

Indian Summers

Australian cricket's relationship with the Indian sub-continent has been marred by prejudice and mistrust. Rodney Cavalier spoke to the author of a new book on the subject.

After nearly eight hours at the crease, Dean Jones' physiology was falling apart. The humidity in the Chepauk Stadium at Madras was draining the energy. The sun was blazing. The stands blocked whatever relief there might have been from a stray breeze off the Bay of Bengal. An open sewer ran right past the ground. Jones had accumulated a century by then, carried on past 150, and now he was begging to get back to the pavilion.

Throughout the innings, Mike Coward, one of the tiny Australian press corps, had trained his binoculars on Jones from the shaded but steamy pressbox. He was witnessing the prelude to the astonishing finish to this First Test against India in 1986-87. It was just another day too, a day spent watching cricket, writing and filing against deadlines made impossible for the Australian newsmen by the difference in time zones.

Coward had been reporting cricket full-time during the 80s in a career that began as a copyboy in 1963. Writing cricket was what he had always wanted. By the end of the West Indies tour of 1988-89, cricket had become more than he had ever wanted. Mike Coward was burned out professionally, the summers had become endless as he followed the Australian cricketers across the hemispheres. Well before the West Indies tour ended, he had been telling colleagues the season was going to be his last.

He would endure one more Indian summer. He had a book in mind, a history of Australian cricket on the Indian sub-continent.

Even for a sport that defies a scholarly interest in its arcana, the project was pushing specialisation to new frontiers. Allen & Unwin, publishers, blessed with a certifiable cricket fanatic as its managing director, was offering every encouragement. The *Sydney Morning Herald* granted a year's leave of absence. In June 1989 Coward took up residence in a fishing village 20 kilometres south of Madras, armed with a Brother EP22 typewriter and several reams of thermal paper. He might have written his book based on his extensive notes of past tours and interviews with the Australian players in each era. That was not the point.

"I wanted to do as much as I could in the environment," he explained back in his inner-Sydney study. "It was a big house, bigger than I needed. I would try to discipline myself to start early because of the heat in the south of India. If I was having a run I would keep going; 8 to 10 hours would not bother me. Some days I could be pacing up and down and getting very angry, talking to the geckos on the wall or doing any damn thing. Of a night, if I had a good productive time, I went down to the beach and played cricket with the kids."

Coward was particularly keen to search the files of *The Hindu* newspaper for details of Australia's unofficial 1935-36 tour, of which little was known in Australia. "I had the help of everyone at *The Hindu* to go through the files. I wish you could see the library at *The Hindu*, it is just remarkable. It is a very, very old building: the old manila files piled high. They dwarf these six or eight men who sit around, some still with eyeshades—it is like taking a leaf from the midst of the Raj, filled by warm and fascinating people going at a tempo we have forgotten about."

It was not until 1956-57 that Australia made its first official tour of India and Pakistan, and by the 80s three-Test series on the sub-continent were a regular feature of the overseas calendar. Between 1935 and the 1980s the knowledge of Australian cricketers on the sub-continent was limited to impressions gathered by short strolls in port cities and to perspectives formed in cricket fields, hotels and airports and the journeys between. The cricketers had firm preconceptions of local conditions before ever setting foot on the sub-continent, etched by dressing room lore, horror stories of wasting diseases that struck down players in their prime. Partly in reaction, well into the 1980s, the Australian authorities sent a doctor with the team. Now a lone physiotherapist accompanies the team, and team photos confirm that players are now more adventurous in their wanderings.

Coward's book, *Cricket Beyond the Bazaar* (Allen & Unwin, \$24.95) is a comprehensive history of the 12 tours by Australian teams to Pakistan and India, plus the one Test against Sri Lanka in 1982-83. Although he provides great detail of the matches, Coward's real fascination is with the society that produced the cricketers and cricket supporters.

"There has been a shift in the sphere of influence in the world of cricket," Coward says. "England's influence is diminishing on and off the ground, year in, year out. Suddenly, the greater Asian cricket basin has emerged. I thought it an interesting and important time for the book to be written. There is no doubt that there is an unwillingness in this country to embrace the Third World. We are frightened by it, we are uncertain about it, it seems an alien culture. The cricketers reflect that. There has been a greater emotional maturity in recent tours."

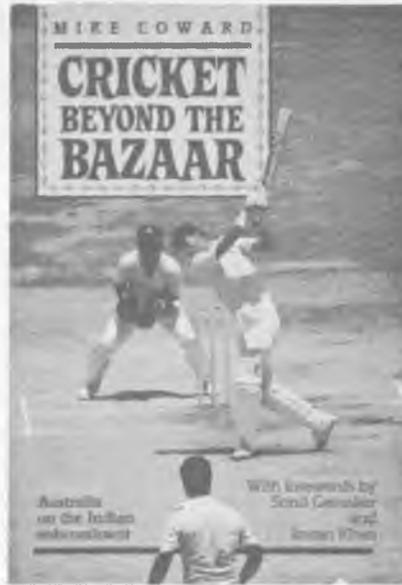
Coward reflected carefully before responding to questions about the alleged cheating of Pakistan umpires: "There is no doubt they have had some appalling umpires over the years. Yet I find cheating very hard to believe. You cannot get away from the fact that Indian and Pakistan societies

are very different. There is corruption at all levels. There is corruption at all levels of our own society. Whether it extends to cricket, I can't say. I've made five tours there, I've dealt a lot with the officials and the umpires, and I've had no reason myself to believe that there is corruption or graft at the top level of cricket."

Why then did such avowed traditionalists as Australian coach Bob Simpson and manager Colin Egar react as they did—by accusing the umpires of bias?

"I believe that they behaved as they would not have behaved in any other country. I don't know why: Bob Simpson has been there before as a captain; he has had great success there. To me it was inexplicable. The most damning thing is that in 1982 the same umpires stood in the First Test and the Australians were so pleased with them that they asked for them to be reappointed.

"You ask yourself: this time there were exactly the same two officials, exactly the same secretary of the board, why did they not go to them at the end of



the match and say that they were not satisfied with them, that they didn't want them reappointed?

"Malcolm Gray, the Chairman of the Board, had flown to Brisbane before the Australians left and appealed to them to temper their remarks, to be thoughtful, diplomatic and caring be-

cause it was a sensitive time in the history of international cricket.

"This was ignored. It was a delicate time because the West Indies wanted extreme action for contact with South Africa."

Coward possesses a fine narrative style: it is a considerable pity that there is not regular space in an Australian newspaper for him to reflect on the implications of modern cricket, here and overseas. He is, as well, a notable mimic and humourist, though he has restrained this bent here.

This is not a book of pretences; it makes no claim that cricket is a substitute for diplomacy or war. International cricket is not going to be the bridgehead for cultural breakthroughs. One incident says it all: Coward met a child at Peshawar, near the Khyber Pass, who recognised him as a person from "Border's country". The child had not heard of Australia.

RODNEY CAVALIER is a freelance journalist and cricket acolyte.

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Fall of the House of Ten

Commercial TV is in the doldrums. Meanwhile, American TV has been striking out in new directions. David Nichols reports.

In July 1989, the Ten Network's Sydney studios were the scene of a sumptuous luncheon-cum-press conference; print media representatives were flown in from all over Australia for one day at Ten TV Australia as it would be known from that day onwards. The occasion was, of course, new station manager Bob Shanks' announcement of his revamping strategy to give the network stronger ratings and greater financial stability.

This reporter left half-way through the proceedings; the questions went on interminably. I don't think I missed much - and, anyway, it was only a few months before Shanks' lowbrow (he used a different term which meant much the same thing) reprogramming was deemed a failure.

At the time of writing, only two of Shanks' changes remain on air. One is the inner-city soap *E Street* which he 'glamourised'. The other is the Australian *Candid Camera*. And if Ten TV Australia was in a spot of trouble pre-Shanks, it is now in decidedly dire straits. Even the once top-rating *Neighbours* is now coming a sad fourth behind ABC News. The Lane Cove studios where Shanks' pronouncements were so confidently made are now empty and about to be torn down for a shopping complex, or to be bought by Channel 9, which wants cheaper premises - depending who you believe.

More recently, in its city offices, Ten has seen even more upheavals. Director of programming Vicki Jones recently got the boot after her many attempts to implement an 'entertain-

ment network' concept were rejected by the cautious powers-that-be at Ten.

It was a grim year for commercial TV finances all round. While we can speculate on the downfall of magnates like Skase and Bond, as well as the odd Steve Cosser, the fact remains that TV last year was full of the same old crap.

But the exceptions, surprisingly, have been excellent. The speculation that Ten would become a 'quality' station along the lines of Britain's Channel 4 (this line of thinking ran concurrently with Jones' entertainment station) may have brought wry smiles to some viewers' faces, but the truth is that Ten has already tried and failed with some excellent shows. American shows, like *Married With Children* and *thirtysomething*.

Both these shows turn American TV conventions on their head. *Married With Children* attacks not only the American sitcom family but the real family with a collection of the crudest misfits ever seen on the screen. The show rated better than any other on its home turf last year. Here, Ten publicity couldn't quite grasp it, nor could the critics, who seemed to take it entirely at face value.

Thirtysomething is a different kettle of fish but, in its own way, attempted a new reading of an old story; it's an 'issues' soap in the *Big Chill* vein. Somehow, Ten forfeited its right to screen *thirtysomething* after Shanks gave it the boot, and the Seven Network is now reluctantly in charge of it.

These two shows were essential to American Network TV. Faced with competition from cable stations and video stores, the networks were forced to tinker with the unprecedented: the notions of quality and depth.

'Quality' is, of course, highly subjective, and this is reflected in the phrase 'good TV', usually taken to mean little more than 'action-packed' or 'easily consumed' TV. Many ALR readers would rarely stray beyond SBS or ABC when they're looking for 'quality'; and the idea of commercial TV featuring watchable shows in prime-time might seem ludicrous to them. Things are different in the US where there is no government network and ratings are the top priority for all stations. In a search for a new twist to the old routine, programmers found a new kind of TV: TV made for a nation brought up entirely on TV. Hence, *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, a sitcom about a stand-up comedian running a sitcom - that is, a show about a show about a show, or - more obliquely - *Murphy Brown*, a comedy about a current affairs news team, peppered with references to real events.

But the great success story of American TV in 1990 was *The Simpsons*, which Ten hopes to launch soon. *The Simpsons* are *Married With Children's* Bundys taken one step further; they're a cartoon family but they're an adult cartoon family. One episode deals with mother Marge's affair with her bowling instructor. Another has the Simpsons accept an Armenian exchange student who spies on the nuclear power plant where father Homer Simpson works. Another had a children's TV clown become the centre of a mass witchhunt when he apparently robs a 7-11 store! *The Simpsons* was created by cartoonist Matt Groening, best known for his *Life in Hell* strips.

Comedy is the main area for bursts of TV originality because comedy's already surreal and by nature allows easy ridicule of TV tradition. David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* - another program Ten is hoping to use to recapture lost audiences - was described at its launch as "*Blue Velvet* meets *Peyton Place*". Lynch directed only three of the first seven *Twin Peaks* episodes, but the show has his particular vision stamped all over it. It's a murder mystery that took America by storm,



The eccentric Nadine Hurley (Wendy Robie), one of the stars of *Twin Peaks*

with the question "Who killed Laura Palmer?" on everyone's lips. There are a possible 20 or so suspects, each of them particularly weird and each involved as well in bizarre sub-plots. Leading the show is CIA man Dale Cooper, played with usual aplomb by Kyle McLachlan. Right down to its deliriously infectious theme music, *Twin Peaks* is the must-see event of 1991. One only hopes Ten can shake itself from the doldrums long enough to entice the Australian public into watching it.

On the homefront - where each station is required by law to screen a certain amount of local drama - Ten barely competes in the drama ratings these

days, and the Nine network doesn't even enter the running. The failure of Nine's great hope *Family and Friends* leaves *The Flying Doctors* as its only regular production. Seven's *Home and Away* is doing well despite large cut-backs, and *A Country Practice*, certainly the most liberal and informative soap Australia has ever seen, is still rating well after nearly a decade.

Seven was less lucky with its police drama *Skirts*: in fact, *Skirts* typifies what is wrong with the whole of Australian commercial TV drama. It was neither good realistic TV, nor was it good soap. In fact, for something that aimed for the pseudo-reality of English TV drama *The Bill*, the closest

thing *Skirts* had in common with real life was its dullness. One almost got the feeling that its producers got scared while making it, and quickly ransacked some old *Cop Shop* scripts for the correct measures of cliché and tired storylines. Whatever the reason, *Skirts'* cast did a good job with very uneven material. Not that the programming helped at all — *Skirts* (what a name!) was floundering in its timeslot.

Meanwhile, Ten's drama offerings have been even less popular than usual. The most loyal of *Neighbours* fans would have to admit that the show these days is a complete bore. Recent storylines had Gemma being

sacked from her job in a dress shop and Ryan teased for wanting to become a policeman. Still, the South American con-woman hell-bent on marrying Paul to get citizenship was interesting, especially her closing speech after being unmasked; it carried reminders of the glory days of the time Helen was abducted and locked in a shed in the cemetery by an escaped prisoner posing as a priest.

Ten is hoping that its recent car-bomb/gun-shot wounds/shipwreck storylines will work for *E Street*, for my money the best Aussie soap in many a moon. *E Street* has everything, in classic soap tradition. The love of the Reverend Bob for Elly as she recovers from gunshot wounds to the head; teenagers Harley and Tony crave constantly for each other's bodies (unfortunately this tends to mean falling off the couch a lot, but we can use our imaginations!), the religious virgin policeman Max and the high-on-life Alice...Well, they're my favourites. But, sadly, even *E Street* has been under constant threat of cancellation due to low ratings — here's hoping it finally 'takes off' (rather than 'gets taken off') in 91.

But, ultimately, what do people want from TV? Obviously the stations don't know, and perhaps viewers don't either. Whatever it is, it's certainly not more of the same. Perhaps the first step would be to ask them directly. Both Britain's ITV and BBC have developed intelligent, watchable shows on which members of the viewing public appear live or on pre-filmed segments to criticise programs shown the previous week. Often, they have the chance to take the program's director or writer to task; station management can get dragged into the argument, too. This is no ABC *Backchat*, with the snide Tim Bowden chuckling over viewers' letters read out in funny voices. This is genuinely accountable television.

But it's the high price of everything - programs, presenters, executives - that is causing Australian TV its major headaches at the moment. TV executive salaries are notoriously inflated. Or take Mike Gibson who, until his recent sacking presented the Sydney show on Channel Ten. He is reported to have defected to Ten from Nine for \$5 million. Call me naive, but I can't see that anyone is worth \$5 million to

Australian TV. It's a huge gamble since Sydney didn't rate at all — it was one of the programs targeted by Vicki Jones for the chop.

Drama, too, has budgets far beyond the comprehension of mortals. Judging by the excellent films produced by Australian film schools every year on next to no money, the stations must be employing the wrong people. Maybe a desire to spend on a par with the US has overridden any reasonable consideration of what would make good (or funny or thrilling) viewing.

The one thing, of course, that no one has ever seriously considered is that many Australians are tired of sitting in front of the 'instrument' for most of their conscious lives.

Well, maybe, but it's been a remarkably loyal 34-year love affair. For most of us born after the mid-50s, television is the main source for cultural reference and identity. No. We're just waiting for something new on the screen.

DAVID NICHOLS is a writer for teen magazines.

What the readers said

If the results of our recent readership survey (ALR 122) are anything to go by, our readers, on the whole, are satisfied with the style and content of ALR.

The majority said that ALR's main strength lay in its features (66%) and that it was unnecessary to carry shorter items (67%), though the number of existing columns was adequate (60%).

Most found ALR's writing accessible (76%) and it wasn't a chore to read the magazine (74%). Only 28% perceived ALR's design as too conservative. On the whole, our sample of readers felt that the magazine did not pay undue

attention to economic issues (80%) and did not want to increase "cultural" content over political (68%). They did, however, want to see greater coverage of environmental (43%) and Asian-Pacific issues (67%).

Rather interestingly, the sample (happily, 100) did not perceive the need for devoting additional space to women's issues, and did not categorise ALR as "a boy's magazine".

These findings are explained in part by the nature of the sample: 70% of the respondents were male - considerably

higher than a cross-section of the subscription base as a whole.

From the sample emerges the portrait of the average ALR reader as aged between 21 and 40, unmarried, university-educated and working most often in the public sector. He/she is predominantly heterosexual and Anglo-Australian. He/she does not belong to a political party and has been reading ALR for less than two years. He/she often eats in a restaurant, buys a book regularly — most usually on politics or current affairs — and sees a film at least once a month.

Thanks to everyone who responded to the survey, and congratulations to David Mehan of Chippendale, NSW, the winner of the survey draw — \$100 worth of books from the International Bookshop, Melbourne.