

## ***“A Tingling Catch”: A century of NZ cricket poems 1864-2009***

**Edited by Mark Pirie.**  
**Wellington: HeadworX, 2010.**  
**RRP \$34. 99.**

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**Y**ou’ve got to hand it to Mark Pirie. Yet again, he has shown outstanding entrepreneurship in bringing out the first anthology of New Zealand cricket poems. As the blurb suggests, this book includes poems from 1864 to the present, grouped under categories of “Plays”, “Players”, “Matches and Tours”, “Songs, Satires and Parodies”, “Watchers and Listeners”, “Boys’ Songs”, and “Social Members”. The game commences, not with the toss of a coin, but with an appropriately poetic “Foreword” from New Zealand cricket writer, Don Neely – first read by him at the launch of *Men in White* in 1986. Here are a few lines from it, just to set the scene:

it is as tangible as a new scoop-bat and as intangible as a warm sunny morning;  
exciting as a full-throated appeal, serene as an umpire’s answer.  
It is competition, composure, memory, anticipation.

It is appropriate, I think, that cricket should be the sport to be honoured by the first sporting anthology in the New Zealand setting. Cricket has always had a certain mystique and a high degree of cultural resonance. Women were playing cricket before they were playing rugby and yes, despite the heading “Boys’ Songs”, there are references to women’s cricket in this book and also poems by women.

English Departments could do worse than have a copy of this book in the departmental library, despite the fact that many of the poems here are somewhat leaden, with some having the sense of having been written to order to flesh out the pages of the anthology. However, there are riches here also and some gems which Pirie has discovered and made available to readers. He has also done readers a great service in the various contextualising annotations he has made to poems referencing this or that player or match.

Let me share a few thoughts that occurred to me as I read this book. Firstly, there is the interesting spin (the obvious metaphor) that is found in historical poems in relation to what I might call the “commonwealth” theme. There are some fascinating poems to be found related to this in the section “Matches and Tours”. G. P. Williams, termed by Pirie a “colonial” poet, has a poem about the final day of “England v. Australia”, a match played at the MCG and won by England thus allowing them to win the Ashes. Here are the final four lines:

Hurrah! For the winning and losing team –  
Australians are English in all but the name;  
In fondness for cricket we’re both the same.  
Here’s to the noble old English game!

How would a post-colonial critic deal with this??! Even more fascinating, from a politico-cultural point of view, is Thomas Bracken's poem, "Sons of the giant islands of the South", read by the author at a reception at Dunedin's Queen Theatre in 1891 to welcome the Australian touring team (which beat Otago by 44 runs, but that is unremarkable). What *is* remarkable is the following sentiment of Bracken's:

Ye are the heralds of those coming days  
 When on one flag one starry cross shall blaze  
 And float above the sunny lands that rest  
 In peaceful beauty on Pacific's breast...

By anyone's standard, this is awful verse, but the idea is remarkable. We already have an inkling that Bracken views Australasia as a single political entity in the title. Poms, Aussies and Kiwis are all happy brothers under the skin! And thank God for cricket, the gluey icing on the cake (or pavlova) which holds us all together.

What actually is a cricket poem? Well, most obviously, you'd think that a cricket poem was in the first place a cricket narrative, telling the story of a brave cricket deed (as per Mark Pirie's poem about Bert Sutcliffe's heroic stand against South Africa in 1953 when he returned from hospital, head bandaged, to play the innings of his life) or sharing a feeling about some aspect of the game. But there are poems here where cricket is very much the backdrop, part of the *mise-en-scène* where something far more significant is going on.

Probably my favourite poem in the book is David Mitchell's "gasometer/ponsonby". (He's up against well-known poets such as Kevin Ireland, Brian Turner, Denis Glover, Murray Edmond, Elizabeth Smither and David Eggleton, by the way). Mitchell has quite a presence in this book. He is the most significant cricketer/poet in our little pantheon. And he is the one person who has both written a poem *about* cricket in this book and has had a poem written about *him*, i.e. Ron Riddell's "Poet & Cricketer". Mitchell was no mean batsman and a stalwart of the Grafton Club, which has its headquarters at Victoria Park in Auckland. The "gasometer" in his title is both a literal reference to a nearby gas tank, but also a suggestion that this is a poem that is going to exploit metre. And it does:

down where the gaswerkes onlie rose  
 blows high or low on college hill  
 & underneath the oak boughs there  
 where sunlight & where time stand still  
 3 gummy old dags were wont to greet  
 with purple meths, new winter's ill...

The cricket enacted on the Victoria Park green, of which Mitchell was undoubtedly a participant, is background to their story, which can only be speculated on by the writer:

reclining on a council bench  
 or clustered, stricken, on the grass  
 saluting late summer's cricketers  
 with plastic bottle and paper glass...

The poem which follows is a reminder of how well Mitchell could write, even when he is in some ways using mock heroic to take the literary piss:

o was it bhudda, was it allah  
 was it world war three?  
 or just ian chappell  
 & dennis lillee?

fooles alone and poets would ask  
 would make request  
 the question begs: the beggars quest  
 the singers fail; the toilers rest  
 & the sun goes down  
 on their final test

& all this summer though I have kept watch  
 each Saturday when stumps are drawn  
 I have not seen them reappear  
 & the groundsman says simply  
 "the meffos? they're gone  
 ...gone."

In short, among the doggerel and dross, you cannot fail to win the toss, and getting this will prove no loss, nor weight you like some albatross.

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