

Graem Sims, Why Die? The Extraordinary Percy Cerutti 'Maker of - Champions', Lothian Books, South Melbourne, 2003.

The lives of coaches, administrators or other (non-playing) participants in sports-world infrequently seem to justify commemoration via the biographical lens. Obviously, there are exceptions: Michael Crick's recent work on *The Boss* — Sir Alex Ferguson, manager of Manchester United — is one. Others, often less worthy, will spring to the minds of sporting *aficionados*. The Australian athletics coach, Percy Cerutti, was memorialised in a biography by Graeme Kelly, published in 1964 under the title *Mr Controversial*. At the time, Cerutti had passed his peak as a coach, having strongly influenced the career of his most well-known 'stotan' (Cerutti's neologism for a mix of stoic and Spartan), Herb Elliott. Following Elliott's world record-breaking victory in the 1960 Olympic 1,500 metres, he retired to Cambridge, fatherhood and a life in the business world. Cerutti, with only his reputation as investment, continued to seek what he had always wanted, financial stability, but he never achieved it.

The title of Kelly's book is apposite. 'Controversial' is, perhaps, a polite understatement to describe 'Perce'. Graem Sim's well-crafted biography, *Why Die?* (the proposed title of what would have been the last of Cerutti's published works) provides the reader with plenty of new information. It is difficult to pick out the most controversial of Cerutti's many and varied antics, which Sims records fairly and squarely. He reminds the reader that many of Cerutti's stunts and rants were, however, unashamed publicity performances through which he could command further interviews and cash payments. Cerutti was certainly not a 'good sport'. Before the start of the 5,000 metres in the Tokyo Olympics, he confronted (arguably the greatest) Australian runner ever, Ron Clarke, with the words: "You've got no hope, Clarke. You always were a weak bastard" (p. 285). His verbal abuse of his trainees was commonplace. He certainly wasn't an egalitarian, being a misogynist — he opposed female participation in sport — but was, at the same time a flirt; he was a homophobe who spent a large proportion of his time with semi-naked men. He expected a degree of independence from his charges but was the ultimate paternalist.

Why Die?, which chronicles Cerutti's life from cradle to grave, is the most detailed treatment yet of a significant figure in Australian sport. The book has the potential to inform students of sport about (a) Cerutti the man; (b) the nature of the coach-athlete relationship; and (c) the nature of Australian sport in the period between 1930 and 1960. The book benefits greatly from the author's coup in accessing the Cerutti archives — his previously unpublished written works, stashed in a cupboard undisturbed for twenty-five years, that are quoted extensively. These are of considerable interest and provide fascinating insights into the Cerutti psyche and his ambitions. Among his writings is his poetry. Some of it possesses sensitivity but much verges on doggerel.

Additionally, many of the photographs included in the book have never previously been published and serve to illustrate the Cerutti physique, early racing and training images of the man himself and many of his protégés, and the nature of life at Portsea. There is a tendency to romanticise the training at the land-sea interface, which Cerutti identified as having some mystical, primeval quality. It is to Sims's credit that he points out that many of the 'action photographs' are posed to give the desired effect — to make Cerutti, the self-promoter *par excellence*, look like an aged superman leading Elliott and his other charges up steep sand dunes.

Cerutti's zany behaviour is probably well-known to many track and field fans of the 1950s. A Freudian analysis of the man would yield huge insights. It would be a cliché to say that Cerutti was a contradiction. He was a man who advocated a back-to-nature philosophy but saw it as a means of delivering the supreme athletic performance in the 'prison of measured time', to use Jean-Marie Brohm's memorable phrase. He was a joker with a serious mission. He advocated a kind of primitive communism but sought (unsuccessfully) to make a fortune through real estate development (his Portsea 'training camp') and, for example, the 'exploitation of the Cerutti Breakfast and Lunch in restaurants, hotels, etc' (p. 266). He believed in nudism, but dressed up in his best clothes to impress people and to gate crash major sports events. He read the Bible and could recite the words of Jesus, but ordered his athletes to hate their opponents.

Percy Cerutti was a charismatic self-taught teacher. However, charisma is an easy basis for seduction and there is little doubt that converts to his cause, that included spending quasi-monastic weekends in the dunes and surf, were seduced by the vision of manliness and athletic success. Discipline was essential. Among a sort of 'ten commandments' of 'stotanism' was one that insisting that stotans 'will not be found in social places after midnight' (p. 74). Cerutti was a great believer in giving credit where credit was not due — mainly to himself. There is no doubt, however, that he greatly influenced the early life of Elliott, though, as Sims points out, the argument continues about whether Elliott would have been an equally great (or greater?) athlete without Cerutti's influence. Cerutti claimed a role in developing John Landy, though Landy's scientific background ultimately led him to accept the training method of interval-running, the track equivalent of time and motion analysis.

Why Die? provides a fascinating insight into Cerutti, the man, the romantic, the home-spun philosopher, the anti-intellectual. I am tempted to add that at times Cerutti's approach to training seems reminiscent of those advocated by athletics pedagogues of the Third Reich in which physical education was planned to be the most important subject on the school curriculum. Cerutti was not liked by the establishment but many of the athletes he coached acknowledged the affection they held for him.

But Graem Sims goes further than an exploration of the man himself. He provides excellent insights into the athletic context into which Cerutti imposed himself — that is, middle distance running and its boom in the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, the names of Nurmi, Haegg, Bannister and Snell are found alongside those of Elliot, Landy, Thomas, Power and Clarke. The Austrian Franz Stampfl, a major figure in 1950s and 1960s track and field and an advocate of interval running, was Cerutti's nemesis. The tension between the two men is not ignored. Nor does Sims ignore Cerutti's own running career in the 1930s, during which he became the Victorian marathon champion at the age of 51.

Succumbing to nit-picking, I noted only two factual mistakes in the book (Roger Bannister's 4 minutes 9.9 seconds mile in New Zealand was set at the Centennial Games of 1949, not at the Empire Games of 1950 [p. 93] and Bannister's four-minute mile was run on the 6th, not the 7th of May, 1954 [p. 148]) but these minor errors in no way invalidate an excellent read. Graem Sims, in his first book, has produced a very readable volume on a man who oddly melded the ideologies of hippydom and fascism. A good book invites questions as well as supplying answers. *Why Die?* provokes research questions about the coach-athlete power relationship and the morality of coaching itself.

John Bale

Aarhus University