

Introduction

These are good times for English sportswriting: there has been a lot more of it over the last few years, and peculiarly (an increase in quantity does not often signify an increase in quality) almost all of this increase in input has come from the classier end of the media. Most of the Sunday broadsheets, and a couple of the dailies, now have designated sports sections, and they need meaty pieces to fill it. *GQ*, *Esquire* and the other glossy men's magazines provide another new canvas for sportswriters, or writers who are sports fans, who want to paint the big picture. Somewhat belatedly, our publishers are beginning to grasp that not all sports enthusiasts are people who cannot read without their lips moving; football books in particular are no longer the sole preserve of ageing players, their agents and their ghostwriters, partly because football fanzines have raised the profile of the literate fan. And John Gaustad's Sportspages bookshops, which provided a meeting place for these literate fans, have had an influence way beyond their size, by demonstrating conclusively that there was a market for the kind of books they sold. This seemed like a good time to reflect and celebrate this recent sportswriting renaissance, and we make no apology for the contemporaneity of much of the writing here.

Yet those who write about sport still create a whole set of problems for themselves in Britain, many of them relating, predictably, to the subject of class. Sport in Britain has all sorts of class associations apparently absent elsewhere in the world. Cricket and (English, rather than Welsh) rugby union are 'posh' sports, played and watched by 'posh' people, and it is therefore acceptable to write in a 'posh' way about them; but anyone who dares to write about the more traditional working-class sports – football or rugby league, say – in a way that recognizes the existence of polysyllabic words, or metaphors, or even ideas, is asking for trouble, or at the very least a great deal of suspicion. From one side comes the accusation that the writer is a middle-class interloper who knows nothing about the sport and its traditions; from the other the supposition that the writer is slumming it, attaching himself or herself to the sport as a quick and easy way of gaining

credibility. (Sometimes the supposition is even more basic: that the writer is simply a semi-literate oaf.)

This pincer movement has all kinds of knock-on effects. Some writers affect an exaggerated one-of-the-boys prose style, full of matery, jocular vulgarisms intended to ingratiate its practitioner with a readership assumed to be distrustful of any voice more refined than this; others borrow wholesale the language and idioms of the tabloids, but use them 'ironically', just to let you know that they could do better than this if they really wanted to. This is not only frustrating, but also patronizing, because it makes the same old assumptions about sports fans, their intelligence and their reading habits. Yet another group seem to suffer from chronic sports insecurity, and pepper their reports and profiles with quotations from Proust, chunks of Italian and anything else they might find lying around in their intellectual larder.

Maybe distance lends enchantment, but it seems from here that Americans experience very few of these difficulties. The class inflections are absent, at least from the major sports themselves, and people like Roger Angell have long accustomed readers to the idea that a love of literature and a love of sport are not mutually exclusive. And – ironically in a country notorious for its flag-waving – the lack of international sporting activity means that there is none of the dubious nationalism that corrupts so many of the things pertaining to sport here: no Tebbit cricket tests, no dumb *Wisden* articles about black players and commitment, no hysterical abuse directed at those who run our national teams. Sport is much more comfortably bedded into popular culture than it is here – and we are only just beginning to learn how to write about popular culture anyway.

Maybe one of the most crucial differences between sports culture in the US and the UK is that very few Englishmen and -women describe themselves as *sports* fans. Football fans, cricket fans, rugby fans, sure. But *sports* fans? Over the other side of the Atlantic, it is not uncommon to find people who care about the New York Giants *and* the Nicks *and* the Yankees *and* the Rangers; but in England there are simply not enough thriving professional sports to sustain that kind of devotion. Most rugby union fans would kill for a ticket to England v. Scotland at Twickenham, but wouldn't cross the road to watch Bath v. Wasps, and while the whole country stops to watch or listen to the Test matches, county cricket is for the most part a poor, bedraggled thing. Only football and rugby league draw in the big crowds on a week-by-week

basis. In America, by contrast, the nearest they get to international sport is the World Series; the pro leagues in the major sports are everything. Maybe this is why they have sports fans and we have cricket fans, or rugby fans, or boxing fans who enjoy a spot of football on the side.

And if the whole sporting culture is different, it stands to reason that the sportswriting will be different too. England has yet to sustain a magazine like *Sports Illustrated*, although many (including Robert Maxwell) have tried and failed; one can only presume that aficionados of golf or Formula 1 don't want articles about Ryan Giggs and Mike Atherton cluttering up the magazine. There is no doubt that English sportswriting has suffered as a result. American sportswriters have always had opportunities to stretch out a bit, mull things over; use the room that a three- or four-thousand-word piece will buy them; our best sports journalists, by contrast, have traditionally been chained to the treadmill of daily journalism – eight-hundred-word responses to yesterday's or today's sporting events. It is hard to transcend that sort of limitation and produce a piece that will endure, especially if you work for the *Sun*, but sportswriters like Hugh McLivannay – although admittedly there are not many sportswriters like Hugh McLivannay, who in the opinion of the editors of this book is the best in Britain – do it routinely. If there is a lot of American sportswriting in this book, it is because American sportswriters have set the pace.

Even if you are a sport rather than a sports fan, we feel that the strength of the pieces here overcome prejudices and antipathies. We certainly have no interest in body-building, for example, but set against Paul Solutaroff's extraordinary, stomach-churning account of Steve Michalik's chemical diet, this kind of indifference is rather beside the point. Our guiding principle here was the prose, not the sport.

For similar reasons we grouped the pieces by underlying theme rather than by subject-sport. A common misapprehension about sport is that, in itself, it stands as a metaphor for real life; that we play, watch and read about sport because we want the rest of our lives to be illuminated by sport's special allegorical language, as if sport has something to tell us in the same way that art does. The editors beg to suggest that this is tosh. Sport is not a metaphor for the rest of life; it is indivisible from the rest of life. That's its magic. It is not a description of something; it is, simply, what it is, in the same way that sex, food and washing-up are what they are. We don't get messages from sex,

food and washing-up; we get on and do them, whether we like them or not. Hence, sport's particular appeal to the writer. It has all of life's business in it and no meaning.

Sport, then, does not exist to enlighten. It exists to be experienced – its pleasures, its pains, its ironies, its tragedies and its comedies. So we have organized this book along those thematic lines. We have, for instance, a section on how sport is shaped by recollection. We have one on the pathology of being a fan. We have a lengthy chapter on what it's like to actually *do* sport. And we consider sport briefly as an agent of epiphany. We finish with a section on Muhammad Ali, who made an awful lot out of the ordinary business of his life and on the way became not only *the* sporting archetype but also the inspiration to a lot of wonderful writers to do their best work.

We decided at an early stage that there should be no fiction in the collection, with the honourable exception of Molesworth, who in our view has long since ceased to be a fictional character, on the basis that we would end up excluding 'proper' sportswriters in an attempt to include some better-known names (and because fictional games, full of players you have never heard of, results you can't remember, and teams with made-up names, are always unsatisfactory); we decided that boxing must be given a disproportionate amount of space, simply because something about it – its glamour and its brutality, possibly – have provoked writers to their best work. It has attracted people of the calibre of Joyce Carol Oates and Norman Mailer, and, in the extraordinary writing of A. J. Liebling, given rise to one of the juiciest literary styles you could hope to read anywhere. We were also particularly keen to choose pieces from some recent sports books that we feel have been unjustly neglected. Charles Sprawson's *Haunts of the Black Masseur*, for example, is an extraordinary and scholarly account of swimming through the ages, written by someone who has been swimming obsessively all his life; David Craig's *Native Stones*, ostensibly a book about climbing, is reminiscent of the work of Raymond Williams. Laura Thompson's *The Dogs* and Andy Martin's *Walking On Water* (greyhounds and surfing), both published in the 1990s, demonstrated, to us at least, that it is not necessary to love a sport before you can love its literature.

They're coming thick and fast now, books like *The Dogs*, *Haunts of the Black Masseur* and *Walking On Water*, books written with care and passion and skill: several more have been published since we finished our selection, and I doubt whether that would have been the case had

we been putting this book together five years ago. (I doubt whether anyone would have asked us, or anyone like us, to put this book together five years ago.) Long may this trend continue: sport contains as much pleasure, pain, irony, tragedy and comedy as a writer will ever need.

Nick Coleman and Nick Hornby

C. L. R. James

The Window

Tunapuna at the beginning of this century was a small town of about three thousand inhabitants, situated eight miles along the road from Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad. Like all towns and villages on the island, it possessed a recreation ground. Recreation meant cricket, for in those days, except for infrequent athletic sports meetings, cricket was the only game. Our house was superbly situated, exactly behind the wicket. A huge tree on one side and another house on the other limited the view of the ground, but an umpire could have stood at the bedroom window. By standing on a chair a small boy of six could watch practice every afternoon and matches on Saturdays – with matting one pitch could and often did serve for both practice and matches. From the chair also he could mount on to the window sill and so stretch a groping hand for the books on the top of the wardrobe. Thus early the pattern of my life was set. The traffic on the road was heavy, there was no fence between the front yard and the street. I was an adventurous little boy and so my grandmother and my two aunts, with whom I lived for half the year, the rainy season, preferred me in the backyard or in the house where they could keep an eye on me. When I tired of playing in the yard I perched myself on the chair by the window. I doubt if for some years I knew what I was looking at in detail. But this watching from the window shaped one of my strongest early impressions of personality in society. His name was Matthew Bondman and he lived next door to us.

He was a young man already when I first remember him, medium height and size, and an awful character. He was generally dirty. He would not work. His eyes were fierce, his language was violent and his voice was loud. His lips curled back naturally and he intensified it by an almost perpetual snarl. My grandmother and my aunts detested him. He would often without shame walk up the main street barefooted, 'with his planks on the ground', as my grandmother would report. He did it often and my grandmother must have seen it hundreds of times, but she never failed to report it, as if she had suddenly seen the parson walking down the street barefooted. The whole Bondman

family, except for the father, was unsatisfactory. It was from his mother that Matthew had inherited or absorbed his flair for language and invective. His sister Marie was quiet but bad, and despite all the circumlocutions, or perhaps because of them, which my aunts employed, I knew it had something to do with 'men'. But the two families were linked. They rented from us, they had lived there for a long time, and their irregularity of life exercised its fascination for my puritanical aunts. But that is not why I remember Matthew. For ne'er-do-well, in fact vicious character, as he was, Matthew had one saving grace — Matthew could bat. More than that, Matthew, so crude and vulgar in every aspect of his life, with a bat in his hand was all grace and style. When he practised on an afternoon with the local club people stayed to watch and walked away when he was finished. He had one particular stroke that he played by going down low on one knee. It may have been a slash through the covers or a sweep to leg. But whatever it was, whenever Matthew sank down and made it, a long low 'Ah!' came from many a spectator, and my own little soul thrilled with recognition and delight.

Matthew's career did not last long. He would not practise regularly, he would not pay his subscription to the club. They persevered with him, helping him out with flannels and white shoes for matches. I remember Razac, the Indian, watching him practise one day and shaking his head with deep regret: how could a man who could bat like that so waste his talent? Matthew dropped out early. But he was my first acquaintance with that genus *Britannicus*, a fine batsman, and the impact that he makes on all around him, non-cricketers and cricketers alike. The contrast between Matthew's pitiable existence as an individual and the attitude people had towards him filled my growing mind and has occupied me to this day. I came into personal contact with Matthew. His brother was my playmate and when we got in Matthew's way he glared and shouted at us in a most terrifying manner. My aunts were uncompromising in their judgements of him and yet my grandmother's off-repeated verdict: 'Good for nothing except to play cricket' did not seem right to me. How could an ability to play cricket alone in any sense for Matthew's abominable way of life? Particularly as my grandmother and my aunts were not in any way supporters or followers of the game.

My second landmark was not a person but a stroke, and the maker of it was Arthur Jones. He was a brownish Negro, a medium-sized man, who walked with quick steps and active shoulders. He had a pair

of restless, aggressive eyes, talked quickly and even stammered a little. He wore a white cloth hat when batting, and he used to cut. How he used to cut! I have watched county cricket for weeks on end and seen whole Test matches without seeing one cut such as Jones used to make, and for years whenever I saw one I murmured to myself, 'Arthur Jones!' The crowd was waiting for it, I at my window was waiting for it as soon as I began to play seriously I learnt that Arthur was waiting for it too. When the ball hit down outside the off-stump (and now, I think even when it was straight) Jones lifted himself to his height, up went his bat and he brought it down across the ball as a woodsman puts his axe to a tree. I don't remember his raising the ball, most times it flew past point or between point and third slip, the crowd burst out in another shout and Jones's white cap sped between the wickets.

The years passed. I was in my teens at school, playing cricket, reading cricket, idolizing Thackeray, Burke and Shelley, when one day I came across the following about a great cricketer of the eighteenth century:

It was a study for Phidias to see Beldham rise to strike; the grandeur of the attitude, the settled composure of the look, the piercing lightning of the eye, the rapid glances of the bat, were electrical. Men's hearts throbbed within them, their cheeks turned pale and red. Michael Angelo should have painted him.

This was thrilling enough. I began to tingle.

Beldham was great in every hit, but his peculiar glory was the cut. Here he stood, with no man beside him, the laurel was all his own, it seemed like the cut of a racket. His wrist seemed to turn on springs of the finest steel. He took the ball, as Burke did the House of Commons, between wind and water — not a moment too soon or late. Beldham still survives. . . .

By that time I had seen many fine cutters, one of them, W. St. Hill, never to this day surpassed. But the passage brought back Jones and childhood memories to my mind and anchored him there for good and all. Phidias, Michelangelo, Burke. Greek history had already introduced me to Phidias and the Parthenon; from engravings and reproductions I had already begun a lifelong worship of Michelangelo; and Burke, begun as a school chore, had rapidly become for me the most exciting master of prose in English — I knew already long passages of him by heart. There in the very centre of all this was William Beldham and his cut. I passed over the fact which I noted instantly

that the phrase 'He hit the House just between wind and water' had been used by Burke himself, about Charles Townshend in the speech on American taxation.

The matter was far from finished. Some time later I read a complicated description of the mechanism and timing of the cut by C. B. Fry, his warning that it was a most difficult stroke to master and that even in the hands of its greatest exponents there were periods when it would not work, 'intermittent in its service', as he phrased it. But, he added, with some batsmen it was an absolutely natural stroke, and one saw beautiful cutting by batsmen who otherwise could hardly be called batsmen at all. When I read this I felt an overwhelming sense of justification. Child though I was, I had not been wrong about Jones. Batsman or not, he was one of those beautiful natural cutters. However, I said earlier that the second landmark in my cricketering life was a stroke — and I meant just that — one single stroke.

On an awful rainy day I was confined to my window, Tunapuna CC was batting and Jones was in his best form, that is to say, in nearly every over he was getting up on his toes and cutting away. But the wicket was wet and the visitors were canny. The off-side boundary at one end was only forty yards away, a barbed-wire fence which separated the ground from the police station. Down came a short ball, up went Jones and lashed at it, there was the usual shout, a sudden silence and another shout, not so loud this time. Then from my window I saw Jones walking out and people began to walk away. He had been caught by point standing with his back to the barbed wire. I could not see it from my window and I asked and asked until I was told what had happened. I knew that something out of the ordinary had happened to us who were watching. We had been lifted to the heights and cast down into the depths in much less than a fraction of a second. Countless as are the times that this experience has been repeated, most often in the company of tens of thousands of people, I have never lost the zest of wondering at it and pondering over it.

It is only within very recent years that Matthew Bondman and the cutting of Arthur Jones ceased to be merely isolated memories and fell into place as starting points of a connected pattern. They only appear as starting points. In reality they were the end, the last stones put into place, of a pyramid whose base constantly widened, until it embraced those aspects of social relations, politics and art laid bare when the veil of the temple has been rent in twain as ours has been. Hegel says somewhere that the old man repeats the prayers he repeated as a child,

but now with the experience of a lifetime. Here briefly are some of the experiences of a lifetime which have placed Matthew Bondman and Arthur Jones within a frame of reference that stretches east and west into the receding distance, back into the past and forward into the future.

My inheritance (you have already seen two, Puritanism and cricket) came from both sides of the family and a good case could be made out for predestination, including the position of the house in front of the recreation ground and the window exactly behind the wicket.

My father's father was an emigrant from one of the smaller islands, and probably landed with nothing. But he made his way, and as a mature man worked as a pan-boiler on a sugar estate, a responsible job involving the critical transition of the boiling cane juice from liquid into sugar. It was a post in those days usually held by white men. This meant that my grandfather had raised himself above the mass of poverty, dirt, ignorance and vice which in those far-off days surrounded the islands of black lower middle-class respectability like a sea ever threatening to engulf them. I believe I understand pretty much how the average sixteenth-century Puritan in England felt amidst the decay which followed the dissolution of the monasteries, particularly in the small towns. The need for distance which my aunts felt for Matthew Bondman and his sister was compounded of self-defence and fear. My grandfather went to church every Sunday morning at eleven o'clock wearing in the broiling sun a frock coat, striped trousers and top hat, with his walking stick in hand, surrounded by his family, the underwear of the women crackling with starch. Respectability was not an ideal, it was an armour. He fell grievously ill, the family fortunes declined and the children grew up in unending struggle not to sink below the level of the Sunday-morning top hat and frock coat.

My father took the obvious way out — teaching. He did well and gained a place as a student in the Government Training College, his course comprising history, literature, geometry, algebra and education. Yet Cousin Nancy, who lived a few yards away, told many stories of her early days as a house-slave. She must have been in her twenties when slavery was abolished in 1834. My father got his diploma, but he soon married. My two aunts did sewing and needlework, not much to go by, which made them primmer and sharper than ever, and it was with them that I spent many years of my childhood and youth.

Two doors down the street was Cousin Cudjoe, and a mighty man was he. He was a blacksmith, and very early in life I was allowed to go

and watch him do his fascinating business, while he regaled me with stories of his past prowess at cricket and critical observations on Matthew, Jones and the Tunapuna C.C. He was quite black, with a professional chest and shoulders that were usually scantily covered as he worked his bellows or beat the iron on the forge. Cudjoe told me of his unusual career as a cricketer. He had been the only black man in a team of white men. Wherever these white men went to play he went with them. He was their wicketkeeper and their hitter – a term he used as one would say a fast bowler or an opening bat. When he was keeping he stood close to the wicket and his side needed no longstop for either fast bowling or slow, which must have been quite an achievement in his day and time. But it was as a hitter that he fascinated me. Once Cudjoe played against a team with a famous fast bowler, and it seemed that one centre of interest in the match, if not the great centre, was what would happen when the great fast bowler met the great hitter. Before the fast bowler began his run he held the ball up and shook it at Cudjoe, and Cudjoe in turn held up his bat and shook it at the bowler. The fast bowler ran up and bowled and Cudjoe hit his first ball out of the world. It didn't seem to matter how many he made after that. The challenge and the hit which followed were enough. It was primitive, but as the battle between Hector and Achilles is primitive, and it should not be forgotten that American baseball is founded on the same principle.

At the time I did not understand the significance of Cudjoe, the black blacksmith, being the only coloured man in a white team, that is to say, plantation owners and business or professional men or high government officials. 'They took me everywhere they went – everywhere,' he used to repeat. They probably had to pay for him and also to sponsor his presence when they played matches with other white men. Later I wondered what skill it was, or charm of manner, or both, which gave him that unique position. He was no sycophant. His eyes looked straight into yours, and an ironical smile played upon his lips as he talked, a handsome head on his splendid body. He was a gay lad, Cudjoe, but somehow my aunts did not disapprove of him as they did of Bondman. He was a blood relation, he smiled at them and made jokes and they laughed. But my enduring memory of Cudjoe is of an exciting and charming man in whose life cricket had played a great part.

My father too had been a cricketer in his time, playing on the same ground at which I looked from my window. He gave me a bat and ball

on my fourth birthday and never afterwards was I without them both for long. But as I lived a great deal with my aunts away from home, and they did not play, it was to Cudjoe I went to bowl to me, or to sit in his blacksmith's shop holding my bat and ball and listening to his stories. When I did spend time with my parents my father told me about cricket and his own prowess. But now I was older and my interest became tinged with scepticism, chiefly because my mother often interrupted to say that whenever she went to see him play he was always caught in the long field for very little. What made matters worse, one day when I went to see him play he had a great hit and was caught at long on for seven. I remembered the stroke and knew afterwards that he had lifted his head. Joe Small, the West Indian Test player, was one of the bowlers on the opposite side. However, I was to learn of my father's good cricket in a curious way. When I was about sixteen my school team went to Tunapuna to play a match on that same ground against some of the very men I used to watch as a boy, though by this time Arthur Jones had dropped out. I took wickets and played a good defensive innings. Mr Warner, the warden, a brother of Sir Pelham's, sent for me to congratulate me on my bowling, and some spectators made quite a fuss over me for I was one of them and they had known me as a child wandering around the ground and asking questions.

Two or three of the older ones came up and said, 'Your father used to hit the ball constantly into that dam over there,' and they pointed to an old closed-up well behind the railway line. I was taken by surprise, for the dam was in the direction of extra cover somewhat nearer to mid-off, and a batsman who hit the ball there constantly was no mean stroke-player. But as my father always said, the cares of a wife and family on a small income cut short his cricketing life, as it cut short the career of many a fine player who was quite up to intercolonial standard. I have known intercolonial cricketers who left the West Indies to go to the United States to better their position. Weekes, the left-hander who hit that daring century in the Oval Test in 1939, is one of a sizeable list. And George Headley was only saved for cricket because, born in Panama and living in Jamaica, there was some confusion and delay about his papers when his parents in the United States sent for him. While the difficulties were being sorted out, an English team arrived in Jamaica and Headley batted so successfully that he gave up the idea of going to the United States to study a profession.

West Indian cricket has arrived at maturity because of two factors: the rise in the financial position of the coloured middle class and the high fees paid to players by the English leagues. Of this, the economic basis of West Indian cricket – big cricket so to speak – I was constantly aware, and from early on. One afternoon I was, as usual, watching the Tunapuna CC practise when a man in a black suit walked by on his way to the railway station. He asked for a knock and, surprisingly, pads were handed to him, the batsman withdrew and the stranger went in. Up to that time I had never seen such bating. Though he had taken off his coat, he still wore his high collar, but he hit practically every ball, all over the place. Fast and slow, wherever they came, he had a stroke, and when he stopped and rushed off to catch his train he left a buzz of talk and admiration behind him. I went up to ask who he was and I was told his name was MacDonald Bailey, an old intercolonial player. Later my father told me that Bailey was a friend of his, a teacher, an intercolonial cricketer and a great all-round sportsman. But, as usual, a wife and family and a small income compelled him to give up the game. He is the father of the famous Olympic sprinter. Mr Bailey at times visited my father and I observed him carefully, looking him up and down and all over so as to discover the secret of his athletic skill, a childish habit I have retained to this day.

Perhaps it was all because the family cottage was opposite to the recreation ground, or because we were in a British colony and, being active people, gravitated naturally towards sport. My brother never played any games to speak of, but as a young man he gave some clerical assistance to the secretary of the local Football Association. In time he became the secretary. He took Trinidad football teams all over the West Indies and he was invited to England by the Football Association to study football organization. I met him in the United States trying to arrange for an American soccer team to visit Trinidad. In 1954 he brought the first team from the West Indies to play football in England, and before he left arranged for an English team to visit the West Indies. He has at last succeeded in organizing a West Indies Football Association, of which he is the first secretary.

Even Uncle Cuffe, my father's elder brother, who, like the old man from Bengal, never played cricket at all, was the hero of a family yarn. One day he travelled with an excursion to the other end of the island. Among the excursionists was the Tunapuna CC to play a match with Siparia CC, while the rest of the visitors explored Siparia. Tunapuna was a man short and my father persuaded – nay, begged – Cuffe to fill

the gap, and Cuffe reluctantly agreed. Siparia made forty-odd, not a bad score in those days, and Cuffe asked to have his innings first so that he could get out and go and enjoy himself away from the cricket field. Still wearing his braces and his high collar, he went in first, hit at every ball and by making some thirty runs not out won the match for his side by nine wickets. He quite ruined the game for the others. He had never even practised with the team before and never did afterwards.

The story of my elder aunt, Judith, ends this branch of my childhood days. She was the English Puritan incarnate, a tall, angular woman. She looked upon Matthew Bondman as a child of the devil. But if Matthew had been stricken with a loathsome disease she would have prayed for him and nursed him to the end, because it was her duty. She lost her husband early, but brought up her three children, pulled down the old cottage, replaced it with a modern one and whenever I went to see her fed me with that sumptuousness which the Trinidad Negroes have inherited from the old extravagant plantation owners. Her son grew to manhood, and though no active sportsman himself, once a year invited his friends from everywhere to Tunapuna where they played a festive cricket match. This, however, was merely a preliminary to a great spread which Judith always prepared. One year Judith worked as usual from early morning in preparation for the day, doing everything that was needed. The friends came, the match was played and then all trooped in to eat, hungry, noisy and happy. Judith was serving when suddenly she sat down, saying, 'I am not feeling so well.' She leaned her head on the table. When they bent over her to find out what was wrong she was dead. I would guess that she had been 'not feeling so well' for days, but she was not one to let that turn her aside from doing what she had to do.

I heard the story of her death thousands of miles away. I know that it was the fitting crown to her life, that it signified something to me, above all people, and, curiously enough, I thought it appropriate that her death should be so closely associated with a cricket match. Yet she had never taken any particular interest. She or my grandmother or my other aunt would come in from the street and say, 'Matthew made fifty-five,' or 'Arthur Jones is still batting,' but that was all. Periodically I pondered over it.

My grandfather on my mother's side, Josh Rudder, was also an immigrant, from Barbados, and also Protestant. I knew him well. He used to claim that he was the first coloured man to become an engine

driver on the Trinidad Government Railway. That was some seventy years ago. Before that the engineers were all white men, that is to say, men from England, and coloured men could rise no higher than fireman. But Josh had had a severe training. He came from Barbados at the age of sixteen, which must have been somewhere around 1868. He began as an apprentice in the shed where the new locomotives were assembled and the old ones repaired, and he learnt the business from the ground up. Then he would go out on odd jobs and later he became a regular fireman on the engines between San Fernando and Princes Town. This proved to be a stroke of luck. His run was over a very difficult piece of track and when the white engine driver retired, or more probably died suddenly, there arose the question of getting someone who understood its special difficulties. That was the type of circumstance in those days which gave the local coloured man his first opportunity, and Josh was appointed. He took his job seriously and, unless something had actually broken, whenever his engine stopped he refused to have it towed into the shed but went under and fixed it himself.

Josh was a card. In 1932 I went to say goodbye before I left for England. He was nearing eighty and we had lunch surrounded by the results of his latest marriage, some six or seven children ranging from sixteen years to about six. After lunch he put me through my paces. I had been writing cricket journalism in the newspapers for some years and had expressed some casual opinions, I believe, on the probable composition of the West Indies team to visit England in 1933. Josh expressed disagreement with my views and I took him lightly at first. But although in all probability he hadn't seen a cricket match for some thirty years, it soon turned out that he had read practically every article I had written and remembered them; and as he had read the other newspapers and also remembered those, I soon had to get down to it, as if I were at a selection-committee meeting. Apart from half a century, the only difference between us that afternoon was that in his place I would have had the quoted papers to hand, all marked up in pencil.

I had never seen nor heard of any racial or national consciousness in Josh. He was a great favourite with everybody, particularly with the white men, managers, engineers and other magnates of the sugar estates. They often travelled between San Fernando and Princes Town on his train and always came up to talk to him. In fact, whenever one of them was talking to Josh, and my mother was anywhere near, Josh

was very insistent on her coming up to be introduced, to her own considerable embarrassment and probably to theirs as well. Josh, after all, was a man of inferior status and fifty years ago you did that sort of thing only when you couldn't avoid it. Josh, however, here as elsewhere, was acting with his usual exuberance. And yet there was more to Josh than met the eye.

One Sunday afternoon near the end of the century he was sitting in the gallery of his house in Princes Town when he noticed, from certain peculiarities in the whistles and the smoke from the chimney, that the engines of one of the big sugar-estate factories had failed. Whenever this took place it caused a general crisis. During the season the factories ground came often twenty hours a day. The cane was cut sometimes miles away and piled on to little open trucks which ran on rails to the factory and emptied on to the moving belt which took it to the grinders. Once the cane was cut, if it was not ground within a certain time, the quality of the juice deteriorated. So that if the big engines stopped and were not repaired pretty quickly the whole process was thrown out of gear, and if the break continued the cutters for miles around had to be signalled to stop cutting, and they sat around and waited for hours. I have worked on a sugar estate and the engineers, usually Scotsmen, walked around doing nothing for days; but as soon as there was the slightest sign of anything wrong the tension was immediately acute. The manager himself, if not an engineer, was usually a man who understood something about engines. There were always one or two coloured foremen who had no degrees and learnt empirically, but who knew their particular engines inside out. All these worked frantically, like men on a wrecked ship. And if the engine stayed dead too long engineers from other factories around all came hurrying up in order to help. Whenever she (as they called the machinery) came to a stop, and the stop lasted for any length of time, the news spread to all the people in the neighbourhood, and it was a matter of universal excitement and gossip until she started off again.

Well, this afternoon Josh sat in his gallery, knowing pretty well what was going on, when suddenly an open carriage-and-pair drew up in front of the house. He recognized it, for it belonged to the manager of the factory who used to drive it to and from the railway station. The groom jumped down and came in and Josh knew what he wanted before he spoke.

Mr. — has asked you to come round at once,' said the groom. 'He has sent his carriage for you.'

'All right,' said Josh, 'I'll come.'

He drove over the few miles to the factory, and there they were, the usual assembly of engineers, foremen and visitors, by this time baffled and exhausted, while the factory workers sat around in the yard doing nothing, and in the centre the distracted manager. When Josh drove in everyone turned to him as if he were the last hope, though few could have believed that Josh would be able to get her going.

Now, on his way to the factory Josh may have dug up from his tenacious memory some half-forgotten incident of an engine which would not go, or he may have come to the conclusion that if all of these highly trained and practised engineers were unable to discover what was wrong the probability was that they were overlooking some very simple matter that was under their very noses. Whatever it was, Josh knew what he was about. When the manager invited him to enter the engine room and, naturally, was coming in with him (with all the others crowding behind) Josh stopped and, turning to all of them, said very firmly, 'I would like to go in alone.' The manager looked at him in surprise, but, probably thinking that Josh was one of those who didn't like people around when he was working, and anxious to do anything which might get the engines going again, he agreed. He turned round, told the others to stand back and Josh entered the engine room alone. No one will ever know exactly what Josh did in there, but within two minutes he was out again and he said to the astonished manager, 'I can't guarantee anything, sir, but try and see if she will go now.' The foreman rushed inside, and after a few tense minutes the big wheels started to revolve again.

An enthusiastic crowd, headed by the manager, surrounded Josh, asking him what it was that had performed the miracle. But the always exuberant Josh grew silent for once and refused to say. He never told them. He never told anybody. The obstinate old man wouldn't even tell me. But when I asked him that day, 'Why did you do it?' he said what I had never heard before. 'They were white men with all their MICE and RICE and all their big degrees, and it was their business to fix it. I had to fix it for them. Why should I tell them?'

In my bag already packed was the manuscript of what the next year was published as *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*. I recognized then that Josh was not only my physical but also my spiritual grandfather. The family strains persist. I continue to write about cricket and self-government. Some time ago I saw in a West Indian newspaper that the very week that final decisions were being taken about West

Indian Federation in Jamaica, my younger brother was also in Jamaica, putting finishing touches to the West Indian Football Association. A few years ago he was appointed the chief accountant of Josh's Trinidad Government Railway – as far as I know, the first coloured man to hold that post.

Josh was no Puritan, but when his first wife died early it was noteworthy that he sent my mother to live with some maiden ladies, Wesleys, who kept a small establishment which they called a convent. Convent it was. As far as I could gather, she was not taught much scholastically, but she gained or developed two things there. We were Anglicans, but from these Wesleys my mother learnt a moral nonconformism of a depth and rigidity which at times far exceeded Judith's. She was a tall handsome woman of elegant carriage and beautiful clothes, but her principles were such that she forbade my playing any sort of game on Sundays, or even going to hear the band play. I was fascinated by the calypso singers and the sometimes ribald ditties they sang in their tents during carnival time. But, like many of the black middle class, to my mother a calypso was a matter for n'èr-do-wells and at best the common people. I was made to understand that the road to the calypso tent was the road to hell, and there were always plenty of examples of hell's inhabitants to whom she could point. She was not unkind, and before I grew up I understood her attitude better when some neighbours of ours defied the elementary conventions to such a degree that she and my father had to pack my young sister off to stay with our aunts until the temperature cooled down somewhat.

There was, however, another side to my mother which she brought from her convent. She was a reader, one of the most tireless I have ever known. Usually it was novels, any novel. Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Hall Caine, Stevenson, Mrs Henry Wood, Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Braeme, Shakespeare (she had her own copy which I read to pieces), Balzac, Nathaniel Hawthorne, a woman called Mrs E. D. E. N. Southworth, Penmore Cooper, Nat Gould, Charles Garvice, anything and everything, and as she put them down I picked them up. I remember her warning me not to read books by one Victoria Cross, but I found the books hidden in one of her dressers and read them just the same.

My mother's taste in novels was indiscriminate, but I learnt discrimination from my father. He was no reader, except for books connected with his teaching, but as a man of some education he knew

who, if not what, the classics were. Our bookseller was an itinerant who came once a fortnight carrying a huge pack on his shoulders. He heaved it off and spread his wares, the *Review of Reviews*, *Tit-Bits*, *Comic Cuts*, *The Strand Magazine*, *Pearson's Magazine*, sixpenny copies of the classics. 'The Pickwick Papers' my father would say, taking up the book. 'By Charles Dickens. A great book, my boy. Read it.' And he would buy it. If he took me to a department store he would do the same. And so I began to have my own collection of books as well as my own bat and balls. But in those magazines, particularly *Pearson's*, appeared, periodically, cricketing stories. There would be also articles on the great cricketers of the day, W. G. Grace, Ranjitsinhji, Victor Trumper, C. B. Fry. My father held forth on W. G. Grace and Ranjitsinhji, but he knew little of the others. I found out for myself. I knew about them before I knew the great cricketers of the island. I read about them from paper to paper, from magazine to magazine. When we moved into Port of Spain, the capital, I read two daily papers and on Sundays the green *Sporting Chronicle* and the red *Sporting Opinion*. I made clippings and filed them. It served no purpose whatever; I had never seen nor heard of anyone doing the like. I spoke to no one about it and no one spoke to me.

Side by side with this obsession was another - Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. My mother had an old copy with a red cover. I had read it when I was about eight, and of all the books that passed through that house this one became my Homer and my Bible. I read it through from the first page to the last, then started again, read to the end and started again. Whenever I finished a new book I turned to my *Vanity Fair*. For years I had no notion that it was a classic novel. I read it because I wanted to.

So there I was, way out in the West Indies, before I was ten, playing games and running races like other little boys, but almost in secret devoting my immense energies to the accumulation of facts and statistics about Grace and Ranjitsinhji, and reading *Vanity Fair* on the average once every three months. What drew me to it? I don't know, a phrase which will appear often in this book. As I dig into my memory I recall that the earliest books I could reach from the window sill when I had nothing to do, or rain stopped the cricket or there was no cricket, were biblical. There was a series of large brightly coloured religious pamphlets telling the story of Jacob and the Ladder, Ruth and Naomi and so forth. There was a large book called *The Throne of the House of David*. One day somebody must have told me, or I may have discovered

it from listening to the lessons being read in church, that these stories could be found in the many Bibles that lay about the house, including the large one with the family births and deaths. Detective-like, I tracked down the originals and must have warmed the souls of my aunts and grandmother as they saw me poring over the Bible. That, I had heard often enough, was a good book. It fascinated me. When the parson read the lessons I strove to remember the names and numbers, second chapter of the Second Book of Kings, the Gospel according to St Matthew, and so on, every Sunday morning. Revd Allen had a fine voice and was a beautiful reader. I would go home and search and read half aloud to myself. (In school I was still fooling about with Standards 1 or 2: 'Johnny's father had a gun and went shooting in the forest.') Somewhere along the way I must have caught the basic rhythms of English prose. My reading was chiefly in the Old Testament and I may have caught, too, some of the stern attitude to life which was all around me, tempered, but only tempered, by family kindness.

I must have found the same rhythms and the same moralism when I came to *Vanity Fair*. Certainly of the lords and ladies and much of the life described, as a West Indian boy of eight, I hadn't the slightest idea. When I later told people how and when I had read the book some were sceptical and even derisive. It was not to me an ordinary book. It was a refuge into which I withdrew. By the time I was fourteen I must have read the book over twenty times and I used to confound boys at school by telling them to open it anywhere, read a few words and I would finish the passage, if not in the exact words at least close enough. I can still do it, though not as consistently and accurately as before.

Me and my clippings and magazines on W. G. Grace, Victor Trumper and Ranjitsinhji, and my *Vanity Fair* and my puritanical view of the world. I look back at the little eccentric and would like to have listened to him, nod affirmatively and pat him on the shoulder. A British intellectual long before I was ten, already an alien in my own environment among my own people, even my own family. Somehow from around me I had selected and fastened on to the things that made a whole. As will soon appear, to that little boy I owe a debt of gratitude.

I find it strange, and the more I think of it the stranger I find it. If the reader does not find it strange then let him consider what has happened since.

When I was ten I went to the Government secondary school, the Queen's Royal College, where opportunities for playing cricket and

reading books were thrown wide open to me. When I was fifteen, the editor of the school magazine, a master, asked me to write something for it. Such was my fanaticism that I could find nothing better to write about than an account of an Oxford and Cambridge cricket match played nearly half a century before, the match in which Cobden for Cambridge dismissed three Oxford men in one over to win the match by two runs.

I retold it in my own words as if it were an experience of my own, which indeed it was. The choice was more logical than my next juvenile publication. At the end of term, during the English composition examination, I was very sleepy, probably from reading till the small hours the night before. I looked at the list of subjects, the usual stuff, 'A Day in the Country', etc., etc., including, however, 'The Novel as an Instrument of Reform'. Through the thorough grounding in grammar given me by my father and my incessant reading, I could write a good school composition on anything, and from the time I was about eight my English composition papers usually had full marks, with once every three or four weeks a trifling mistake. I sat looking at the list, not knowing which to choose. Bored with the whole business, I finally wrote each subject on a piece of paper, rolled them, shook them together and picked out one. It was 'The Novel as an Instrument of Reform'. For me it seemed just a subject like any other. But perhaps I was wrong. Literature? Reform? I may have been stimulated. But I drew on my knowledge and my long-ingrained respect for truth and justice, and I must have done very well, for at the beginning of the following term the English master called me and surprised me by telling me that he proposed to print the 'very fine' essay in the school magazine. Still more to my astonishment, when the magazine appeared I was constantly stopped in the street by old boys and the local literati, who congratulated me on what they called 'this remarkable essay'. I prudently kept the circumstances of its origin to myself.

As I say, those were the first two printed articles. Nearly forty years have passed, and very active and varied years they have been. In the course of them I have written a study of the French Revolution in San Domingo and a history of the Communist International. I went to the United States in 1938, stayed there for fifteen years and never saw a cricket match, though I used to read the results of Tests and county matches which the New York Times publishes every day during the season. In 1940 came a crisis in my political life. I rejected the Trotskyist version of Marxism and set about to re-examine and reorganize my

view of the world, which was (and remains) essentially a political one. It took more than ten years, but by 1952 I once more felt my feet on solid ground, and in consequence I planned a series of books. The first was published in 1953, a critical study of the writings of Herman Melville as a mirror of our age, and the second is this book on cricket. The first two themes, 'The Novel as an Instrument of Reform' and 'Cobden's Match', have reappeared in the same close connection after forty years. Only after I had chosen my themes did I recognize that I had completed a circle. I discovered that I had not arbitrarily or by accident worshipped at the shrine of John Bunyan and Aunt Judith, of W. G. Grace and Matthew Bondman, of *The Throne of the House of David* and *Vanity Fair*. They were a trinity, three in one and one in three, the Gospel according to St Matthew, Matthew being the son of Thomas, otherwise called Arnold of Rugby.

Laura Thompson

The High Life

Derby night at White City was hot with atmosphere. I feel sorry for Wimbledon, which took over the running of the race in 1985, because no one who ever went to the Derby at White City thinks that anywhere else can *really* stage it. 'Ah,' we say, 'the atmosphere, the elegance, that a terrible day when they closed the place down – bastards – nothing's ever been the same since, has it?' White City connected the Derby with the past in a way that Wimbledon can never do. The racecard was engraved with signifiers of tradition: the trophies named by Major Brown after barely remembered champion dogs of the 1930s, the Fret Not Stakes, the Long Hop Chase, or after the little Olympic runner, the Dorando Marathon. When the dogs paraded around the track before the race, their bodies, iridescent beneath the light, were streaked and shot and shimmering with the ghosts of other greyhounds: Mick the Miller, Pigalle Wonder, dogs who in some unimaginable time had been not myths but had paraded this track, had run this Derby, had inhabited this here-and-now.

White City rose to the occasion of the Derby in the way that those rare greyhounds do. Sporting occasions sometimes feel like a quest for atmosphere: one formulates excitement, watches Mexican waves through a haze of indifference, finally abnegates oneself from all that showing off and self-expression. But some events one falls into head first, helplessly and drunkenly. One knows that they are the real thing. One knows that all present are unified by a tacit comprehension of the significance of the occasion. They do not have to tell themselves that the Derby is an event, they do not have to try to make themselves more important than the Derby in order to make it an event; they *know* that the Derby is what matters, and this knowledge, this willingness to subsume themselves into the event, makes the event significant. These mysteries, these myths, these great traditions, great occasions: one cannot partake of their power by enveloping them in bear-hugs, by French kissing them, by dancing around on top of them and hoping that other people are watching this close congress. The only way in which to partake of them is to submit oneself to them, to be humble with them.

And so, entering White City on Derby night, one knew that one was both partaking of, and contributing to, an event. One was an actor upon a stage, playing a part, swelling a procession, watching one's own performance, watching the piece of theatre that it was helping to create. To attend was to feel the ties that bind: all the dog world was here, celebrating the night on which the greatest greyhounds ran in the greatest race at the greatest stadium; all bowed down before all that greatness. All *wanted* to bow down before it. Their eyes glistened proudly with subservience to the occasion.

Derby night in the restaurant meant black tie and, at the end of June, with the sun flooding painfully through the vast glass frontage, the early part of the evening was always cruelly hot. My first Derby was in 1976; on that night the last part of the evening was hot as well, though in a different, less evil, more exhausting way. The drought and the heatwave had a fearsome hold on the White City restaurant.

But I had wanted to go to that 1976 Derby so much. Since 1960 the race had been shown on television, for as far back as I can remember on *Sportsnight*, when lights like creamy suns melted and burned behind a beaming Harry Carpenter – he knew it was an event – but for some reason I didn't see the 1975 final. Perhaps it was ousted from the television by a friendly football match – England versus the Fierce Islands or some such, but at about seven the next morning I was in my parents' bedroom demanding a result. 'If I give you five guesses, you won't get it,' said my father, which was ridiculous, because it was a five-dog race and anyway he'd given it away with that answer. Clearly, the dog that could not win had won. 'Tartan Khan!' I said, bouncing around gleefully, asking for details of starting prices (25/1), did my parents back the dog (no), how had he won the race (easily), what had happened to all the other dogs that were supposedly so much better than he (they weren't). The romance, the *wit*, of this win by Tartan Khan strengthened my desire for complicity in this occasion.

The 1975 final had been thought to belong to Myrtown, the odds-on favourite who had run second in 1974, but these races are not run to a preordained scenario, they are shockingly, staggeringly of the here-and-now. And this here-and-now had been shocking and staggering. Only one other dog has ever won the Derby at such long odds (Duleek Dandy won in 1960 at 25/1). If Tartan Khan had been the invention of a storyteller, one would have dismissed him as a foolish fantasy; he had been third in practically every round of the competition, and at the beginning of 1975, White City had asked his trainer to take the dog

away from them when he lost eight races in a row. He scarcely won more than twice in his whole racing career. However, the two races that he won were the final of the Derby and the final of the St Leger.

After the first of these wins, every dog man in the country quested for an explanation for the sudden explosion of greatness from this mysterious greyhound. Eventually one was found. Tartan Khan's trainer had, prior to the final, walked him regularly by the railway line at Cheddington (where the Great Train Robbery took place), believing that the noise of the trains would prepare him for the noise of the crowd. Certainly on Derby night the dog had nerves as loose and easy as Ronald Biggs's.

The noise of the crowd, what is called in the dog world the 'Derby roar', does terrorize some greyhounds. It is for them like hitting a wall of sound, built by gamblers. As the dogs parade the track, the wall is being laid in place, brick by brick, welded together by the hunger of the crowd for the occasion that is now almost upon them, oh so near, they can feel it coming, they are being encircled ever more tightly by the waves of its energy, in a few minutes, in a minute, in a few seconds they will hear the words – 'and now the hare's running' – and the encircling waves of energy will constrict them in a vice from which the only release is to shout and shout. When the hare passes by the traps open the individual voices of the crowd become one. When the traps open the dogs hit the wall of sound. Some of them balk at it in fear. Some of them crash through it like heroes. Tartan Khan was such a hero.

And the next year I got to the Derby, and sat in one of my ballerina dresses, in heat that beat as intensely as in a summer garden at midday, encircled by waves of energy, my heart jumping a tiny chasm every time I looked at my watch and saw that 10.45 p.m. this evening was becoming first a possibility, then an inevitability. How well I remember that evening – not clearly, but powerfully. What I remember are the pink tables, the bread rolls like big shells, the curls of butter set in ice, the angled sashay of waiters with one arm aloft; the buzz of dog talk made unnaturally electric by the vibrating timbre of each individual voice; the quality of the early evening light outside, promising such a night, such a summer; the quality of the air inside, soggy with heat, watery with electric light, bright, heavy, filmy, trailing cigarette smoke, the slow building of the wall of sound; the slow encroachment of the floodlights upon the sun; Mutt's Silver, the 6/1 winner of the Derby final, dropping to the ground like a boneless puppy and rolling luxuriously upon his pristine victor's coat; the occasion playing upon

the terraces, the bars, the restaurant and The Box as if it were a strong and gentle hand, strumming the strings of a guitar and leaving them separate, tensile, reverberating and harmonious.

When it was there, it seemed as if it would be there for ever. I regret intensely the fact that I scarcely bothered to go to White City after my last Derby there in 1980; but I know that if I had never gone there at all then it would be almost impossible to write this book, ignorant as I would be of this place whose high definition, whose easy grandeur, whose self-possession and self-assurance were at the heart of greyhound racing: the proud, and now buried, heart. Nor should I have in my possession the two vital codewords which can unite the most disparate band of dog people. Say that you went to White City, that you saw the Derby there, that you owned greyhounds there – and that's it, you are in. At the sound of the two codewords, hardened dog men relent and relax. Understanding, of a shared past, of shared priorities, flashes dimly but indstructibly. One day I may meet a dog man who does not respond to the code: 'I always hated the bloody place,' he will say, 'give me Walthamstow any day.' But he will be as rare a creature as a Derby winner. White City has become an icon, a temple, a touchstone. To the dog men its obliteration caused a pain as inexpressibly deep as the razing of Lord's would cause to a cricket lover; except that Lord's would be mourned and eulogized by a world beyond cricket, and White City never has been. White City was the world, but those who never went there never knew it.