playing record, there is his longevity as an administrator and test selector, as elder statesman of all things cricket. Bradman is as Australian as the Holden car and the kangaroo. His first bat was a sawn branch from a gum tree and the people loved him for his brilliance and his humility. In 1930 Bradman became Australia's first world-class champion sportsman. He brought cheer to an otherwise cheerless environment when the Depression hovered heavily over the land. Bradman shared top-billing with the great Phar Lap [a champion race horse that won the famous Melbourne Cup despite having to carry gross penalty weight]. Here was a fledgling country which created a legend from a disastrous strategic failure at Gallipoli [a 1915 military campaign in Turkey and against the Turks]. A war, a racehorse and a batsman, in that order (p. 201).

One doubts that sport history is as simple and uncluttered as Mallett would make it! Any book that opens with the line "Don Bradman is the eternal flame of cricket" (p. 1) seems committed to penning a reverential ode and crafting a beatitude rather than carving out a balanced biography. That being said, this reviewer cherishes *Bradman's Band*. My sporting library stays shelved and vertical in my university office. I keep a handful of books at home ready, in a horizontal position, to be picked up and browsed. *Bradman's Band* belongs to that latter group and already I am returning to the book because the Bradman persona is a compelling enigma that deserves to be endlessly dissected. Despite being perceived as a "ruthless run-making machine" (*Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*), Bradman, as quoted by Mallett, described his "greatest partnership" as his sixty-five-year marriage to Jessie Bradman.

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