

Adrian McGregor, *Simply the Best: The 1990 Kangaroos*.
University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1991. Illus., index, pp. 226.
\$12.45 (paper).

Adrian McGregor is an award-winning sports writer, best known for his biographies of Wally Lewis (*King Wally* and *Wally & the Broncos*) and Greg Chappell (*Greg Chappell: Cricket's Incomparable Artist*).

Simply the Best is his fast attempt at a tour summary and to aid in bringing the book from the mundane to the educational he spent several months in England steeping himself in the traditions of the game and getting a feel for the people and the terrain in the areas where the matches were played.

McGregor is a consummate journalist, employing all the freest skills of his craft in moulding his works. *Simply the Best* is no exception. He displays as always a rare gift of phraseology ('imposing Steve Roach and scarred Glenn Lazarus . . . Blocker & Lazza were the engine room of the Australian pack yet looked as poised as two Parisians in a sidewalk cafe', 'Gallant defeats don't make for long conversations'). He is always meticulous in his weighing of facts, and his work holds up again despite an evident and persistent nationalism ('The 1990 Kangaroos lifted rugby league into a new plain of professionalism at Elland Road').

A flaw in this work that has never been evident with McGregor before lies in the general approach. Many years ago one author endeavoured to classify sports writers as representative of particular writing schools, and two were the 'jock-sniffer school of sport journalism' and 'the house voice school'. McGregor goes very close to being categorised into one or the other of these schools. For example, the 'jock sniffer school':

After two months in dressing rooms beside the massive biceps, triceps and quadriceps of half-naked Kangaroos, I had gained an insight into why Australia overcame such a determined British side. Mal Meninga could have been an Olympic decathlete, Paul Sironen and Glenn Lazarus possess shot-putter's shoulders, Steve Roach could have been a title contender. (p. 220)

Then 'the house voice school'.

For two months the unfortunates of English rugby league had been hammered by footballers with muscular physiques sculpted by modern power weightlifting and cardio-vascular supervision. It was the Australian's body strength, sheer Schwarzenegger

muscle-power, which underpinned the Kangaroos' retention of the Ashes. English rugby league grew out of black coal pits but its future now had to be in the bright lights of sports institutes, exercise testing laboratories and clockwork physiology. Bob Fulton was in no doubt: 'Unyielding defence won the day', he said. 'When we didn't have the ball we tackled and didn't we tackle! Our defence was so strong that in the end I think the Poms were hiding. They didn't have people to take the ball up. Their gun players were terrorised.' (pp. 220-221).

For all that, McGregor misses a bit by under-emphasizing the quirks and foibles of individual players. Apart from nicknames, 'E.T.', 'Buttocks', 'Heifer Head', 'Brick with Eyes', 'Brandy', 'Badge', 'Rowdy', 'Napper', 'Chicken', 'ALF', and 'Eddie', the author is strangely reticent - the house voice? - about identifying the bastards, the trouble-makers, the larrikins, the political animals, the failures, the drunkards and so on. This is the problem of getting too close to a team and being accepted by them. You become part of the adventure, and shutting your mouth is part of the unwritten law.

Adrian McGregor has done his homework on the origins of the game, and that lifts the book out of the ordinary journalistic endeavour. He also takes us on tour, describing the main historical sights and the tourist extravaganzas of the areas that the team passes through. Perhaps he was typing his own main references when he said that tour guide Steve Ricketts carried with him his bibles - the A A book of British villages, the A A book of British towns and the British Coal Good Beer Guide for 1990.

There are 15 chapters in the book, and it rounds off with Tour Statistics. A disappointment was that the tour to France was not included in the book.

As always, McGregor's careful journalism shines through. *Simply the Best* may not be Adrian's best, but he is a writer who does not like to be hurried, and he had to meet horrendous deadlines to produce it so

soon after the tour. It lacks some of the polish of his earlier books, but it is still light years ahead of similar rugby league books. It keeps Adrian McGregor in the forefront of the game's serious writers.

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