

**Ken Piesse, *Cricket's Colosseum: 125 Years of Test Cricket at the MCG*,  
Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 2003, pp. xii + 356. RRP \$59.95.**

Ninety-two Test matches at the Melbourne Cricket Ground is a lot of cricket history to document in one book. One way would be to provide a history of each of those games, complete with scorecards — a dip-in book. A second way would be to do this but, in addition, to set the games within the context of particular series as well as relating to Australian Test cricket history and other issues in the game. Nigel Hart and I used the latter approach in

*Adelaide Oval Test Cricket, 1884-1984* nearly twenty years ago, but that was a big book and we dealt with only 42 matches!

Ken Piesse in his twenty-eighth cricket book offers a third way to tackle the MCG's 125 year Test history. He also discusses the Melbourne Tests within the series and cricket history, but has structured his chronological narrative in eras using such chapter titles as 'The Pioneers', 'A Little Clay Urn', 'Storms on the Horizon', 'The Colossus', 'Brightly Fades the Don', 'A Typhoon Strikes', 'Revolution' and 'The New Invincibles' to elaborate on the foundation of international cricket, the background to the 'Ashes', the early players dispute with the Board of Control, the might of Bradman and his legacy, the explosive force of Frank Tyson, the Packer upheaval, and the power of the modern Australian side under Steve Waugh.

There are weaknesses in such a method and it is a challenge to keep such a sprawling subject alive and under control. Critics of Piesse will argue that he writes too much to produce a truly great sports book but he has done a fine professional job and *Cricket's Colosseum* is well packaged. Important elements are the well-selected photographs, excellent tables of key performers, and the vignettes of players in which old memories and forgotten stories are revived. In a recent address to the Adelaide branch of the Australian Cricket Society, Piesse stated that one of the pleasures of writing this book was to uncover a 'hidden history' of the ground and he has gone some way towards achieving this.

Naturally, the core history is conveyed. Of the great games: the 45 run win to Australia in the first Test of 1877, the 1 wicket loss to England in 1907, the grand drama and symmetry of the Centenary Test, and the 3 run loss to England in 1982. Of heroes: Bannerman, Barnes, Bradman, O'Reilly, Tyson, Sobers, Lillee, Randall, Hughes and Warne. Of controversies: Bodyline, pitch-watering, chucking, intimidatory bowling and (although it was not in a Test match) the underarm ball. Yet there is more: Ian Johnson bowling without socks; Sam Loxton learning of his Test selection when working in the Malvern branch of the ES&A Bank; Rodney Hogg described as a 'renegade milkman-turned express bowler' who lost his job after a night at a strip club — presumably he wasn't delivering milk!; and umpire Rex Whitehead using John Elliott-style language ('Pig's arse') in response to a Sunil Gavaskar complaint that he had snicked a ball onto his pad when given out lbw.

As a journalist Piesse has interviewed widely, synthesised important secondary cricket sources, and drawn on his own previous work with *Australian Cricket* and *The Australian Cricketer* magazines. The bias towards interviews with former Victorian players like Sam Loxton, Doug Ring, Colin McDonald, Len Maddocks, Ian Redpath, Jack Potter and Paul Sheahan and their remarks, along with those of Bill Lawry in his foreword, strengthens the local flavour of the text.

The book's pictures are largely based on the superb collections of the Melbourne Cricket Club library and the colour and colourised images in a sixteen page central section are a design highlight. Elsewhere there are lots of superb black and white photographs located through the text with full-page pictures used as chapter dividers. For those of us who feel that the lower levels of the Members' Pavilion ought to have been saved and that the demolition of the Long Room is an act of sacrilege, we are reminded that two glorious pavilions previously existed on the ground (pp. 1, 30). Admirers of stateliness have been denied thrice.

One of the most striking visual elements in the book can almost be described as statistical art. Hugh Trumble's Bowling Record in Test Matches compiled by R. H. Campbell is handsomely reproduced on a full page (p. 70) and this, along with the photograph of Dolly (the horse) and MCG ground staff in 1920-21 (p. 92), are reminders of lost worlds. While we have no photographic record of Roy Park's wife dropping her knitting and missing his Test career for Australia (one ball) in the Second Test on the last day of 1920, we do have a wonderful image of a woman peeling a potato with carrots to come in the 1950s (p. 178).

Any book of this size will make a few slips and it is not my inclination to play the pedant. Nevertheless, '20-year-old Jack Crawford and an almost-as-young Jack Hobbs' (p. 74) should have been corrected when Hobbs is reported '(aged 28)' (p. 76) in the same season. Of more concern is C. A. G. Russell's unavailability for the 1921 Test as a result of injuring his thumb 'while trying to start a car', (p. 96) If this was going to be mentioned some mention of the perils of crank starting need to be explained. I am interested, further, that Piesse repeats the hoary old myth of Len Hutton as 'the first professional to captain England downunder' (p. 179) when it was James Lillywhite (1877), followed by Alfred Shaw (1881-82), and Arthur Shrewsbury (1884-85, 1887-88). Matters of interpretation I generally don't publicly dispute, but the timing of Michael Holding at 137km in 1981 leaves me incredulous when Ajit Agarkar reached this sort of speed during the last Australian summer.

There may not be room for full scorecards but the MCG Test statistics compiled by Ken Williams are an important supplement to the text. Not only are the short scores and main performances highlighted for each match but there are also major team, player and attendance records consolidated in a discreet 10-page section. To sum up, *Cricket Colosseum* is fine, straight sports history. Like the ground itself on Boxing Day, it is pretty much a full house.

**Bernard Whimpress**

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