

Michael Meyer (ed.), *Summer Days. Writers on Cricket*. Oxford University Press, 1981. pp.255. £2.95 paper.

There was a time, not so long ago, when an interest in sport was seen as a sure sign of serious cultural inadequacy in literary and academic circles, equivalent in certain staff common rooms known to me to a public admission that one wore socks to bed, smoked woodbines and kept coal in the bath. Nowadays the reverse is true on the whole, although, on the evidence of this book, writing on sport is still regarded as an essentially 'lightweight' enterprise by some. Here we have a collection of some 30 essays on cricket (and occasional poems) by some of the most well-known cultural figures of our age in the English-speaking world, including the best contemporary dramatist writing in English (Harold Pinter);

some reputable poets (including Ted Hughes); several middling but recognised novelists (Kingsley Amis, Beryl Bainbridge, Tom Keneally, V.S. Naipaul); leading British astronomer (Bernard Lovell); major philosopher (A.J. Ayer); two of our best literary biographers (Robert Gittings and Michael Holroyd); and all this motley collection edited by the finest modern translator and critic of Ibsen.

Michael Meyer's idea was to ask several leading cultural identities to 'set down their considered reflections on the game', and on the whole the resultant book is an enjoyable means of whiling away the odd hour. The pieces by Harold Pinter, on the former Somerset player Arthur Wellard in the twilight of his career, and Bernard Lovell, on the conflicting claims for importance of a cricket match and the first Soviet lunar rocket, are worth the purchase price in themselves. It is also true, however, that one feels the enterprise would have been all the better had all the contributors taken to their task with a proper degree of commitment, or even if some of them had graciously declined Michael Meyer's invitation. After all, Samuel Beckett, the most distinguished writer of our era to be mentioned in *Wisden*, and a Nobel Prizewinner for Literature, did apparently feel himself unable to do justice to the concept, and in a courteous reply to the editor honestly put to rest the rumour that he had once played international cricket for Ireland, admitting that the pinnacle of his career was as a bowler for University College, Dublin.

Some readers may also feel a little jaundiced by the overwhelming preponderance of English writers on English themes. The only Australians to get a guernsey are the actor Leo McKern, who has lived in Britain for 35 years, and novelist Tom Keneally, and the only West Indian is V.S. Naipaul. Astonishingly there are no writers from the Indian subcontinent. To be fair, Michael Meyer openly admits 'with regret a certain southern bias in the book' (p.9) which he would no doubt have liked to remedy, but there is certainly an overemphasis on cricket matches involving Middlesex and Surrey teams which don't always seem to justify the focus on them. In venturing north of the Watford Gap, moreover, a piece of lamentably naive hero-worship of the Yorkshire opener Boycott (Gavin Edward's poem 'Geoffrey') can hardly be justified on literary merit, and will inevitably raise the ire of more than one Australian lover of the game by its sycophantic tone.

Indeed, the main failing of this collection apart from its bias is that the editor was perhaps unwilling or unable to edit as ruthlessly as he should have done. The contributors are almost all well-known, but the pedestrian nature of one or two pieces would suggest that they were included because of who their author was rather than either their literary or historical interest. Some essays, such as A.J. Ayel's, are little more than a self-indulgent listing of cricketers and cricket matches seen in days gone by, whilst others, Kingsley Amis and Leo McKern, struggle unsuccessfully to rise above lightweight reminiscence. Some manifest another peculiarly English characteristic (which those of us forced to endure BBC radio Test Match commentators of recent seasons can barely stomach) by describing a world of in-jokes and name-dropping apparently designed to keep the uncouth at their proper Antipodean distance; (Robert Gittings) infatuation with the English theatrical profession is a case in point). At least one other essay is, curiously and perversely, not about cricket at all but simply displays a family history in which the game plays an accidental and apparently regretted role (Beryl Bainbridge).

This is, then, at best a collection to dip into at odd moments, with the real chance of finding something of interest but with the likelihood of feeling that some of the contributions don't do justice to Michael Meyer's good idea. It is hardly a classic of cricket literature overall. No doubt the book is more of literary interest than historical value, but even the general reader, whilst enjoying the style and atmosphere evoked of 'summer days' in the best pieces, could be irritated by the unabashed genial sloppiness of some of the reminiscence: 'I have deliberately refrained from checking dates', writes Julian Symons in his 'Memoirs of a Cricketer', 'feeling that such memories of mine should preserve their imprecision' (p.217); David Wright recalls a Test Match, adding perversely 'had I a *Wisden* by me I'd be able to give the exact date. Probably the early thirties' (p.239). Such remarks simply confirm the impression that this is a lightweight collection and, although not unenjoyable, is not quite the memorable anthology it might have been had several of the cultural eminences taken to their task as seriously as the concept deserved.

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