

Christopher Brookes, *His Own Man. The Life of Neville Cardus*. Methuen, London, 1985, pp.280. \$45.

Neville Cardus is cricket's most outstanding writer. He transformed cricket and sports journalism from mundane reporting into a literary genre. While his style has been aped by many, and only equalled by John Arlott and C.L.R. James, its rich, indulgent

quality has never been surpassed.

The essence of Cardus was that he understood that 'a cricketer, like anybody else, is what his period and environment make of him, and he acts or plays accordingly'. Neville Cardus was born in Manchester in 1889 and this fact had a crucial influence on his subsequent writing. He grew up in the Edwardian era, the so-called Golden Age of cricket; a period which is now grossly over-romanticised as one of flourishing, carefree amateurs, as opposed to dour professionals.

Cardus never knew his father. He was brought up by his mother and his aunt Beatrice, both of whom worked as high-class prostitutes, and by his grandparents, who took in washing. In *Autobiography* Cardus wishes us to believe that he was 'an uneducated boy from an illiterate home' but in this excellent new biography that Cardus-created myth is carefully examined and refuted. Brookes concludes that it is a legend that has been 'authenticated by default and sanctified in absentia'.

Poverty was certainly part of Cardus family life but Brookes demonstrates that these were enlightened working class people who strove hard to avoid penury and instilled into Fred, as Neville was then called, a fierce determination to avoid the drudgery of a proletarian existence. That he achieved through his cricket writing and music criticism, primarily in the pages of the *Manchester Guardian* and to a lesser extent in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. As Brookes explains, before the First World War Manchester had a vibrant cultural life. Cardus graduated from George Robey in the music hall to the weekly classical concerts given by the Halle orchestra, while in the city's libraries he absorbed Thackeray, James, Conrad and Dickens. In later life Cardus remarked that there are only two classes, those who have read Dickens and those who have not (don't bother with the latter, he advised!).

By the time Cardus began writing his 'Cricketer' columns for the *Manchester Guardian* he was already an accomplished writer. He was the first prose writer who chose cricket as his subject and, although Cardus admitted in retrospect that much of his early cricket writing was contrived he did add tens of thousands of readers to the newspaper's circulation. Perhaps there is a moral here for



of the trend towards finding solace in the Edwardian Golden Age. It is a mistaken desire, evident in many areas of life, which is seeking comfort from the long-gone, never-to-return, halcyon days when Britain ruled the waves. Cardus fits neatly into that imperial tradition.

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