

The Aestheticization Of The Don*

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Don Bradman's favourite cricket photograph of himself was a cover drive he made as part of his world record innings of 452 not out. Although he scored many runs with the shot it was not his signature stroke. Primarily a back foot player he destroyed bowlers more often with violent pull shots and deft late cuts. Bradman was a master batsman who imposed his will on bowlers but was never a pretty player in the sense that Victor Trumper had been before him; like his contemporaries Alan Kippax, Archie Jackson and Stan McCabe; or like Mark Waugh in recent years. Bradman grew to cricket prominence in the shadow of Trumper and laboured by comparison with the great Victor no matter how many runs he made. It was only many years after his own retirement in 1948 that more aesthetic images of him began to appear.

Aesthetics has been defined as 'the philosophical study of beauty and taste'. The term was first used to discuss art from about 1750 but later extended to music, literature, architecture and associated with objects and play activity. Aesthetics in sport has long been discussed and there is a curious paradox which exists in those sports which have a direct purpose such as scoring a goal, a try, making runs, hitting a target, taking a wicket, and so on. The *scoring* of the goal etc. not *how* it is scored is paramount although such pleasure is often transitory. The memories that last are often associated with dramatic moments and graceful movement.

Bradman was always careful about his own image but what do I mean by aestheticization? Two things: a process by which Don Bradman is made to appear a more aesthetic batsman than he was; and a process to which he may have contributed.

Intelligence and Aesthetics in Cricket

At the height of the Bodyline series in January 1933 the brilliant cricket analyst Dr Eric Barbour wrote a perceptive article for the *Sydney Mail* on cricket psychology and developed an argument that cricket was a 'more serious', 'more business-like', 'less happy-go-lucky game' than it had been at the beginning of the century.

Barbour also discussed cricket intelligence which he saw as embracing ‘perceptivity of judgement, the faculty of noticing important details and not forgetting them’. He believed that the perfect cricketer’s brain functioned more rapidly than normal and he wrote that ‘the Ranjitsinhjis, the Trumpers, and the Bradmans of cricket not only see the ball earlier, but they interpret what they see, and translate it into action more quickly than others’, an early and deep understanding of information processing.

Barbour stated that the greatest mentality that he had ever seen on a cricket field was possessed by Bradman. Bradman was part of a trio with Ranji and Trumper at the top of the batting hierarchy. Yet while all were unorthodox, Ranji and Trumper had style while Bradman did not consider himself in that light. When I first interviewed Sir Donald Bradman in the early 1980s he took me into his billiard room where there were two large pictures of cricketers—Ranji and Trumper no less.

The aesthetic successors to Trumper were Charlie Macartney, Alan Kippax and Archie Jackson. Macartney became friends with Trumper, practised on his backyard pitch and was a pallbearer at his funeral. His audacious innings of 170 at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 1921 reflected his deceased hero’s flair and inspired the 12-year-old Bradman on his first visit to a Test match. Bradman, nearly thirty years later, wrote in his autobiography *Farewell to Cricket* that he could still picture his ‘delicate leg glances’ and ‘one flashing drive—not through the covers but over the top’.

Kippax was a graceful and cultivated batsman who was a powerful role model for Bradman as New South Wales captain when Bradman made his first-class debut in December 1927. A fortnight later, Kippax’s chanceless unbeaten 315 not out, out of 639 must have given Bradman something to aspire to as his own contribution was 0 batting at number eight.

Jackson was Bradman’s direct contemporary. Although thirteen months younger he made his first-class debut for New South Wales at 17 a year earlier and averaged 50 in his first season. When Bradman made his first appearance in first-class cricket it was as a replacement for Jackson who pulled out with a boil on his knee. When Bradman became the youngest Australian to reach a Test century at the age of 20 Jackson beat him a month later with his 164 on his Test debut at Adelaide Oval at the age of 19

years 152 days. Moreover *Wisden* commented on this innings: ‘for sheer brilliance of execution his strokes during this delightful display could scarcely have been exceeded’. Anything Bradman could do Jackson (it seemed) could do better.

Bradman as Hero

It says much for Bradman that he overcame. In one sense he could never overcome comparison with Jackson because of Jackson’s death from tuberculosis at 23. Those who die young forever live in the realms of possibility. Early death subtracts from the promise of achievement but adds to the myth of what might have been achieved. Jackson didn’t match Bradman’s huge run scoring on the 1930 tour of England but his modest record was excused as an early symptom of his disease. When he scored 73 in the final Test of the series in a stand of 243 with Bradman it was said that he handled the short-pitched bowling of Larwood on a damp wicket better than his partner who went on to 232. There were those who thought that Archie might have found some answer to Bodyline which none of the Australians (even Bradman) were able to do. Jackson died on the last day of the Fourth Test of that series, his casket accompanying the Australian players on the train to Sydney, and Bradman along with several teammates was a pall-bearer at his funeral.

Bradman overcame by sheer weight of runs but he had many critics in his early years. Although he gained support as ‘Our Don’ he broke the aesthetic pattern of New South Wales batsmen with his agricultural boy-from-the-bush methods of pulling balls from outside the off stump through the leg side field. Furthermore, in backing away to the leg side to slash balls through the off-side against Bodyline he also broke the Muscular Christian ethic of bearing the physical brunt by seeking to evade deliveries. His breezy second innings of 66 in the Third Test at Adelaide led to several damning eyewitness accounts. A number of observers questioned his intestinal fortitude.

Bradman overcame also by his longevity and the loss of spectator memory. Taking 20 as an age when a spectator might make a critical stylistic judgement of cricketers, those who watched Trumper in his peak years in the 1900s, Macartney just after World War I, and Kippax and Jackson in the 1920s, were turning 80 or dying in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. While there is almost no action film footage of Trumper and Jackson, little of Macartney and Kippax, and still photography was neither as close-up

or as sophisticated as it would become, still more would be done with less. A few black and white photographs, re-runs of black and white moving pictures, increasing radio commentary over twenty years, and mountains of newsprint besides his incredible statistical feats, gave Bradman (brilliant though he was) the edge over the other great run accumulators of his time like Bill Ponsford and Wally Hammond. It also put him in a league with dominators from other sports such as Babe Ruth (baseball), Walter Lindrum (billiards), and Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills (tennis) who set a new ethic for the age. Bradman recast the batting ethic of cricket: not so much how but how many. Bradman gained an extra edge by living on into the age of fading memories.

When Bradman retired his wife Jessie was relieved that they could get on with more normal lives and for the next forty years they did so. In 1949 the recently knighted Sir Donald Bradman was the subject of a portrait by the well known Australian painter Ivor Hele and seemed bemused, stating that it was 'a great compliment to himself'. When the portrait was completed Lady Bradman was 'thoroughly satisfied' but a more restrained subject thought it was 'a good likeness'.

Hero, the second innings

Bradman worship to a later generation of Australians began in the mid-1980s, following the opening of the first stage of the Bradman Museum in Bowral in 1989 and has continued after his death. Although Bradman declared at the opening of the museum that he did not want it to become a shrine to him, but rather to reflect his place in Australian cricket, more and more shrines began to appear around the country. The Bradman Collection at the State Library of South Australia, his birthplace of Cootamundra, and wherever he played around the world, but particularly in Australia became holy sites associated with a secular saint. Despite the best efforts of the Bradman Museum Trust to protect the use of the Bradman name to license products it was difficult to control the industry which grew around him.

Sydney artist and cartoonist Bill Leak undertook two major portraits of Bradman in 1989 and 1990. The first, a three-quarter length study has Bradman standing with his hands resting on the back of a chair, and was commissioned for the Bradman Museum. The second, another three-quarter study in which he is seated, was

commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery in Old Parliament House, Canberra. It now hangs there after earlier periods on loan to the Australian Gallery of Sport at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Adelaide Oval Museum.

The first picture was the subject of an article, 'Bradman: The final portrait' by the Sydney journalist and author Phil Derriman in which Derriman writes of Bradman in self-effacing mode speaking of the 1930s New South Wales and Australian batsman Ray Robinson as more naturally gifted than himself. He also quotes Bradman repeating the remark he once made to Neville Cardus, 'If you saw Ray Robinson make a hundred you'd forget about me', revealing a generosity of spirit similar to his exhorting his team-mates on to the balcony at Trent Bridge in 1938 to watch the closing stages of Stan McCabe's masterly innings of 232. Twelve years later Bradman wrote of that event in *Farewell to Cricket*: 'I gripped his hand, wet with perspiration. ... I can recall saying to him after expressing my congratulations, "I would give a great deal to be able to play an innings like that." No skipper was ever more sincere in his adulation of another's skill.'

Notable features of the two Leak portraits are the images of Bradman cover drives facing left and right and stuck on the wall behind him with masking tap. The artist told me that he used the images partly because of the impression Bradman made on him as neither carried away with his own cricket fame nor bogged down in the past, but as a man who always got on with life.

The Cover Drive as Signature Shot

The Cover Drive (capitals) was not established as *the* image of Bradman until the 1990s. Although it had been reproduced on glass bowls in the 1930s, on a couple of booklets of that era, and on the spine of *Farewell to Cricket* in 1950, it had not seized public imagination.

The Cover Drive grew and grew. A recent view from the Bradman Museum at Bowral is that it re-emerged in the 1990s as 'a symbol following Bradman's earliest and most remarkable career achievement' and as a 'pretty shot' and 'perfect graphic' for the game. The cover drive (lower case) was a stroke Bradman obviously loved and the description echoed his own words from '*The Sun*' *Cricket Hints*, a 1930s coaching

manual where he stated that it was a stroke which will always ‘send a thrill down the spine of a true cricket lover’, and went on to call it a ‘gem of the batting art’.

If Bradman maintained an aesthetic preference for the cover drive over the years he cannot be blamed for that and nor can the Bradman Museum, following its establishment and expansion, for being guided by a commercial imperative. Bradman in the 1990s became a brand image. Unfortunately, in the process, and for those who have only lately come to Bradman know, the Cover Drive has been transformed from icon to cliché.

Zimbabwe-born sculptor Mitch Mitchell created a life-size Cover Drive of Bradman in 1988 working from a composite of several impressions of Bradman throughout his career but said to be concentrated on the 1934 tour of England. It is a beautiful object which beautifies the batsman. The sculpture gained the approval of cricket-lover, and former Victorian premier Lindsay Thompson, who remarked: ‘I can almost hear the pickets rattling after a sizzling shot between mid-off and cover.’ That may be so but Bradman rattled the pickets many more times with pull shots between mid-on and square leg.

Victorian artist Stanley Hammond was commissioned by the Kensington District Cricket Club’s Vice-President’s Committee in 1989 to produce a limited run of bronze statuettes of Bradman. Hammond was sought because of his ability as a realistic sculptor and the brief followed the Bradman’s former Adelaide club’s committee’s discussion with him regarding a favoured image. That chosen was the execution of a cover drive in a posed photograph.

South Australian artist Tim Hall, who is often regarded as portraying a nostalgic and sentimental Australia, produced a limited series of prints entitled *The Cover Drive* in 1995 in conjunction with Bradman and signed by him. They have been described as capturing Bradman’s dashing strokeplay but could it be that the artist has followed too closely the subject’s preference?

Beyond the Cover Drive

Commissioned works usually provide what the commissioner ordered and art works have traditionally flattered. However the South Australian realist artist Robert

Hannaford has revealed greater integrity than Hammond, Mitchell and Hall in his sculpture of Bradman, commissioned by the Adelaide City Council, and unveiled by the South Australian Governor outside Adelaide Oval on 25 February 2002.

Not everyone will like the Hannaford sculpture. I would have preferred a pull shot. Not everyone will like the rough finish. Not everyone will like the site. A better one would have been as the centre of a roundabout by the nearby Victor Richardson Gates of the oval. There it would have had a greater connection with Bradman's life. Instead, the closer proximity to St. Peter's Cathedral has a flimsier connection with his death. The siting of the sculpture alongside the Richardson Gates would also have enriched public appreciation of the connection between the gates' original architect, Ian Hannaford, and his youngest brother, sculptor Robert.

Despite some beliefs the sculpture does not depict the Cover Drive. It is a straight drive veering towards an on drive. A friend (who knows his cricket) remarked that he thought Hannaford had made Bradman too heavy in the legs but this can be contested. Hannaford has shown Bradman concentrating his power driving through and low over the ball. While Bradman was noted for his lightness on his feet he maintained a low centre of gravity through the hitting zone. Hannaford has captured Bradman's rougher aggression and power rather than producing a limper, more idealised form.

Is there Art beyond Aesthetics?

Wassily Kandinsky, the great Russian Modernist painter and art theorist once wrote about the tension involved in producing art. Perhaps defending his colourful geometric shapes Kandinsky stated that there could be as much dramatic power in the edge of a circle meeting that of a triangle as the finger of God the Father touching that of Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Artistic (or dramatic) tension is exhibited in Test cricket when high quality batsmen and bowlers are opposed on pitches which are regarded as fair to both. In the last decade contests between star batsmen like India's Sachin Tendulkar and the West Indies' Brian Lara and Australia's bowling heroes Glen McGrath and Shane Warne represented such tension.

The English art critic John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* and the American art teacher Betty Edwards in *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* both discuss artistic vision as a unique way of seeing the world. While art can be about fashioning beautiful objects such activity is closer to older meanings of aesthetics. Cricket has a number of batting aestheticians of that type and some Australians have been mentioned. Around the world we have had players like Frank Worrell, V.V.S. Laxman and a trio of left-hand batsman such as Frank Woolley, Graeme Pollock and David Gower to name just five. But art is different from aesthetics.

Writing in the 1940s an Australian aesthetician, D.H. Rankin stated: 'To talk about art is one thing, to apprehend it is another. Art has two parts—the work of art that is observed and secondly the creative power behind it.' He continued that 'if the viewer sees what the artist intends the aesthetic operates'. This judgement can be applied to both Bradman's batting and representations of him by artists.

At the end of the nineteenth century Ranjitsinhji was willing to break orthodox codes by whipping straight balls to the fine leg boundary. And Ranji's Sussex teammate C.B. Fry, with whom he constructed many huge partnerships, destroyed off theory bowling by pulling balls to the leg side. Bradman did not have a picture of Fry in his billiard room but he had the cricket intelligence to adopt similar methods and it was Fry's record of six successive centuries in first-class cricket that Bradman equalled in 1938-39. Bradman did not live in the past but was intelligent enough to know that his ability to process information was not (by itself) going to be sufficient to preserve his place in history. He was probably shrewd enough in his eighties and nineties to know that an attractive image in bronze or on canvas would give greater power to that place. He might not sit alongside Trumper as an aesthetic batsman but it would do no harm to appear a little better looking than he was.

In the final resolve perhaps there is a small sadness in this. Artists understand negative space. They see beyond what is there. A batsman may survey the field and see only fielders or he may see the gaps. The art of placement in batting is hitting the ball into and through the gaps. Bradman saw the ball differently to others and responded more resourcefully. He created positive space. Therein lay his art.