

**Richard Cashman, David Headon and Graeme Kinross-Smith, eds,**  
*The Oxford Book of Australian Sporting Anecdotes.* Oxford University  
Press, Melbourne, 1993. Index. pp. x + 286. \$29.95.

Recently, appearing on the ABC program, 'Grandstand', I made a plea for the greater use of sporting literature in schools. I made the seemingly incontrovertible observation that there had been much fine Australian writing on sport that would be attractive to children. To my amazement, David Headon, who was on the same panel refuted this. With David in full flow, I had no opportunity on the program to counter his rejoinder. Now I find that this book, of which he is joint editor, is sufficient refutation of his counter-argument.

The editors have wisely resisted the temptation to provide a 'laugh-a-minute' collection. Although some of the stories are very funny, the anthology contains others that are poignant, some that are cruel and others that are inspirational. The eclectic nature of the book is demonstrated by the nineteen sports represented. It is fitting and proper that, out of 241 entries, no fewer than sixty-two should concern that most artistic of sports, cricket. Cricket outnumbers its nearest rival, 'Football', by nine. But the supremacy of cricket as a literary inspiration would have been even more pronounced had the editors not perversely decided to classify 'Football' to comprise Australian Rules, Rugby Union and Rugby League (fifty-three entries altogether). Amazingly, they give 'Soccer' a separate entry, despite its etymology as an abbreviation of 'Association Football', and its just claim, historically, anatomically, culturally and spiritually, to be considered as the 'real football'. Soccer, sadly, rates only three entries, all concerning the irascible coach, Frank Arok.

The editors have wisely chosen to present their anthology in chronological order, rather than by alphabetical or any other mode. This allows for an examination of trends in literary style, as well as for a cursory overview of historical developments. It is, however, noticeable that the character of the Australian sporting culture, and the virtues and desiderata

of Australian sporting heroes, establish themselves at an early stage. The heroes and heroines seem almost to be reincarnated from generation to generation. It is striking that, out of the numbers of sportsmen and women who have brought lustre to this country, a chosen few feature in two or more stories. Dally Messenger, Arthur Mailey, Evonne Goolagong, Raelene Boyle - what mystiques do they possess which makes them so reportable? The Australian sporting hero is certainly more than a fine performer. There is some indefinable quality that sets him or her above the crowds, perhaps; grace; a will to win, perhaps; certainly, the ability to laugh at him/her self; and, above all, a laconic wit.

And so, we learn of the gracious way in which an Aborigine accepts cruel, racist taunts (Doug Nicholls, p.115; Evonne Goolagong, p. 216) or disgrace (Meckiff's Test farewell, p. 199) or humiliation (Raelene Boyle's sex test, p. 220). We learn of the tightening pressures placed on the professional athlete (Margaret Smith's account of the crazed New York telephone caller, p. 197). We relive the terror of 'Black Sunday', when hundreds of beach-bathers were dragged out to sea by a backwash from tidal waves, some of them being rescued by a twenty-one-year-old victim of polio (p. 141). We identify with the crowd that lined the Maitland streets for the funeral of the boxer, Les Darcy surely the unlikeliest of Australian sporting heroes, a conscientious objector (p. 98). And we admire the modesty and sincerity of Shane Gould, who renounced a swimming career for Christianity (p. 238).

But there is much rich humour in this anthology. For sustained wit, it is difficult to better 'The Worst Whinger at the Wickets', a tale told by Fred Trueman and Frank Hardy (p. 145). For sheer incredulity, the tale of golfer Noel Craig's six holes-in-one (three right-handed, three left!) takes some beating (p. 137). But I think I liked best of all the tale of the eagle-eyed starter at the Melbourne Olympics, who recalled an entire field because one runner had slightly moved before he fired the gun - in the Marathon! (p. 181).

It would, perhaps, not be inappropriately un-Australian to confess that one of the finest pieces of prose in the book is written by a foreign observer - the description of the Melbourne Cup of 1895 by Mark Twain (p. 50).

In one sense, *plus, ca change, plus c'est la même chose*, can be said to be the leitmotiv of this collection. Should football be allowed on the Melbourne Cricket ground? Yes! This was an issue of the 1860s, and it was grudgingly permitted (p. 1). In 1994, rather the issue is, should cricket be allowed on this ground?

And while talking French, I must remonstrate with the editors for their one noticeable error - the failure to feminise the word, 'protege' on p. 234, all the more unforgivable as it refers to a strictly female female, Evonne Goolagong.

Yes! This is a marvellously compiled anthology. It is truly representative of all that is special about Australian sport.

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