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Harold Larwood

Duncan Hamilton

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HAROLD LARWOOD



Harold Larwood, 1927.

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DUNCAN
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FOREWORD

KICKING BRADMAN UP THE ARSE



Bradman is inconvenienced by Larwood in the fifth Test at Sydney, February 1933.

Trent Bridge, July 1977

The old man laid his hand lightly on the pavilion gate. His closely cropped hair was as white as hoar frost, his caramel-coloured face lined and pinched with age. The lenses in his square, black-framed spectacles were as thick as double glazing. He wore a pale checked shirt with a gold fastener between the collars, a tightly knotted wool tie, and a dull brown jacket which looked half a size too big for him – slightly too broad across the shoulders, an inch too long in the tail and sleeves.

He carried himself with the dignity of a veteran from the Great War, his back as straight as he could make it, his chest thrust slightly forward, as if there were a row of ribboned medals fastened across his top pocket. Around him were a knot of stooped, flabby men of much the same vintage, dressed in shirtsleeves and braces, who stared at him as though revering a saint at the altar. It was early evening. The sun was still bright and the dark shadows elongated everything, like a fairground mirror. The ground was almost empty, the stands echoing to the drag of brooms which swept away the litter of a long day of cricket-watching.

A straggly crocodile line of young lads carrying bags and swinging worn, heavily taped bats walked around the boundary edge without glancing at the old man or his admirers. One of them tapped a ball on his bat. It caught the edge and rolled towards the pavilion gate. The old man stopped the ball with his foot and then picked it up. He briefly weighed the ball in his hand and rubbed his thumb on the leather before throwing it back with a careful underhand lob, the sort of soft delivery you'd get in the back garden or on the beach. 'Here you are, son,' he said. The lad reached out with his bat, knocked the ball into the air and grabbed it, like catching a falling apple from a tree. All this happened in an eye-blink; it was just a moment that passed unnoticed and without fanfare. The lad – a year or two short of his teens, I'd guess – casually tucked his bat under his arm, stuffed the ball into his trouser pocket and sauntered away without a backward glance. The old man carried on talking before shaking hands, saying his polite goodbyes, slowly climbing the pavilion steps and vanishing inside.

I was sitting a few yards away, too shy to approach the old man at first and then too slow to decide what to do when he walked past me. I missed my chance to speak to Harold Larwood, but I like to claim that I saw the last ball he ever 'bowled' at Trent Bridge.



Harold Larwood demonstrates how to hold the ball in the improbable setting of his own back garden. He described this delivery as his 'swinger'.

I was in my first summer as a part-time junior reporter for a local news and sports agency, where it was usually my turn to make the tea or type out copy and invoices. I'd been assigned to Trent Bridge to send score updates, organize the telephones and dictate to copytakers. Extra phones for the Test – the third of a five-match Ashes series that England won 3–0 – were plugged into the long dusty corridor outside the press box and faced away from the play. I acted as gopher for the national newspaper cricket correspondents. The Trent Bridge Test was the one in which Geoffrey Boycott ground out his 98th hundred and Ian Botham took five wickets on his debut. But I remember it for Larwood. For me, the privilege of being there was to get close to him.

If you grew up in Nottingham, as I did, you knew all about Larwood. He was the local legend. You were told about him as a rite of passage. As boys we propped up an orange box as a makeshift wicket or used the lamp post in the street – floodlit cricket long before Kerry Packer thought of it or Twenty20 was a gleam in someone's inventive eye. There were

men still alive back then who had bought cheap tickets to watch Larwood play, stood him a pint or queued for a sight of him at the railway station on his arrival home from Australia after the Bodyline tour of 1932–33. If you measured out a long run-up between the handful of parked cars in our cul-de-sac, naively believing that the length of your stride determined the speed at which you'd deliver the ball, there was always a voice behind you ready to chide: 'You'll never be as fast as Harold Larwood. He were quickest there's ever been, lad. Ask your grandad.'

Nearly everyone had a Larwood story, usually about batsmen too frightened to go in against him or the miles per hour he generated or how much alcohol he could sup without falling over. A besotted friend of my father's went so far as to sit a gold-framed photograph of Larwood on the sideboard, as if he was a member of the family. He always referred to him as though he and Larwood shared the same bloodline too. He called him 'Lol', the nickname Larwood was given almost as soon as he arrived at Trent Bridge in 1923. The nickname stuck to such an extent that Larwood referred to himself as 'Lol' too. He signed many of his letters with it, and men such as my father's friend would say 'Lol' naturally in conversations to create a spurious intimacy between him and themselves. It sounded to me as though 'Lol' was such a pal that he would stand everyone a beer in the pub later that evening. My father's friend kept cuttings of Larwood's career in an oversized Woolworth's scrapbook – passed on to him by his own father – and I would turn the grey pages so often that I could recite the smudgy multi-decked headlines like lines of poetry:

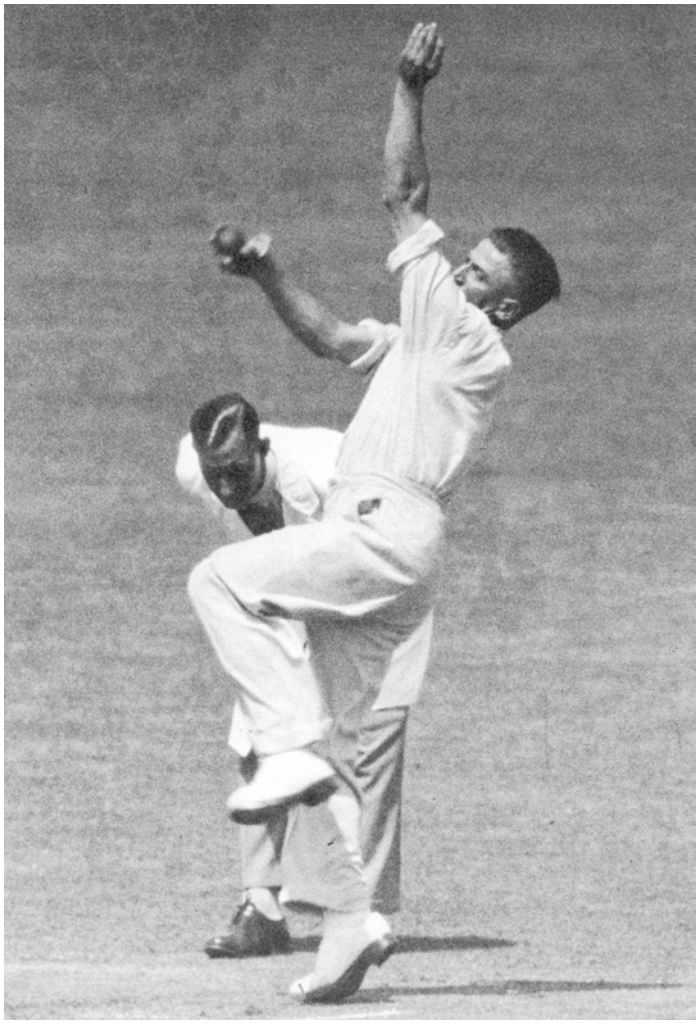
LARWOOD TOO QUICK FOR AUSTRALIANS
Terrific pace puts MCC in command of Test

LARWOOD ON BODYLINE
I never bowled at the man

LARWOOD'S AMAZING HOMECOMING
Mobbed by admirers at the station

Nottingham was a coal city. Skeletal mine headstocks were dotted across the county, and around each one lay the dug-out clay, the slag heaps and the messy debris of the industry. You could smell the coal that lingered everywhere; damp and musty, like one long washing day. Everything

seemed to be soot-stained – the streets down which the coal cart rattled, the houses with funnels of curling smoke from the miners' allowance of free coal, the shards of coal that fell out of the bags or were shaken off the clothes of men who toted it with blackened hands and faces. The air was gritty with dust. Even the leaves on the trees were coated in smuts. Larwood had been a pitman. He knew what it was like to feel the cage jerk, and then rapidly descend from daylight into darkness. He scraped the skin off his back, his bare flesh grazing the jagged edges of the narrow tunnels which he crept along on his knees. His hands became calloused from tightly gripping a pick or a shovel. His bitten nails were rimmed black. The miners my father worked alongside – though none of them ever saw him play – regarded Larwood as one of their own and would have nothing said against him. He was working class, manifestly proud of it and made of the right stuff, which was good enough for them. When I saw him it was still difficult to connect the thinnish, short and round-shouldered old man in front of me – he was nearly 73 by then – with the raw-boned fast bowler whom I'd read about in the scrapbooks, or even the matey 'Lol' who, though he didn't know it, counted as everybody's friend. He stroked his chin, readjusted his spectacles on the bridge of his nose and occasionally ran his fingers across his bristly head. As he spoke he glanced at his hands, as if the palms were a map he could read. I focused intently on his wrinkled fingers and imagined them unblemished half a century earlier, laid down or across the thick seam of a new cherry-red ball, polished like a pearl. I wondered how many times Larwood had passed through the pavilion gate, whether or not he saw Trent Bridge as it had been rather than the way it was at that moment, and if any ghosts were there to meet him. I thought about the framed black-and-white photographs of him that hung in the Long Room. In one photograph I saw Larwood side on and at the very point of delivery. His strong neck and powerful back were arched. The eyes, just inky dots, were clearly focused on his target. The left leg was so high that the batsman must have seen the spikes, like jagged teeth, and the worn sole of his boot. His right arm was about to fire the ball in a perfect, swift arc. In another, he was standing in a team group wearing cap and piped blazer: 'Nottinghamshire: Championship Winners 1929' said the caption, without listing the names. There was no mistaking the 24-year-old Larwood: second from the left on the back row, the cap pulled tight and low over his high forehead, as if trying to hide from the camera.



The classical action. At full speed, Harold Larwood flowed like a bolt of pure silk.

However hard it was to reconcile those images with the one I saw in the flesh, I knew I was within touching distance of a 'Great Man' and of greatness itself. I reckoned then, as I do now, that Larwood was England's fastest-ever bowler and, for a period, the fastest bowler that cricket has ever seen; though, of course, most batsmen didn't see him, which is the point. He had electric pace, and delivered it in jolts of four or five overs

at a time. The pros used to say Larwood had 'nip', a gentle euphemism for the frank admission that he was 'too bloody quick' for nearly all of them. In the early 1930s Larwood was timed at 96 mph. Today the indispensable Hawk-Eye uses six high-speed cameras to record a bowler's speed. Larwood was measured by a man in a bowler hat who stood half-way down the pitch with a stopwatch in his hand and then did his calculations on lined paper with a stubby pencil. An Australian mathematician with a stopwatch – but minus the bowler hat – used the same method and reached a figure of 99 mph. But with a clanking, Heath Robinson-style contraption, Larwood's bowling was electronically timed in an experiment at the White City at over 100 mph. 'I can't shout about the accuracy of any of them,' said Larwood, who supposed that he bowled at 'well over' 90 mph and 'sometimes at 100 mph'. That belief was expressed with neither smugness nor conceit. 'There were umpires who'd seen me bowl, and everyone else up till the 1970s. They said I was a yard or two faster. That's good enough for me,' he said. We can only speculate about the true figure. There isn't sufficient film of Larwood to use Hawk-Eye's sophisticated gadgetry and definitively calculate his exact speed. But it was taken for granted by the poor souls facing him that the ball would fly at them between 95 mph and 100 mph. And no one disputed the fact that Larwood was capable of both maintaining that pace and bowling with extraordinary accuracy. Against him, the distressed batsman had less than half a second to decide:

- The line and length of the ball
- The position his feet should be in to play it
- The shot he should choose

It demanded the rigorous co-ordination of brain, eye, hand and feet to survive. The batsman saw nothing but a flash of red; often not even that. The Australian Bill O'Reilly explained most eloquently of all what it was like to be on strike against him, the bat in the blockhole tapping nervously against hard, dusty earth. 'He came steaming in,' he said of Larwood, 'and I moved right across behind my bat, held perfectly straight in defence of my centre stump. Just before he delivered the ball something hit the middle of my bat with such force that it was almost dashed from my hands. It was the ball.'

I once asked John Arlott, who had watched Larwood both before and

after the Bodyline series, how quick he had been. Arlott tucked his left hand into his jacket pocket, the prelude to some deep thinking. He paused for what seemed to me like an hour, but in reality lasted a minute at most. 'You cannot imagine how fast he was,' he said in that ravishing voice marinated in vats of fine wine. 'Sometimes, depending on where you were standing, you couldn't pick up the ball with the naked eye at all.' With trepidation – for to a callow, nervous teenager he looked like an angry wasp about to sting – I put the same question to Jack Fingleton, who batted against Larwood during Bodyline and became his friend. I was running Fingleton's copy for *The Sunday Times* and, after returning with one take shortly after the tea interval began, I took an exceptionally deep and fearful breath before launching into my interrogation of the formidable-looking figure hunched over his portable typewriter. At the mention of Larwood, Fingleton mellowed. A softer look appeared in his eyes, perhaps because he couldn't believe someone of my age – a boy with long hair and a scruffy grey sweater – was interested enough to ask him about the distant past. 'About twice as fast as anyone out there,' he said, jabbing his thumb, like a man hitching a lift, towards the Trent Bridge pitch. 'You needed your wits and your heart to play him.' He instinctively laid his hand over his own heart. 'He was so strong, you see.' Fingleton tugged at the peak of his flat cap, as if adjusting it out of respect for Larwood. 'You know,' he said, 'not many batsmen could play him. Those who did have still got the bruises.' Fingleton became so committed on the subject of Larwood, and I was so absorbed in what he said, that I forgot to give him back the two pages of copy, with his scribbled changes in blue ink, that I'd just telephoned on his behalf. I still have them, pressed like autumn leaves between the pages of one of his books. Fingleton talked about Stan McCabe – he'd mentioned him in his piece that afternoon – and his valiant innings against Larwood at Sydney in the opening Bodyline Test. He finished by telling me, 'I won't see a faster bowler and if you do, you'll be a lucky fella.'

The bats in Larwood's era look insubstantial compared with today's, like toothpicks next to railway sleepers. The average weight was around 2lb 4oz, the edges almost as thin as a credit card, and the bat wasn't as well sprung. The pads were flimsy too, just thin strips of poorly upholstered canvas. White cloth gloves had short rubber spikes to cushion the impact of the ball, but in reality offered scant protection to the fingers. Of course, there were no helmets and terrified batsmen stuffed bath

towels down their trousers as makeshift thigh pads or into their shirts as bulky padding across the ribs. Some, especially the Australians during Bodyline (including Fingleton), wore special protection over the torso. It resembled a quilted bedjacket. But nothing stopped Larwood . . .

* * *

When generations separate them, it is almost impossible to judge one cricketer definitely against another. As Donald Bradman made clear: 'Dealing with comparisons in cricket is harder and more complex than in most other sports.' You can, he argued, assess the merits of swimmers strictly from the clock because 'the water hasn't changed' (he was talking well before swimsuits became scientifically bespoke). He went on: 'No such comparison is possible in cricket. Averages can be a guide . . . but are not conclusive because pitches and conditions have changed.' So had the cricket ball, added Bradman, and the height and width of the wickets too. The laws of the game had also been refined. If you can't trust statistics, you're obliged to rely on anecdotal evidence. Larwood emerges favourably from it. Whatever his figures, nearly everyone who played against him – and most who witnessed the pace he achieved – described him unequivocally as the finest and fastest quick bowler of his era, and any era before it.

At its meanest – which is how Larwood practised it – fast bowling is a bloody affair and the fast bowler is like the slaughterman in the abattoir. Think of Dennis Lillee, who looked angry enough to shoot you dead, and Jeff Thomson, whose slingy action made each delivery slice through the air so quickly that your eyes strained to glimpse it. Think of the West Indians: the smoothness of Michael Holding, for whom the words grace and graceful seemed to have been minted; the frenetic energy in Malcolm Marshall and Andy Roberts. Think of Joel Garner, who loomed over batsmen like a church steeple. And think of Keith Miller, John Snow, Fred Trueman, Frank Tyson, Wes Hall, Ray Lindwall, Brett Lee, *et al.* If you could put Larwood in front of them now, you'd see each one give a deferential low bow towards him.

At five foot seven and a half inches tall, and less than eleven stone in weight, Harold Larwood looked physically less formidable than his predecessors, contemporaries or successors, but he produced enough fierce heat to turn the most bellicose of batsmen into pacifists against



Harold Larwood and Bill Voce reminisce on the outfield at Trent Bridge during the third Test match against Australia, July 1977. The interviewer is the BBC's Peter West.

him. He was a devastatingly brutal and physically intimidating bowler, who routinely inflicted pain. He bruised flesh, broke bones, knocked batsmen unconscious, had them hoisted off on a stretcher and hospitalized. Some deliveries were so fast that it was impossible to duck or dance out of the way of them. If Larwood hit you, with uppercut digs into the gut or chest, or with a ball that skidded like a pebble off water onto the thigh bone, the mathematicians calculated that it was the equivalent of absorbing two tonnes.

Among the men who kept wicket to him, Les Ames used to say that he stood so far back that he was 'in another county' when he took the ball. During Larwood's first tour to Australia in 1928–29, George Duckworth laid strips of raw beef inside his gloves to protect his palms. The stench from the meat in the dry Australian heat made his slip fielders bilious. Duckworth's palms hurt all the same. Nottinghamshire's Ben Lilley strapped his fingers and hands so heavily that he looked like a burns victim. He still chipped, fractured and broke bones and accepted it as a

part of a hazardous occupation. By the end of his career, the joints on Lilley's hand were badly knotted. The fingers were bent and thick and splayed, like tree branches.

A few overs of Larwood at his fastest were like a public stoning. He frightened batsmen out. Of his 1,427 first-class wickets – in an era when pitches were generally friendly for batsmen – 743 were bowled. It might be an exaggeration – but only a slight one – to say that he could turn a stump to sawdust. When Larwood bowled, the Trent Bridge groundstaff always made sure there were three sets of spare stumps: Larwood was certain to break, splinter or shave at least one of them, possibly two. He could turn a batsman to pulp too. *Wisden* provides supporting evidence of his extraordinary skill. He took one hundred wickets in a season eight times. He headed the first-class averages in five summers – 1927, 1928, 1931, 1932 and, post-Bodyline, 1936. No other bowler of the twentieth century – or after it – has equalled that feat. His sprint to the crease was so fast that he had a 'drag' of 32 inches after his final stride.

None of this seemed possible to me when I eventually saw him. He resembled my grandfather; a kindly gent who would slip you a crafty ten bob for sweets and comics, and tip his hat and stand up when a woman came into a room. It was impossible to believe that, during Bodyline, the Australians could ever have labelled this old man 'The Wrecker', 'The Murderer on Tip Toe' or 'The Killer'. Or that he'd been spat at in the face. Or that he'd been called 'a bastard' who should 'fuck off home'. Or that he'd ever been sent hate mail – unsigned letters written in red and green ink that threatened to poison or shoot him and then feed him to the dingoes.

I remember the fuss around Larwood's return to Nottingham in 1977, the frisson of anticipation for me. The homecoming headlines in the local newspapers were strung across the page like bunting. After he caught sight of something better than austerity Britain and emigrated to Australia in 1950, a decision which seemed utterly implausible at the time, Larwood had been back only once before, almost a decade earlier. He had neither the finances nor the inclination to return more often. But I'd seen a few snatched seconds of him on TV six months earlier during the Centenary Test in Melbourne. Alongside his 'mucker' Bill Voce, he was introduced, and his name put on the scoreboard. He and Voce went out to the wicket. It was as if a history book had been opened and the two of them had walked straight off the page: 44 years had passed since the

pair bowled in Australia together. The difference in physique remained striking. Voce was a wide, tall, bull-muscled man, very evidently a quick bowler in his playing days. Beside him, Larwood was diffident and almost bird-like. You couldn't conceive that he had been at least five yards faster than his friend. He had the light build of a spinner, who might once have given the odd one a tweak and turned it a foot. Voce took off his jacket, handed it to Larwood and began to mark out his run theatrically with long strides. The crowd adored the make-believe. As the scene was briefly played out, it became obvious from the applause and the admiring expressions on faces all around the MCG that the Australian public regarded Larwood as a figure to be venerated. In Melbourne and at Trent Bridge, where Larwood looked so contented with his lot, and comfortably at ease with himself, I would never have detected the malevolent legacy of Bodyline. In time I came to realize that the impact of it had changed everything for him.

* * *

On the day when I saw him at Trent Bridge I was aware that Bodyline had made Larwood's name, briefly bringing him commercial benefit in a decade when the basic salary for a six-month Ashes tour was a miserly £400. I didn't know it had broken him for a long while afterwards, or begun his black disillusionment with cricket, which culminated in his desertion of the professional game and a decade spent living – as he starkly put it – as a 'recluse'. I didn't realize – because Larwood shared it with no one but his family and closest friends – the mental torment he'd been through, the grievances he had silently stored up, the anger that had settled like a stone inside him. He became unsparing with himself, and the interior monologues about Bodyline dominated his waking hours. It was grief and mourning on a grand scale. I didn't know either about the smears and whispers, the words that slid out of the side of the mouth or from behind the back of the hand about him and his bowling action: the accusations – which Donald Bradman implied in 1960 with his use of cinefilm from Bodyline – that Larwood was 'a chucker', a man who threw his fastest ball.

When I did find out, it struck me that Larwood embodied the poet Dryden's line that: 'Ev'n victors are by victories undone.' With 33 wickets, he was the undisputed victor of Bodyline. But it was a pyrrhic victory.

The series – Douglas Jardine's plot, his use of Larwood to nullify Bradman's majesty and the responses it provoked – camouflages achingly sad human consequences. History embalmed Larwood in the Bodyline series, as though he died bowling it. As a cricketer, he is preserved only in its controversy. As a man, he is hardly preserved at all except in the place in which he was born and the places where he lived.

Bodyline is so familiar that it doesn't require an elaborate description. The basic dictionary definition is enough: 'Bodyline: the policy of bowling the ball straight at the batsman so that it will strike the body.' Larwood protested that the term Bodyline was 'evil' and 'detestable' because it suggested that he bowled specifically to maim the batsman. He called it, less abrasively, 'leg theory' (its dictionary definition is notably less threatening: 'Leg theory: the policy of bowling on the striker's legs with a trap of leg-side fielders'). Whichever phrase you prefer – and Bodyline is the convenient shorthand – Larwood became inseparable from it. It attached itself to him like the hyphen in a double-barrelled name. Everything about Larwood, and everything he did, bore the memory of the thirteen weeks of that Ashes series. The complicated presence of that past always lurked in his present. Bodyline defined him to such an extent that his name was used as the way into debates about it. He died knowing what the opening line of his obituaries would be. 'It'll be Harold Larwood, the Bodyline bowler,' he'd say.

The strength of any plan depends on its timing. For Jardine, time and tide were synchronized in 1932–33. Larwood was bowling with firebrand energy. He was hardened by seven seasons in the first-class game. He knew all the tricks. Mere figures alone don't reflect the scale of the psychological advantage he gave Jardine in Australia. His softening-up of a batsman so that Voce or Gubby Allen could remove them later on; the turmoil and apprehension he created within the Australian dressing room and especially in Bradman's psyche; and the swagger and brash cockiness he displayed, a 'no bastard's going to beat me' attitude, which gave the team a belief in itself. With Larwood alongside him as both rapier and bludgeon, Jardine couldn't lose. The Australians tacitly conceded as much in the widespread adoption of the lines from a music-hall revue, which were written when Bodyline was fresh and occupying acres of newsprint. Many a true word is said in jest, and the song expressed Australian thoughts more perfectly than any contemporaneous report ever managed to achieve:

Now this new kind of cricket
Takes courage to stick it,
There's bruises and fractures galore.
After kissing their wives
And insuring their lives,
Batsmen fearfully walk out to score.
With a prayer and a curse
They prepare for the hearse,
Undertakers look on with broad grins.
Oh, they'd be a lot calmer,
In Ned Kelly's armour,
When Larwood, the wrecker, begins.

Larwood dismissed such doggerel as 'drivel'. But at his pace, and with his precision accuracy – he could hit three florins left on a length – it's debatable whether even Ned Kelly's armour would have been enough to repel him. A ball from Larwood would probably have punched a hole clean through it.

The cardinal points of Bodyline have been so well mapped that the mention of it instantly creates a jumble of moving images in the mind. The Adelaide Oval, the crucible for its ugly passions, is dipped in pure light for the third Test. There is the sweep of the overflowing Giffen Stand, its flags aflutter. There is Larwood bowling at full throttle, the ball bumped into the pitch and taken by a wicketkeeper standing in the far distance. There is Bradman backing away, mostly well outside leg stump. There is the Australian captain Bill Woodfull taking a ball over the heart from Larwood and clutching his breastbone. There is Bert Oldfield struck on the head – again from a Larwood delivery – and staggering away like a drunk thrown out of a saloon bar. There is Jardine in his Harlequin cap and white silk cravat, his stick frame like a Giacometti sculpture. There are eight pairs of clutching hands waiting for the leg-side catch. There are the mounted state police.

What came next – the fear of a feral riot, the accusations that Bodyline just wasn't cricket and the string of cables between the MCC and the Australian Cricket Board of Control, which threatened the rest of the tour and even relations between the two countries, is constantly raked over in search of any fact that might have been overlooked or any minor detail worthy of reinterpretation.

Those of us devoted to sport are frequently guilty of magnifying its importance. Sometimes we over-dramatize and hype it, judge it disproportionately and give it a status that on sober reflection is nearly always either wrong-headed or plainly unmerited. We just get carried away. But Bodyline is one of the very rare examples of a seminal sporting event, the significance of which is genuine and lasting and transcends the narrow field of the sport itself. Even people who neither cared for, nor knew anything about cricket, felt compelled to voice an opinion about it. Bodyline was the shifting of cricket's tectonic plates, which split the ground beneath its administrators. The political convulsions stretched almost to breaking the bonds of Empire and brought about a pivotal change in the game's rules.

Even today you can't be neutral on the issues that Bodyline created. Either you believe Larwood's claim that he didn't bowl specifically to injure or you condemn him for deliberately trying to cause bodily harm. Either you believe the Australian batsmen were too ready to squeal about Bodyline or you argue that its deployment was an unjustifiable case of gross intimidation, which shattered the spirit and the ethics of the game. And either you think the MCC was treacherous and cruelly pusillanimous in the way it sacrificed Larwood's Test career, having failed both to persuade and then threaten him into apologizing for bowling Bodyline, or you feel that its action was diplomatically prudent and for the long-term benefit of the game.

The repercussions that flowed from Bodyline washed away the rest of Larwood's Test career. He was the scapegoat, tarnished for obeying his captain's instructions and subjugating the world's greatest batsman. As far as the MCC was concerned, he was unclean, an outcast. Were it not for the national bowling averages in the mid-1930s, Larwood said, he might as well have been 'invisible' as far as Lord's was concerned. The MCC hurt him with silence rather than with words. But the compelling aspect of Bodyline is what Larwood suffered after it was over. His tragedy and triumph is a drama of almost Shakespearean proportions. The main strands of the plot, and the various sub-plots that grew in a tangled vine around it, embrace betrayal and injustice, sacrifice and class snobbery, loyalty and, eventually, redemption, reconciliation and peace.

Whatever your view of the MCC – and mine is that its action was callous and morally indefensible – Larwood was tossed aside for expediency's sake, as if he no longer mattered to them as either a bowler

or a human being. His work was over, and he could be dismissed and forgotten. This was the period in which the demarcation between gentleman amateurs and salty professionals from working-class backgrounds was as well defined as the differences in military rank. The two camps didn't share a gate on to the outfield, let alone the same dressing room. Amateurs were given the courtesy of being addressed as Mr; professionals were written and spoken to by surname. The counties and the MCC showed a depressingly feudal attitude towards them. Most professionals were viewed as tradesman or hired hands, who did menial labouring jobs. The MCC got away with its shabby treatment of Larwood because the prevailing mood was that the pros were expendable. Devoid of duty and kindness, the MCC thought it owed Larwood nothing, and had no obligation to him. It didn't understand that for those embroiled in it, Bodyline was akin to a war, and the stresses it placed on its chief protagonists – the poor bloody infantry – induced symptoms that were related to shell-shock. There was the constant nervous tension Larwood felt at being the centre of attention. He was verbally abused inside and outside Australian grounds. Whenever he picked up a newspaper, or tuned in to the radio, his name was the prefix or suffix to a volley of criticism about unsportsmanlike behaviour. After Adelaide, there was always the prospect of personal bodily harm too. There were plenty of people prepared to pick a fight with him. At home he found that the Post Office knew where to find him. Letters, their envelopes marked with nothing more than 'H. Larwood, Fast Bowler', were soon stacked in towers in his lounge or waiting to be collected from Trent Bridge. 'My living room was like a sorting office,' he said. Larwood opened every letter and defied his wife, Lois, who wanted to 'make a bonfire' in the backyard and burn the most malicious. He was called 'dirty', a 'liar', a 'lousy cow' and a 'craven Pommie bastard', who would 'get what's coming to you'. Even Englishmen accused him of 'not being an Englishman' himself. One letter he brought back from Australia didn't even carry his name. Instead, the sender crudely drew the Devil – horns, long tail, pointy beard, three-pronged trident – running up to a set of stumps with a ball in his right hand. It was automatically delivered to Larwood's hotel room in Adelaide.

Who else could it have been for?

* * *

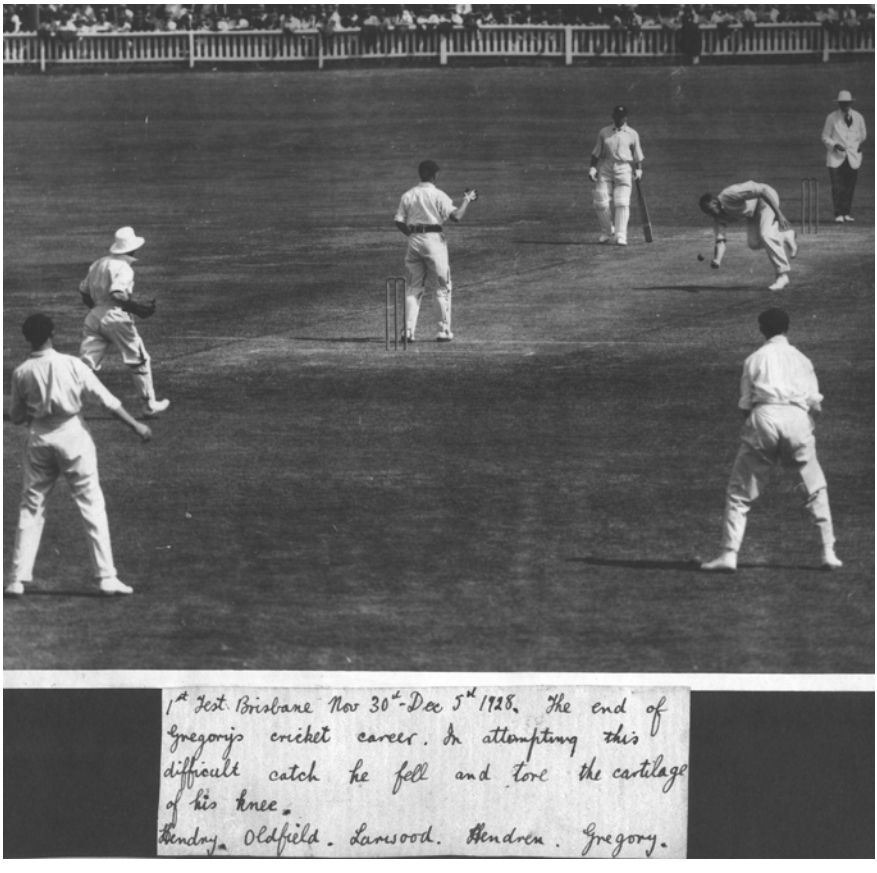
As well as coping with the vilification after Bodyline, Larwood faced the prospect of premature retirement. On the concrete-hard Australian pitches, which had no 'give' in them, he wrenched and jarred his joints and his feet were always sore and blistered. In the second Test at Melbourne he took off his left boot to find the socks soaked in blood. He wrung them out like a wet towel. By the time he'd finished, his hands were bloody too. In the final Test at Sydney, his body failed him. He damaged his left foot, which blackened from heel to toe, and never bowled as quickly again. He lost his gift of speed.

What Larwood needed was a tenderly supervised convalescence. Neither Nottinghamshire nor the MCC recognized it as necessary. But the agonies that Bodyline caused him were disguised behind a gutsy show of pride. The private wound is always the deepest, and Larwood suffered alone. He was confused and bitter. He felt alienated, and experienced an inconsolable emptiness that he was unable to articulate. Strength of character, and the fear of being labelled weak, wouldn't allow him to betray any of this publicly. Although his fixed ideas of fairness and faith were torn out by the root, and he was forced to re-evaluate and then re-order his entire life, Larwood survived the dark torture that used to visit him in spasms during his early middle age. Today we can stick the label of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' on what Larwood went through because of Bodyline, and offer compassion and a way of treating it. In the 1930s, it went undiagnosed. The signs were ignored, the sufferer was left to 'heal thyself'. Larwood sent out distress signals that went unanswered in the mid-to-late 1930s: loss of sleep, panic attacks, bouts of drinking and aggression born out of frustration. There was no agent to advise him, no public relations man to counsel him, no personal assistant to tidy up for him. He was on his own.

When I think about the desolation that Larwood experienced, and the way he eventually cut himself off from his former self because of it, I appreciate why the sense of recrimination took so long to leave him and was eventually overtaken by a different hurt. He regarded his treatment as unjust and dealt with it by leaving behind both cricket and his home in Nottingham. In his own mind he exaggerated – wrongly but understandably – the depth of feeling against him. When he realized his mistake, what rankled were not the original slights, real or imagined, but how much time he had wasted worrying about them. He could never claw back that lost time; he could only reconcile himself to the hard fact of the

loss itself. With the clarity that hindsight brings, Larwood saw that he hadn't been damned at all. Far from it. In Australia, he discovered how much he was liked and genuinely respected. In England, as I witnessed at Trent Bridge, he was treated as a deity. The Australians still thought of Bodyline as by murder fed and by murder clothed. But no one at the end hated its perpetrator or thought him monstrous.

* * *



Brisbane, 1928: Jack Gregory lunges to take the ball at the end of his delivery stride, but loses his footing and tears his cartilage. The injury ends his cricket career. The batsman is Harold Larwood, who goes on to make 70. Patsy Hendren is the non-striker.

As Larwood admitted, Bodyline was designed and executed solely for one purpose – to 'kick' Bradman into submission. Its success is gauged in two sets of figures. Bradman's average against England in 1930 was 139.14. His average in 1932–33 was 56.57. By his own superhuman standards, The Don failed.

Larwood was a fastidious collector of his own memorabilia: cuttings, menu cards, photographs, letters. Through them he reconstructed his past. 'It's for when me memory goes,' he would say in the Nottinghamshire accent that he never shed. Larwood kept some of his ephemera in his tan-coloured MCC suitcase and tucked it underneath his bed for safe keeping. Photographs were pressed in black-paged albums. Alongside them he wrote his own captions, the writing cramped but clear, so there would be no mystery or ambiguity about who was in the photo or where and when it was taken.

In particular, he cherished two photographs. The first was of one of his heroes, the Australian fast bowler Jack Gregory, whom the camera catches straining to take a catch off Larwood's batting at Brisbane in 1928. Gregory lunges for the ball. He is sprawling forward. His mouth gapes open and his shadow falls across the pitch. His long fingers are cupped, as if he's a thirsty man trying to scoop up water. The ball is six inches from his hand. A fraction of a second later he will lose his balance and fall over in dazed pain. He will tear the ligaments in his right knee. His Test career will be over. The ball will drop beside him.

The second (and most significant) photograph was taken during the



Donald Bradman misreads a Harold Larwood delivery in the first innings of the final Bodyline Test at Sydney. He turns away from the ball and it strikes him, as Larwood always made clear, 'smack on the arse'.

final Bodyline Test in 1933. It is one of a sequence of four, and Larwood has added his own commentary on a tiny square of yellow paper glued onto the page: the photograph shows Bradman struck for the only time during the series. A skidding ball hasn't climbed as high as he expected. As the shutter clicks, Bradman has his back to the camera. He is bent at the waist and has begun to fall away behind the stumps. The bat remains gripped in his left hand. Larwood has written plainly: 'Bradman, trying all sorts of shots to combat the leg-side attack.'

Newspaper reports claimed that Larwood struck him on the forearm. Not so, said Larwood. Those privileged enough to be given the photograph to examine were asked the rhetorical question: 'You know where I got Bradman?' There'd be a well-rehearsed pause before he'd lean forward and deliver his punchline: 'On the arse.' No matter how many times he recounted that story, Larwood always laughed, as though telling it for the first time. The thought of the mottled purple bruise on Bradman's backside made him smile mischievously. 'There'd never been a lot of love lost between us,' he'd admit, flatly.

He never bowled to Bradman again. But Bradman and Bodyline would still shape the rest of his life.