



## A Personal View by Colin Dexter

*"I'm sometimes asked whether Morse is like me at all. Well, not in one respect, that's for sure - for the Chief Inspector cannot abide the game of cricket. To redress the balance, then, here are a few inconsequential paragraphs taken from a host of precious memories."*

My mother and father (thank goodness!) were both heavy smokers, and thus my early years were bountifully blessed with great numbers of cigarette cards. At the age of nine or so I had almost the full set of the Players cricketers series, and how inordinately I rejoiced in reading and re-reading the brief biographical data of men with such memorable forenames as Denis Charles Scott"; such surnames as "Badcock". Badcock? All right! A Trumper or a Bradman he may not have been, but Badcock (Tasmania and NSW) was a member of my personal pantheon in 1938.

My father used to bowl to me along the concrete strips of our backyard in Stamford, Lincolnshire. He was not a demon, I know that - but he had met "Loll" Larwood in the late 20s; had his autograph to boot! He could bowl a tweaky leg-break too - albeit underarm - and it was in those years, while my elder brother fostered an ambition to play one of the Mozart piano-concertos in the Albert Hall, that I myself was amassing many a large score as I coped with the wiles of Fleetwood-Smith and Bill O'Reilly.

I'm not exactly sure when the Wisden for 1938 came into my proud possession, but as a single book only Bleak House, perhaps, has given me longer hours of pure enjoyment. Dozens and dozens of times I read through the Gloucestershire v Whomsoever scorecards and commentaries, and revelled in the magisterial (virtually inevitable) achievements of a man printed as "Mr W.R. Hammond". Ye gods! What a glorious look - what a glorious stature had that name for me!

### **A Promising Pupil**

In 1940 I went to the local grammar school and tried very hard, though unsuccessfully, to shine at the great game. We were called by our surnames, with a number appended if there were more than one of the clan. My brother was Dexter (i); I was Dexter (ii). Now the pinnacle of my cricketing glory at school was being made captain of the Under Fourteen XI; and one of the team was a spindly, blonde-headed little lad called Smith (vii) - aged 10. In our first match we made 92 runs - about double the normal tally, with Smith (vii) scoring 40 n.o. His initials were MJK.

It was in 1946, my last year but one at school, that three of us from the Classical Sixth played hookey and went up by train to see England v India at Lord's. The same Mr W.R. Hammond - now a vast, overweight figure - stood throughout the morning session at first slip, touching the ball on not one single occasion. Then, with the Indians all out, we watched the two England openers accumulate the sixty-odd runs required for victory, with high-elbowed, aristocratic professionalism. I had a new hero. The one from Yorkshire. Hutton, L.

### **Gods or Mortals?**

But heroes are difficult things to live with. Each evening I used to look down the Stop Press column of the Leicester Mercury to find the news of the Yorkshire innings. What a joy if the score was 1 50-0! But if therein I were to read, say, 1 5-1? Then fearfully certain would I be that it was the great man himself who had been dismissed. So vulnerable our heroes are! As the incomparable Cardus was later to tell me: "A boy believes his heroes are gods, yet at the same time he has no real confidence in them."

So, on to 1948 - when I went to the first three days of the Oval Test to watch the greatest cricketing side (surely?) to have come to these shores in my lifetime. I saw Bradman's famous duck (those last three words to be used in one of my books as a crossword clue to "Donald") - and I rejoiced exceedingly when Hollis bowled him, second ball. How very strange! The greatest batsman (surely?) ever born: and this the only time I would ever see him! It was all rather like a man who goes to see the world's greatest striptease artiste, and who applauds madly when just at the erotically climactic moment there is a power-failure, and the lights go out.

But perhaps such a reaction was understandable. So often in my youth had I risen very early from my bed to listen to the wireless commentary from Australia (usually, around 400-2: with Barnes 1 60 n.o.; Bradman 200 n.o.). How wonderful to have been a young Australian in those bygone years! And yet... and yet my own great day of triumph was drawing closer, ever closer: that agonizing utterly intolerable day, in 1953, when Edrich and Compton slowly hit off the runs at The Oval to win the Ashes for England for the first time since before the war.

### **A Side of Character**

By 1953 I had finished my years at Cambridge, where I spent so many happy days at Fenners. Nowadays it is comparatively rare for a member of the Oxford or Cambridge XIs to squeeze into any county side. But what a side CUCC could field in the late 40s, early 50s! What about this for an XI? Alexander, Bailey, Dewes, Doggart, Goonesena, Insole, Marlar, McCarthy, Sheppard, Subba Row, Warr... And you realise (of course you do) that I've left P.B.H. May out of the side, in my view the greatest of England's purely post-war batsmen.

Between the late 60s and the mid-80s I had the huge pleasure of going each year to the first two days of the Oval Test - and that with my lifetime's greatest friend. We agreed about so many things, and most certainly about the merits of drinking cask-conditioned ale whilst watching any game of cricket. The only thing we argued about - and that most vehemently - was I.T. Botham. My kind and foolish comrade (a Gloucestershire man) would assert frequently and forcefully that this latter-day upstart was wholly unworthy to lace up Walter's boots. Yet, for myself, I shall be eternally grateful for those two miracles that Botham wrought in 1981. (Was any test captain ever quite so luckless as poor Kim Hughes? For Willis worked a further miracle, remember?) Although I find it extremely difficult to believe in the existence of the Almighty, I was almost persuaded, in that particular series, to acknowledge the cosmic power of earnest and repeated prayer.

### **A Dream Come True**

So many memories... including that of Procter taking a hat-trick of lbws, against Yorkshire, at the lovely Cheltenham Festival... Yet if I were forced to settle for just one day of the great lost days, I would plump for the opening day of the England v Australia Test at The Oval (again!) in 1985. Often, in my youth, I had dreamed the details of the scores between these two inveterate foes. But seldom had the cast of my temperament permitted me much optimism. Something like that 400-2, at the end of the first day, might well have been the order of things for Australia; but not, not for England - not even in my wildest dreams. Yet that's what it most gloriously was - well, almost was - with Gooch and Gower batting virtually all that livelong, infinitely sweet and satisfying day.

### **Fame is the Spur**

The perceptive reader cannot have failed to notice that no mention has hitherto been made of the author's own exemplary deeds on the cricket field. So be it! To be honest, they weren't all that bad. But they weren't very good, either; and any epitaph upon my exploits, such as they were, could never elicit much more, alas, than the passing tribute of a sigh. But I did have my ambitions. And when a few years ago my publisher asked me what these were (Oxford, after all, is the home of lost causes) I suggested two: crossing swords with Mrs T. in parliamentary debate; and opening the batting for England. The first of these can now, perhaps, no longer be fulfilled. The second also (you may think?) has similarly disappeared. But I am not so sure. Having witnessed, with anguish, our recent batting performances in Australia, I wish it to be known to the England selectors that I am still available, waiting patiently in the wings.

Two years ago in London I was asked my name - for a lapel-badge. When I replied "Dexter", the man checking the list asked whether I was related to the great Ted. I sadly shook my head, upon which all interest in me was immediately lost. It was in the lift going up to my meeting that the truth about this 'fame' business suddenly hit me. If in a year or so's time Mr ER. Dexter goes to a similar meeting and is asked whether he is related to Colin Dexter - then, indeed, I shall have made it. Not yet though. Just like my England cap.