

# Bradman's War

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## Extract

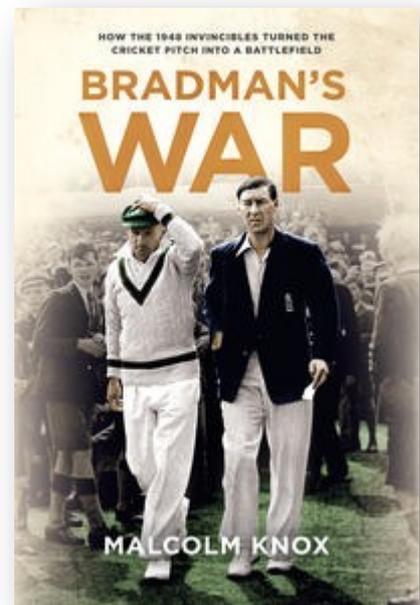
### Introduction

It was while reading through some old cricket documents in the Marylebone Cricket Club Library that I discovered a forgotten perception of Don Bradman.

Immediately after his retirement, when Don became Sir Donald and accepted the plaudits for his cricket career, he was not the universally praised hero to whom we have become accustomed. In fact, by the early 1950s Bradman was the most controversial and divisive figure in the cricket world. It is not going too far to say that he was engaged in a bitter fight to redeem his reputation.

This image of Bradman re-emerged gradually, like a photograph being cleaned of layers of dust. I had read his retirement autobiography, *Farewell to Cricket*, which was published in 1950, two years after his poignant last Test innings. Had Bradman lived and retired today, I imagine that it would have been written in gracious receipt of the tributes to his greatness. But 1950 was a more candid time, and the curatorship of public image was left up to the individual. Bradman used *Farewell to Cricket* to release all his bottled-up desire to set the record straight.

Consequently, it is a book laced with a sour stridency that seems, from our historical viewpoint, both surprising and unnecessary. Why should the Don, of all people, have needed to fight so hard for his reputation? Immediately after his retirement, however, Bradman was many decades away from becoming The Greatest Australian. In 1950, he saw his legacy as a highly contestable matter and set about its zealous protection. No document gives as clear an insight into his motivations. It's all in his own words. No slight was too small for Bradman's memory. He never forgot how the New South Wales selectors snubbed him when, as a boy, he had travelled from the country to trials at the Sydney Cricket Ground. He never forgot how, when he took his first interstate tours, the senior men teased him as a bumpkin. He never forgot the merciless batting of the great England team of 1928–29, when, as twelfth man – he never forgot *that* either – he spent days in the sun picking Wally Hammond's cover drives out of the gutter. He never forgot the teasing from England's spin bowler Jack White, who chided Maurice Tate for dismissing Bradman in his first Test: 'Hey, you got my bunny!'



Bradman played in retirement as he had played on the field: for keeps. From its beginning, Anglo-Australian cricket had been played as war by another means. There was never any 'gentlemen's game', from the time W.G. Grace sneaked up to run out Sammy Jones while he was gardening the Oval wicket in the most famous match of all, the 'Ashes' Test of 1882. By the 1930s, Bradman's success put Ashes cricket on an unprecedentedly hostile footing. His mathematical accumulation of 974 runs in 1930, when he hit White, among others, into submission, provoked England's counter-reaction – the infamous physical assault of Bodyline in 1932–33. Cricket wars, like real wars, are not discrete affairs with beginnings and ends; they flow into each other. After Bodyline, it is well known that Australia's outrage ended the Ashes careers of its chief prosecutor, Douglas Jardine, and its weapon, Harold Larwood. Perhaps less well known is how the next Australian team to tour England, in 1934, was booed out of Nottingham when it threatened a walk-off after Larwood's partner Bill Voce bounced them. That Australian team, with Bradman again dominant, was described as 'the silent, sneering sixteen'. Bodyline left both sides resentful: Australia for having suffered from it, England for having been de-fanged as a consequence of it.

Fifteen years and a world war later, writing his memoir, Bradman was still seething over Bodyline. He was also seething over the battles he had fought in South Australia, when he was imported from New South Wales to take over the state captaincy from the popular hero and legendary Adelaide sportsman Victor York Richardson. He was seething over his clashes with teammates when he became Australian captain in 1936: a quintet of senior men, all Roman Catholics – Bill O'Reilly, Stan McCabe, Len Darling, Chuck Fleetwood-Smith and Leo O'Brien – had been carpeted by the Australian Board of Control for 'undermining' him.

Bradman seethed, still, over the apotheosis of 1930s cricket brutality, England's 903 runs for seven wickets at the Oval in 1938. Len Hutton batted nearly three days for 364, Bradman broke his ankle, and, in the last Ashes Test before the war, the Australians were ground into the Kennington dust. Four weeks later, Neville Chamberlain came back from his summit with Adolf Hitler in Germany and declared 'Peace for our time'. In the deeper mood of cricket, just as in the deeper movements of people, there was a stronger pull towards hostility.

Years later, Bradman took out his greatest frustration on his former teammates and antagonists from the 1930s, such as Jack Fingleton and O'Reilly, who had become journalists critical of his actions. Worse than enemies, he saw them as apostates; his autobiography gave him his chance to bite them back. He missed no opportunity to vent at the 'personal spleen, naked and unashamed' of Fingleton's writing. Bradman lived by the rule, he declared, of 'You can't make people like you, but you can make them respect you.' But can respect be forced? In *Farewell to Cricket*, the peerless English

cricket writer Alan Gibson concluded, Bradman 'seemed to go through every slur cast on him during his cricket career, and reject them all'. It was nothing less than a tirade.

Who was this angry man? Certainly not the Bradman we came to know in recent decades, when, having retired from a sometimes stormy life as a cricket administrator, he had become such an unquestionable Australian eminence that his vital statistics were in the questionnaire for applicants for Australian citizenship and his batting average comprised the post office box number of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. By the time of his death, he was the nation's shy grandfather, to whose suburban Adelaide home great men went to pay homage. We knew that Bradman had had his critics – O'Reilly and Fingleton were well known, as were Ian Chappell and the protagonists of World Series Cricket – but his record of accomplishment and service to the game surely placed him above all criticism.

This was not the real Bradman, however, at least as he perceived himself. By 2001, when he died five years into the prime ministership of John Howard, who idolised him, he might have felt satisfied that his reputation had been cleared of any taint. But Bradman never forgot his *own* time, and knew better than anyone that his final iconic status was a reward for longevity. He had outlived his critics, but their ghosts were fresher in his mind than in ours.

Australians are used to thinking of his 1948 team – the Invincibles – as having conducted a triumphal march through war-ravaged Britain. It was a tour that restored cricket's supremacy as a popular entertainment, and resuscitated the mother country's battered morale. It was a gift from the triumphant new world to the shrunken old, from the coming Pacific Century to the fading Empire. Our boys delivered food parcels and speeches, played joyfully and won some of the most dramatic matches ever staged. Once they scored 729 runs – 729! – in a day. Bradman went out, truly, in a blaze of glory, and his famous duck at the Oval, stranding him with a Test cricket average of 99.94, was just a minor flaw, Japanese-style, to emphasise the perfection of the whole.

This, at least, is the orthodox view. But when I went back to the original documents, a very different picture emerged. Among Bradman's teammates, those inimitable golden boys, few spoke of the 1948 tour as their favourite. Neil Harvey, the teenaged 'baby' of the tour, said that of his four Test tours to England, his most enjoyable by far was his last, in 1961 under Richie Benaud. Arthur Morris, whose batting in the 1948 Tests eclipsed even Bradman's, preferred the 1953 tour under Lindsay Hassett. Hassett's happiest tours were in 1938 when he was a prankish youngster and 1953 when he was captain, but not 1948. The famously good-natured Bill Brown said he gained more enjoyment out of his two Ashes tours in the 1930s than in 1948. Keith Miller, after the 1948 tour, bowled bouncers at Bradman in the great man's testimonial match and was dropped from the next Australian team, which

toured South Africa in 1949–50. Bradman was one of the selectors responsible, but blamed the others. When Miller approached another selector, Chappie Dwyer, and informed him that Bradman denied any part in the decision, Dwyer replied, 'Did the little – say that?' In the early 1950s, Bradman was involved in the murky blacklisting of another Invincible, Sid Barnes, who effectively sued the Australian Board for defamation. Bradman was widely believed to be behind Barnes's ostracism, though the fall was taken by Keith Johnson, a loyal Bradman retainer who had been the manager of the 1948 tour.

The contest over Bradman's legacy figured in teammates' memoirs as if it was a feature of the cricket climate that everyone knew. That some, such as Colin McCool, rose in his defence only confirms that there was a widely held body of negative opinion to be challenged. McCool had been Australia's first-choice spin bowler going into 1948, but Bradman did not pick him for one Test match. A decade later, rising above his disappointment, McCool still felt it necessary to comment on Bradman's reputation. 'Quite unjustly and irrationally, Bradman has been labelled as the man responsible for [the] depressing trend' of eradicating leg spinners, McCool said. Even the team scorer, Bill Ferguson, was moved to rebut what he called 'the legend of Bradman's unpopularity' a decade after Bradman retired.

Entertainment-hungry Britons had flocked to see Bradman and had thrown their hats in the air to celebrate him. There are famous photographs of Bradman walking onto Headingley through a tunnel of Englishmen, and of Norman Yardley leading the three cheers of Bradman in his final innings at the Oval. The world seems to have forgotten the wild scenes of celebration when, after Bradman walked through the Headingley tunnel, Dick Pollard clean-bowled him. John Arlott said the cheering at his dismissal 'rolled like thunder'; Fingleton saw 'almost indescribable scenes of bedlam'. Yes, Yardley, England's captain, did lead the three cheers at the Oval, but he said to Eric Hollies: 'That's all we'll give him – then bowl him out.' When Hollies did so, no England player spared a moment's mercy for Bradman. As Bradman walked off, Hollies quipped, 'Best f – ing ball I've bowled all season, and they're clapping *him!*'

After the series, England's champion players of 1948, such as Cyril Washbrook, Denis Compton and Bill Edrich, wrote scathingly of Bradman's sportsmanship. Yardley wrote that Bradman 'will never forget or forgive the Bodyline Tour' and 'let his relentless determination to win sometimes run away with him'. Edrich, the most outspoken, wrote that Bradman brought 'an element of grimness, savage competition and uncompromising search for victory, that no other country has equalled, and that may, I hope and believe, be reduced again to more normal proportions now that the controversial figure of Don Bradman has retired to the Olympian heights of cricket control'.

The clashes between Miller and Bradman – perhaps the most defining personal differences, because they embody the fundamental schism of life in the 1940s, between a warrior and a non-combatant, and between two opposing ideologies of how cricket ought to be played – had also seeped out of the dressing room into public knowledge over time. Most famously, Miller derided the pressure a mere cricketer faced, no matter how Bradman-like his status; real pressure was 'having a Messerschmidt up your arse'. That lay at the heart of Miller-versus-Bradman: one man, his nerves damaged by war, wishing to play cricket as a game, versus another man, who spent the war as an invalid, yet returned to the field to wage cricket as war without the shooting. It also lay at the heart of England's ambivalence over the way Bradman led his 1948 team.

The surviving participants in the 1948 tour have mellowed as their ranks have thinned, and they have taken on the guardianship of the legend of the Invincibles. I interviewed the four surviving players from 1948 when I commenced my research – Australia's Neil Harvey, Arthur Morris and Sam Loxton (in his last interview before his death in December 2011), and England's John Dewes. Dewes was quite forceful in his opinions of the Australians' ruthless attitude to cricket in 1948. Harvey and Morris maintained that the presence of Bradman made 1948 a highly pressured tour, less enjoyable perhaps than their later ones, yet they had over time recognised that they were custodians of a corporate memory, talismans of national myth-making, and this had subsumed their personal feelings. Loxton, who only made the one tour of England as a Test cricketer, was as strident as he had always been in supporting Bradman and denouncing his enemies.

Just as the passage of years mellows individuals, it reshapes the telling of history. It is not far-fetched to suggest that cricket has been as much a battleground of the contestability of history during the past fifteen years as have other fields of Australian life. Just as our participation in the two world wars is seen very differently, and more positively, than it was closer to the events themselves, the Invincibles tour has been subject to a historical spit-and-polish. Anzac and Armistice days are commemorated with a lustre that was never in the minds of the silent and grim-faced men who had recently been there and lived on with the nightmares. When it comes to Bradman, too, we live in revisionist times, when we who were not there have put aside the negative and celebrated his contribution.

The two strands of our history – the world wars and Bradman – are intertwined. The dispute over their remembrance has been wrongly simplified as positive-versus-negative, or optimistic-versus-pessimistic. John Howard took the view that 'black armband' history talked down the nation and its achievements. It is easily argued that to rediscover the negatives of the past is to denigrate it. Yet that may not be the case. When we go back to the real story of the Invincibles, we rediscover a forgotten optimism that came out

of the war: an alternative vision for what postwar England and Australia, and postwar cricket, might have become. When we go back and listen to the original voices of the time, we find an undercurrent of utopian ideas that the world might be remade better than it was before the fighting. Some cricketers were tired of the brutality of the game in the 1930s, as whole populations were tired of the economic and political forces that brought a long Depression and the slaughter of millions. During the war, hopes also arose that a new Anglo-Australian cricket might be played, one that might not be just a continuation of fighting to the death. These hopes were fostered most of all by the men who saw combat. In Britain, these men came home and voted Winston Churchill out of office in an unprecedented landslide. They wanted a new world to be the fruit of all the sacrifice. Otherwise, what would the sacrifice have been for?

In cricket a new vision arose among the soldiers, fliers and sailors who played each other in services games to take minds off the fighting. Many of these men, English and Australian, had been Test cricketers in the 1930s. They wanted something different, something better, something played in the spirit of the interservices games, when the cricket was hard but the players shared dressing rooms. Among the Englishmen, this spirit promised the final breakdown of the century-old amateur-professional class division in the same way that the postwar general election promised a fairer society. For these warriors in white, a window would open up in 1945 when this better kind of cricket could be realised and exported into real Test cricket whenever it recommenced. Cricket had the potential to be not what it had been – a ritualisation of warlike behaviour – but war's antidote. The story of the 1948 Invincibles starts with those idealists and the fate of their dream.