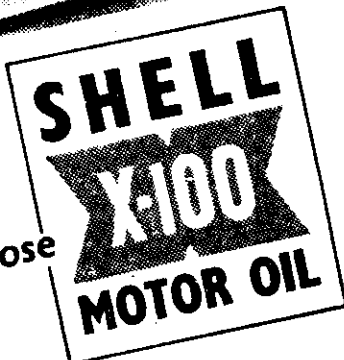


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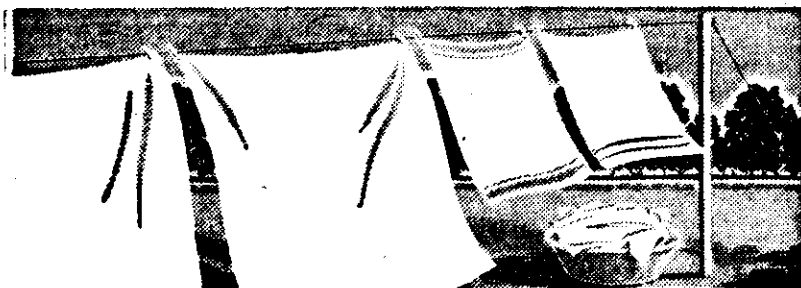
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John Arlott's Cricket

BY the time these words are in print the superlatives will all have been used, the excitement will have died away, and only the historians of cricket will be thinking of the fifth Test between England and Australia. There is, however, one feature of the game—and indeed of the whole series—which has not been much mentioned, except privately by people who heard the broadcasts. The commentaries were excellent, though one man above all others gained the interest and respect of New Zealand listeners. John Arlott's success has shown again that the most persuasive speaker on any subject is the man who, in addition to knowing what he is talking about, knows a great many other things as well. The mere expert is not enough: he can have all the statistics, can give the facts precisely, and yet be dull or commonplace.

Arlott has much more to offer. His voice is full, rather deep, with an earthy tone which falls agreeably on the ear. This makes him immediately recognisable. Men who use what has come to be known—not always correctly—as the BBC accent are so like one another that they could easily remain anonymous, whereas Arlott could not conceal himself if he wanted to. Further, he never forgets that cricket is a game, and that people are playing it. He is interested yet relaxed; and excitement, when it comes, is never shrill, but adds richness to the voice. His eye takes in the pitch, the flight of the ball, the batsman's stroke, the movements of fieldsmen; but it also sees the human comedy, and what is seen is described clearly, with wit and insight, and with a salting of literary allusion and quotation. We know that we are listening to someone for whom cricket is not entirely art, sport or science, or even an imperial occasion, but an event which expresses many things not obviously connected with bat and ball.

This mellow interpretation of a game may be possible only in cricket. If a commentator quoted

Oscar Wilde at a football match, some doubts would be felt of his sanity, and people would write indignantly to newspapers. In a fast-moving game there is no time for comment which does not help listeners to see more clearly what is happening. Moreover, the thing has to be taken seriously; it is against the spirit of football to descend from the high, declamatory tone. If there must be gaiety and good fellowship, its proper place is believed to be before and after the match—in the processions and invasions which seem to follow the Ranfurly Shield on its travels around the country, and in the tumult of the bars when the returning crowds are in the mood for celebration or post mortem.

There is plenty of action in cricket. A duel between bowler and batsman can be exciting, but attack and defence may have slow and interrupted crises: there is time for the eye to move about the field, time for irrelevant thoughts, even for meditation. According to one definition, quoted in *The Listener* a few months ago in a different context, cricket is "something the English—not being a naturally religious people—have had to invent to give them some idea of the eternal." Could that have been said by anyone who had really lived inside the game? One of the deeper satisfactions of cricket is in the curious way it epitomises life itself. To the spectator, it is all there: the alternations of luck, the recurring tedium and the sudden changes, the inexplicable failures and the noble achievements, the delicate balance and interactions of the individual and the team, the lordship of the unexpected, the rewards of perseverance and skill, the penalties of carelessness, the intervention of forces from outside through the uncontrollable weather, and at the end the threads drawn together, the stumps taken out upon the summons of time, the shadows spreading on the grass, and the lights twinkling from the pavilion. Can it be surprising if a poet knows best how to tell us the fortunes of the game?