

Greg Growden, *A Wayward Genius: the Fleetwood-Smith Story*. ABC Books, Crow's Nest, 1991.

In the Fourth Test of the 1936-37 series at Adelaide, England ended the fifth day's play at 3 for 148 and so needed another 244 runs for victory. They were already leading the series 2-1 and with Walter Hammond, the most imperious English batsman of his generation, comfortably set on 39, victory must have seemed eminently achievable. Yet, it was in this situation that Les Fleetwood-Smith produced one of the most famous balls in Test Cricket. In his first over he bowled Hammond with a magically perfect combination of flight and turn and ended England's hopes in the match and the series. That one ball ensured the bowler cricket's version of eternal life.

Here was a bowler of that most beautiful, difficult and neglected of spinning arts, the left-arm off break. The excesses inherent in the art mean that mechanical accuracy is impossible, yet Fleetwood-Smith took 5 wickets in an innings 57 times in a career of only 112 matches in the 1930s.

For Fleetwood-Smith, though, there was a rapid descent to the world of the vagrants on the bank of the Yarra. Even they were affronted by his wearing of his Test cap in the environment where badges of self-respect were quickly lost. And there, for many people his story ended but Greg Growden's research demonstrates that the last couple of years saw a rekindling of the old fires of stability and self-knowledge through the kindness of many friends and particularly through the help of his second wife Bea.

Growden's biography is a readable and substantial achievement. While Fleetwood-Smith does not emerge as a character (he was probably too uncomplicated for his own good) we are allowed to see the multitude of forces which operate on the life of a sporting figure. Growden writes with real insight into Fleetwood-Smith's experience of growing up in Stawell Victoria. The family's social aspirations transformed Les Smith

into Leslie O'Brien Fleetwood-Smith and we gain a vivid picture of an indulged life in a country town of the 1920s.

In many ways, Fleetwood-Smith was a person who many Australians saw as an embodiment of the typical : the good-looking country lad with an obvious relish for the enjoyment of life who just used his natural gifts in the most spontaneous way. He also appeared to be a bit of a larrikin in the most endearing way : never too overawed by the sobriety of cricket's sense of occasion to produce a few bird calls, whistle a popular song or give his war cry. Behind the figure, though, Growden, charts the wider focus operating on Australian cricket of the 1930s : sectarianism, the economic stringencies of the decade and the class-bound nature of much of cricket administration.

Perhaps the finest part of the book is Growden's demonstration of what happened to a gregarious yet feckless man possessing no vocational skills after his first-class career was over. Growden widens the particular case of Fleetwood-Smith into a general examination of this problem which confronts all those involved in the higher levels of sport.

I believe this to be one of the most substantial Australian cricket biographies to be written so far as it allows us to see the personal, psychological and historical dimensions to Les Fleetwood-Smith, cricketer. What is more it is written with honesty, compassion and clarity.

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