

Alex Buzo and Jamie Grant (eds.), *The Longest Game - A Collection of the Best Cricket Writing from Alexander to Zavos, from the Gabba to the Yabba*, William Heinemann, Sydney, 1990, \$37.95.

The epigraph at the beginning of *The Longest Game* reads:

The Rime of the Ancient Cricketer

Three times the batsman swung and missed;
the third ball struck his knee:
he is an Ancient Cricketer,
and he stoppeth one of three.

Not surprisingly, this book is edited by Australian playwright Alex Buzo and poet Jamie Grant. Both are excellent choices by Heinemann because they produce a book which defies the mould. In the Introduction Buzo and Grant promise the reader a range of selections which reflect 'our taste, with idiosyncrasies and prejudices to which we cheerfully confess'. Buzo's renowned love of the lunatic in language (How can one avoid alliteration when basking in Buzo?) and Grant's passion for poetry do indeed result in some 440 pages of wonderfully eccentric and, at times, inspired choices.

The title 'Longest Game' is used, the editors inform us, because every other suitable superlative has been done to death. They strove for difference. They also give priority to quality writing - be it from Australian creative writers who share their love of cricket or from talented journalists, like Ray Robinson, 'Johnnie' Moyes and Neville Cardus, who rub shoulders with the great cricketers and cricketer/journalists such as Arthur Mailey, Jack Fingleton, Simmo, Richie Benaud and the indomitable Bill O'Reilly. Add to these an entertaining contribution from the Australian cultural community - renowned actor Ron Haddrick and writers such as Dal Stevens (the classic 'Batting Wizard from the City'), Kate Jennings, Louis Nowra,

Buzo, Clive James, Jean Bedford and John Romeril. Throw in Barry Andrews' excellent article 'Tugging Four Bits Off the Deck at the WACA', Brian Matthews' diatribe against Packer cricket, Don Watson's (he of the republican speeches of our incumbent PM) deft little piece '*Unnatural History*', and even a few sheep (like Glenn Turner and Spiro Zavos) from across the Tasman and you have a fair idea of the book's riches. You can read cover-to-cover or just browse. Both approaches will reward.

The book sections are imaginative: fast session (the Bradman era), lunch, second session (the Big Tours), tea, third session (post-Packer cricket - 'Maelstrom Acres') and a stumps session which allows Buzo to indulge his language obsession. It's as refreshing as a cool beer at the end of a long day chasing leather. The eighty or so pages of the 'Tea' section allow the creative writers to enjoy their cricketing day in the sun. Yet it is worth noting that the editors feel obliged to offer something of an apology for their colleagues: 'Cricket does not appear in Australian creative writing as often as you might expect it to in such a 'sport-mad' country... 'Jamie Grant, in a brief introduction to this section, puzzles over the reasons for the comparative malaise. 'Imagine', he asks, 'a cricket match as described by Patrick White: the notion disturbs the mind as well as the syntax'. And he prods (in the fashion of his co-editor) a little more: 'Patrick White and Thomas Keneally; David Malouf and C.J. Koch; Kenneth Slessor and Ces A. Murray - one would not trust any of these combinations to put up a needed last- wicket partnership'. The editorial interventions are as lively as the selected articles.

Though the structure and contents of *The Longest Game* provide something of a contrast with the memorable cricket books of the past, the book shares one of their great strengths: the ability to isolate and celebrate that wonderful moment when a sporting memory moves beyond anecdote into myth. Bill O'Reilly's 'Young Don Bradman', the first piece in the book, is a case in point, especially when it is cleverly counterpointed by the last article in the collection, Buzo's own 'Don

Bradman at 80'. Arthur Mailey's list of the six most difficult batsmen to bowl to in his era (cricket aficionados, I know, want names: Trumper, Macartney, Ponsford, Hobbs, Woolley and Sutcliffe) - and the required embellishment - is another, along with Ray Robinson on Stan McCabe. Betty Archdale, long-time headmistress of the exclusive Abbotsleigh girls school in Sydney, deserves an honourable mention for the comment, after taking her girls to the cricket, only to watch Bill Lawry pad up most of the day: 'I could have throttled Lawry. I'd only just persuaded the girls that cricket wasn't a boring game'.

If I have raved about the quality of the contents, I can't do the same about the photographs in the middle of the book. The captions are witty, as we might expect; unfortunately, the quality of the reproductions is about on a par with a bush-school magazine. Featured West Indian cricketers find their heads lost, or merged into the grim Gothic backgrounds. But this is a small quibble in a fine book. Buzo's lists of great cricketing tautology, clichés, mixoes and quotes in the 'stumps' section provide just the right kind of post-match feast.

This is a book for purist and post-modernist alike.

David Headon

University of New South Wales, ADFA