

David Frith, *By His Own Hand: A Study of Cricket's Suicides*. ABC Books, Crows Nest, 1990. Illus., index., pp. 264. \$29.95.

Part of the fascination of cricket has been the tension produced from the dichotomies which its devotees feel it possesses. To begin with it seems to offer the individual scope to display his personal art and skill yet individual accomplishment is framed by the need to play as a team member.

David Gower has received countless homilies on this subject. Further, part of the ethos of the game has been a kind of guileless relish in the exuberance of physical effort of the sort produced so spectacularly by Ian Botham in the 1981 Ashes series. On the other hand, cricket is

the most theoretical and secretive of games with its delight in schemes, strategies and plans. Witness Clarrie Grimmett conniving away in his backyard, accompanied by his faithful fox-terrier, plotting the overthrow of yet another leaden-footed English batsman.

Then there is the difference between the public and the private worlds of cricket. Even if all the best cricket writing isn't incurably Georgian pastoral, it certainly conjures pictures of the high noon of youth seen against a sun-drenched background. (Staring at me as I write are copies of Green *Sprigs* and *Days in the Sun*). Yet there is the other dimension of loss of form, waning confidence and advancing years.

This darker side of the cricketing world was crystallised in the feeling that the game had produced a disproportionate number of suicides. Perhaps these feelings of unease were encapsulated in the figure of the Somerset and England opener, Harold Gimblett. Here was the man who scored 123 in eighty minutes on his debut in 1935; a batsman of daring and authority who could draw crowds to county grounds by the sheer physical presence of his stroke play. Yet David Foot in his sympathetic study of Gimblett showed us a complex, difficult and diffident man, tormented beyond endurance by a fear of failure and a conviction that his services were not properly appreciated. Foot showed us the man who could take an attack apart in half a dozen overs was haunted by fear and depression to the finality of suicide in 1978.

In his book David Frith has widened the focus to a study of all the first-class (and near first-class) cricketers who have taken their own lives. Frith's research has produced a comprehensive record of the famous, the moderately known and the obscure who have been driven to suicide. The book is framed by the question of whether it is the cricket which has produced its victims and by weight of evidence he concludes that we must look elsewhere.

The elsewhere includes the historical: suicide seems to have been a very Victorian way of ending it all although Frith doesn't give a lot of attention to the sociological factors which might have been operating

here. Other factors include hypochondria (Arthur Shrewsbury) fear of financial ruin (Jim Burke), loneliness (Andrew Stoddart) alcoholism (Joe Partridge), mental derangement (Billy Scotton) and the frankly mysterious (Jack Inverson) - or even perhaps the burden of a nickname (Turnip-Head Trott).

Ultimately, Frith charts his movement from suspecting that there was something to his conclusion that it was the other factors which were more prominent. Readable and painstakingly researched, *By His Own Hand* is the flexible kind of book which can be dipped into for the individual portraits or read as a well-developed account of the area.

It is particularly poignant not only for the accounts of personal misery which it gives but for the mysteries it contains. Why, for instance, did Barry Fisher, a better than average Queensland fast bowler of the late fifties and early sixties, end his life so suddenly? What story is there to be unravelled of this phlegmatic but enigmatic man whose bowling action gave a latter-day echo of the great Lindwall?

Perhaps the most haunting aspect of Frith's book is the grainy snapshots of the players of long ago frozen for all time by the camera. We know what happened to them; did they? Or, finally, do we?

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