

**Ray Webster**, *First-Class Cricket in Australia, Vol. 2, (1945-46 to 1976-77)*.  
**The author, Melbourne, 1997. pp. 983. \$90.**

The cricket world is well aware of Australia's current dominance in the Test arena. What is, perhaps, less well known is the extraordinary quality of current scholarship and literature on cricket in Australia. It is my view (and I trust as an expatriate Englishman, that I shall not be accused of jingoistic bias) that modern Australian writing on cricket is unsurpassed in excellence. Historians, such as Richard Cashman, Bernard Whimpress and Brian Stoddart, economic historians such as Bob Stewart, journalists of the calibre of Mike Coward and Gideon Haigh, and biographers such as Ed Jaggard and Ashley Mallett, exemplify this remarkable flowering.

It is not going too far to say that this is a golden age of Australian cricket writing. It is a literature characterised by wit, erudition, social relevance, reflection and maturity.

But, in the constellation, there shines a resplendent star so luminous that it defies a mundane value judgment of a normal review. I refer to Vol. 2 of Webster's *First Class Cricket in Australia* (published by Webster himself).

Webster, on Australian cricket, is as incontrovertible as the dictionary of his namesake is on American usage. It is no less than a compendium of every first-class match played in Australia. It includes all Tests and other tour matches. It is a project to which Ray Webster has devoted ten years of his life. For each match, six or seven score books and newspaper accounts have been consulted, so that the ultimate entry can be definitive. Sometimes, perhaps too often, even *Wisden* is found to have nodded! Every match is prefaced by a précis. Invariably, a noteworthy or striking incident is highlighted, adding colour to the bare details of the score book. Like Charles Lamb, Webster has perfected the difficult art of encapsulating a lengthy drama into a pithy paragraph. Quotations from newspapers, though often clichéd, add a piquancy to the description. Lest it should be thought that a perusal of scorecards is a pursuit of little interest save to crabbed statisticians, let me point to several gobbets of information, randomly selected from pages 109 to 175, that illustrate the book's charm.

In the Queensland versus Western Australia match in 1949/50, E J Chadwick, the umpire, was appointed directly from the junior ranks, without ever having umpired a district match!

The Western Australia versus Victoria match of 1949/50 was Jack Iverson's third first-class game. In those three games, from 25 November to 20 December 1949, he took 24 wickets, including single innings figures of 6/47, 7/77 and 6/46!

The total attendance at the Victoria versus New South Wales match at the MCG from 24-28 December 1949 was 44 792!

In the New South Wales versus South Australia game at the SCG from 13-16 January 1950, fast bowler Tom Brooks 'was criticised for his overdue use of the rising ball \_ but there was no answer from the umpires'. Is there not a wicked irony that Brooks should subsequently have become a respected and stem Test umpire?

In the New South Wales versus Queensland game from 3-7 November

1950, C E Harvey, batting for Queensland, was presented with a four to reach his century so that Queensland might declare, thus enabling the players to race off the field to hear the broadcast of the Melbourne Cup!

In the Second Test between Australia and England at the MCG in December 1950 there were two consecutive rest days. In the Third Test between those teams at the SCG, Iverson was run out by two substitute fielders, Berry and Shepherd. (An example of Webster's attention to detail is his meticulous attempt to ascertain the fielder — or fielders where appropriate — responsible for run-outs).

In the Tasmania versus MCC match from 13-16 January 1951, the umpire Terry Lynch was the youngest participant! In the Victoria versus Western Australia match at the MCG from 16-20 February 1951, P C D McCarthy made his debut for Western Australia. He was the first Ceylonese to play a first class cricket match in Australia.

In the 1951/52 season, Sid Barnes brought a libel case against the Australian Board of Control, having previously challenged the Board to give reasons for his exclusion from the team for the Third Test match.

The final day of the Third Test between Australia and the West Indies at Adelaide was 25 December 1951. A crowd of only 6722 was present to see an extraordinary six wicket win by the West Indies. But at the following match at the MCG an aggregate crowd of 168 000 saw a sensational reverse when Ring and Johnston put on 38 for the last wicket, to secure a one wicket victory for Australia. Four West Indians were run out in this match — all four by Neil Harvey — Trim being run out for 0 in both innings.

Each scoreboard harbours an enigmatic story. The captions to the match do much to resolve the enigmas. They put flesh on the bones of the statistics.

Webster's two handsomely bound volumes occupy pride of place on my shelves. It may be sacrilegious, but Webster's volumes take precedence over my *Wisdens*? Webster is, indeed, too marvellous for words.

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