

Paul Wheeler, *BodyLine - The Novel*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, pp.211. £7.95.

Bodyline - The Novel is not to be confused with *Bodyline* the film, nor *Bodyline* the television series, nor *Bodyline* the illustrated historical account of the 1932-1933 M.C.C. tour of Australia. The nostalgia industry has turned its attention to this famous episode in Australian sporting history for reasons, one might fairly speculate, which have little to do with either Australia or the facts of history. The commercial spirit behind this particular enterprise was born in British film studios as a result of the surprising success of David Puttnam's chauvinistic, but simplistically effective, 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*. We have often heard of 'the film of the book', but with this novel we have clear evidence of a work of fiction which is manufactured from the preparation for the cinema and not *vice versa*. One of this novel's faults is its obvious dependence, not only upon the film, but also upon the visual and dramatic requirements of the screenplay. As such it is not easy to respond to it as a 'novel' because its technique is essentially cinematic: most of the text is either composed of static scenic description or lengthy dialogue. There is certainly little or no evidence of the analysis and development of character which typifies much interesting fiction.

In recent years there has been, of course, the emergence of a new kind of fiction - sometimes rather oddly termed 'faction' - which is based very closely on historical *fact*. Norman Mailer's *The Executioners Song* and Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* are good examples of this genre, which overlaps in several respects with the 'dramatised journalism' of writers like Tom Wolfe. The relative success of these writers is an indication that the kind of exercise embarked upon by Paul Wheeler can work if the author has the necessary skills and does his homework. In the case of this book, however, it is to be doubted whether Wheeler was well advised to set his sights above screenwriting.

The real disappointment with this book as a novel lies in its pedestrian narrative and characterisation. The general thesis is that Douglas Jardine was persuaded to undertake the captaincy of the MCC team to Australia at the behest of vague 'establishment'

figures in London in order to teach the Australians as a nation a lesson which would make them less troublesome at the forthcoming Imperial Conferences. Jardine, who all the sporting world knows as having been a man of stern, unbending, patrician character, is a fascinating subject for the biographer or novelist. Why did he make this tour if he disliked Australia and Australians so intensely, especially after first insisting that on no account would he do so? Is it likely that he, of all people, would agree to act in the unfriendly, obnoxious and (to put it mildly) unpopular way he did simply to assist the working-class Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs in Ramsay MacDonald's government? Jardine's character is the key to the notorious events which developed on the tour, but this novel gives little explanation as to why he acted as he did. Instead we have anonymous letters and superficial explanations to make the issues simpler than they were (presumably for the film audience).

The relationship between J.H. Thomas, the Dominion Affairs Secretary of State, and Jardine touches on the problem of cricket and class. One would expect any English novelist to be concerned with the class issue to some extent, and indeed Wheeler raises the matter in regard to both Jardine's view of Australians and Larwood's own part in the tour and the bodyline controversy. Nowhere, however, does the class argument make total sense as this novel presents it: instead of historically possible justification we are instead given fictional explanations which smack of the 1980s rather than of fifty years earlier. These cultural anachronisms, oddly enough, also apply to the language used, which at times is surely completely untypical of that era! From the moment on page 2, where King George V exclaims 'bugger Bradman' to Percy Chapman, then English captain, we are subject to a succession of expressions ('bloody', 'bugger', 'bastard') which were apparently commonplace not only in working-class English pubs and in Australia, and other such low haunts, but also in the refined corridors of Lords and Parliament.

All in all this is a disappointing book, which fails to capture the drama and tension of that extraordinary era. One hopes the film will be better.

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