

Mike Colman and Ken Edwards, *Eddie Gilbert: The True Story of an Aboriginal Cricketing Legend*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2002, viii + 280pp., illus, pb, \$29.95.

I have looked forward to the appearance of Ken Edwards' biography of Eddie Gilbert for a number of years. I have looked forward to it knowing of his frustrations with several publishers. I have looked forward to it because I have read and possess a copy of Edwards' very fine and readable PhD, which was always worthy of publication. I thus wondered when this book appeared why there were two names on the cover and spine instead of one. I further wondered why as co-author Edwards name was second in the order of precedence.

I bought the book and looked at the cover – a very arresting one – but I wondered about the subtitle. Why 'The True Story of an Aboriginal Cricketing Legend'? I didn't expect a fiction so *True* seemed superfluous. Or was this a marketing ploy to cash in on Peter Carey's *The True History of the Kelly Gang* which was fiction. Would this book be fiction too, post-modern, cross genre and so on? I went to the Authors' Notes. The first two sentences are as follows:

This book was seven years and nine months in the making. Seven years of part-time research by Ken Edwards, followed by nine months writing by Mike Colman, with Ken's assistance.

My first thought was had Edwards been duded? Had there been a journalistic makeover? Why else would the author who had done the hard yards come second? But let me, as Alan McGilvray used to say, come back to that in a moment. I also noted the comment in the third paragraph that Edwards as an academic felt 'uneasy' about his co-author's 'creative license' in the Prologue and the

description in Chapter 10 of the famous Gilbert over to Don Bradman at the Gabba in 1931. I went immediately to the Prologue and Chapter 10. Unnecessary! I share Edwards' unease.

There is no need for the Prologue depicting a middle-aged Gilbert in the mental asylum at Goodna. Ashley Mallett used some 'creative license' in his book, *Clarrie Grimmett: The Bradman of Spin*, taking Clarrie into the future to bowl at present day batsmen. Some people liked it. Others thought it out of place. Martin Flanagan created a wonderful picture of Johnny Mullagh hooking a bouncer by Tom Wills in *The Call* but that is a work of fiction. Here the drama is wasted at the beginning. David Frith's much more powerful report of his meeting with Gilbert thirty years ago, quoted in part at the end of this book, has a fine sense of drama. I take a similar view of the 'creative' passage in Chapter 10. Anyone who has read the contemporary newspaper reports of the first Gilbert-Bradman confrontation knows they are vivid enough to be quoted or paraphrased. There is no need for invention.

Is the book a true story? Yes. Is it a good story? Yes. Let us look at what I think Colman has brought to the book. Certainly great chapter titles: 'A Protected Species', 'Fast Eddie', 'Tall Tales', 'Too-fast Eddie', 'The Don', 'A Thorny Rose', 'Social Leper', 'Bradman's Revenge', 'Gilbert 2—Bradman 1' and so on. What journalists over beer, and publishers over riesling, call 'sexy'. The chapters more often than not contain what I would call good leads. A number of times the first paragraphs create a wider context and the text flows smoothly.

There is much to like about this book. It opens strongly on the Barambah background, racial policy in Queensland and the loss of Aboriginal cultural identity on reserves which is replaced by the 'Barambah mob'. It reveals the strong place of sport in the creation of this Barambah identity and discusses how Gilbert came to be viewed as 'special' and 'select' whereas other notable sportsmen like Frank 'Bigshot' Fisher, the grandfather of Cathy Freeman faced the colour bar. It has strong detail on Gilbert's background in cricket and the role played by Barambah superintendent Porteus Semple and schoolteacher Robert Crawford in Gilbert's life. It shows how Gilbert's success gave him the hero status of 'Our Eddie' on the reserve and underlines the role of Len Allen as his social guardian in the city and on tour. It discusses the social problems Gilbert faces with his Queensland team-mates, how he is accepted by some but not by all. It reports on Gilbert's popularity as a Queensland hero, especially with female fans and young boys. It gives a terrific insight into the efforts of Crawford to gain assistance from the Queensland Cricket Association to assist Gilbert recover from a shoulder injury during the Bodyline season. It provides excellent discussion of the money problems faced by first-class cricketers and Gilbert's particular difficulties in this respect. It deals straightforwardly with the period when Gilbert begins to slip from grace as he finds his fame on the cricket field at

odds with reserve life and lapses into womanising and alcohol abuse. It is especially good in the final two chapters where Gilbert lives as a fringe dweller and is asylumed for what is misdiagnosed as tertiary syphillis instead of Alzheimer's Disease. Its selection of photographs across the range of Gilbert's life are superb.

Despite these strengths there are also matters about which I have quibbles. In Colman's 'creative license' in bowling to Bradman he has Gilbert thinking about bowling an inswinger/outswinger. I've not heard of a Gilbert outswinger. In the same section the author talks of train drivers blowing their whistles with approval at the Gilbert assault on Bradman. How would they have known what was going on? This was pre-ABC, there was little chance of a Shield match being broadcast, there were no transistor radios in the steam engine cabins, and even if there had been they would not have heard them over the general locomotive din. Very silly! Can I go on? Umpire Orr never no-balled Jack Marsh and Albert Henry out of the game for chucking (p.140). He never no-balled them at all. After umpire Barlow no-balled Gilbert it is reported (p.152) that Queensland captain Gough queried the reason after delivery. I found no evidence of this in my reading of the *Age*. It may be forgivable to call Harold Larwood a Lancashire man – though not to someone from Nottinghamshire – and to misspell Jack Badcock's name five times, but to say 'Bradman devised his own plan [of dealing with Bodyline], stepping inside the pitch of the ball and hooking' is nonsense. This was the Stan McCabe method which worked gloriously in the First Test at Sydney but not thereafter. The Bradman method, much criticised at the time but highly effective, involved backing away to the leg side and hitting the ball on the rise through the off side. A further point is likely to upset Bodyline buffs. It might have been true in the Queensland press to say that 'column after column was dedicated to discussing the possibility of Gilbert taking on the English at their own game' but this exaggerates the chance of retaliation, especially while Bill Woodfull remained captain. Retaliation was mentioned, but not widely canvassed in papers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Melbourne Age* and *Argus*, and the *Adelaide Advertiser*.

Colman and Edwards' good story submerges the excellent history and this is a shame. A shame that in chasing a commercial imperative the book concentrates too much on a 'what the paper's say' approach linking long quote after long quote instead of hearing what the author's themselves have to say about issues. This reworking which one suspects is due to Colman is often highly readable but then, as indicated earlier, Edward's thesis was readable in the first place. Under the revamping, the Gilbert-Bradman rivalry has been pushed to the forefront and notwithstanding the drama of their encounters there were just three. Three is a statistically insignificant number by social scientific analyses.

Overall, the writing partnership works well and there are a number of excellent descriptive passages, perhaps none better than the beautifully spare description of Gilbert's grave at the end of the final chapter.

The Cherbourg cemetery register lists Gilbert as being buried in Grave No. 217. There was no memorial or even a headstone. The usual practice at Cherbourg was to have a simple white cross with a metal grave number attached. Sometimes a name was painted on it, but the crosses were not sturdy and often broke or fell down, leaving no trace. Such was the case with the cross which marked the grave of Eddie Gilbert. Apart from being directed to a general area of the cemetery, visitors will find there is no indication of his last resting place.

The cost of Gilbert's funeral was \$325. The Queensland Cricket Association picked up the tab. It was the least they could do, some might say, for the man who got Bradman out for a duck.

Journalists can write good history. Witness Les Carlyon's majestic *Gallipoli*, Sarah Murgatroyd's *The Dig Tree*, and in the sports history arena Gideon Haigh's *The Big Ship*, all published in the last year, and all authors prepared to do their own analysis. The strength of this book is the rich source material both written and oral which Edwards uncovered in his seven years of hard labour. The weakness perhaps in the journalistic revamp is that some of the interviews provide only hearsay evidence.

The verdict? A book well worth buying even if some critical questions are left unasked.

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