



SLIPS

cricket poems

by Mark Pirie



Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop

Paekakariki

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Cover photo by Gemma Claire

This book's for Harry, poet, friend and cricketer

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Mark Pirie was born in 1974, in Wellington, New Zealand. Work includes the anthology of young New Zealand writing, *The NeXt Wave* (University of Otago Press, 1998), the short story collection, *Swing*, and 16 poetry collections, including *Shoot*, *The Blues*, *Dumber*, *Wellington Fool*, *The Search*, and *London Notebook*. A new collection *Private Detective* has recently appeared from Kilmog Press, Dunedin. From 1995-2005, he edited and co-founded the literary magazine *JAAM* (Just Another Art Movement). His new and selected poems, *Gallery*, was published by Salt Publishing, Cambridge, England. He runs the small press HeadworX in Wellington. Mark has played cricket since he was a boy and has continued to play at senior level for two Wellington clubs Hutt Districts and Wellington Collegians, from Senior 3 level to one day social leagues, where he is well regarded for his fielding and catching ability.

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SLIPS

1

My first time
was at Junior
cricket

age 10,
and Jerry Coney
was there

telling me
to get down low.
I did

and was
promptly
hit hard by ball.

2

In an
Honours
exam

I put 'Vagina
Woolf' by
mistake

much to the
marker's delight
I'd imagine.

3
It's when
someone
sends

you a reply
with what
I call

a 'poetic
slip' – that's
when

a closet poet
has a subconscious
poetic thought.

THE PAVILION

Everyone likes to take
their chances: the dipping
catch at mid-on

grasped by urgent finger-tips,
or the unbeaten 50 that
has the opposition packing

early. Or the swinging ball
that sends the stumps
cartwheeling into the air.

But, as with cricket,
as with life, there's times
when things inevitably turn,

and even the best of us
spends their time stuck in the pavilion.

LEGACIES AND COLD STATS

For Harry

With cricket

 what always intrigues me
 are the legacies left behind,
and those players who
 never attain that legacy of ‘greatness’,
 yet play one ‘great’ innings.

On Astle’s retirement

 New Zealand has their own
 ‘great’ who’s modest batting averages
don’t fully register his ‘greatness’.
 What Astle will be remembered for
 ultimately, is his cavalier innings of 222
in a losing cause against England.
 It was the fastest double century
 and a record to this day.

Similarly I think of others like

 Lawrence Rowe, whose fabulous 302
 lit up the Windies at Bridgetown,
or those players who made much lesser scores
 but which became ‘great innings’ never repeated:
 C L King and Mike Veletta.

In the World Cup Final, 1979,

 King outshone the unquestionably great
 Sir Viv Richards

with a thrilling 86 off 66 balls
to put the game beyond reach of
England's batsmen and a dour Boycott.
In the '87 World Cup Final, Veletta smashed
45 off 31 balls, a pivotal knock
that set up Australia's win. When one comes
to do the stats on Astle,
cricketers must always keep in mind
this fallibility of cold stats.
A 'great' innings, like the one Astle played, will always remain
in people's minds, more than
an easy century in a tame draw or thrashing
(which becomes mere batting practice
against weaker teams). Fouled by cold stats,
one thinks of Victor Trumper,
batting often on wet pitches
and against strong attacks,
and the greatness he achieved.

AT BROWNS BAY

For Gemma

Walking to the Browns Bay shops,
I stopped to look your way
seeing your hair, eyes
your body, so lithe and tender,
beautiful in the breeze.

I held your hand and
walked with you down the hill,
past the cricket pitches and
houses, the playing fields of life.

Here we were, I thought, in another part
of the country I hadn't been in,
and I thought of how love can be like
that – suddenly you're there
and can't work out how
it happened – but you're there,
and the day glows bright.

THE NEW ZEALANDERS AT LORD'S, 2004

A see-saw struggle,
a tightly fought contest.

At the end, Hussain punches the air
in victory – or is it *disbelief*?

Botham called for his axe.
Strauss just wanted another ton.

Drama at the cricket.
Richardson played hard.

Everyone loves a battler.
McCullum though was last seen in the doldrums.

11 WAYS OF BEING DISMISSED

1
Merv Hughes
to Gooch,
who jabbing
down late

loses his
balance, and
sees the ball
heading

for the stumps.
Fiendishly,
he brushes
it away

with his hand
and Dickie
Bird's finger
goes up.

2
India's Ashok
Mankad, ducking
away from
a rising ball,

watches as
his cap lifts off
and falls onto
the stumps.

3
Ducat facing
McDonald,
his first Test
innings: he plays

a steer to gully
and the bat splits
lobbing the ball
to slip, while

the bottom
of his bat
tumbles to hit
the stumps.

4
Wayne Phillips
digging in
for a draw
cuts one
firmly into
Allan Lamb's boot,

the ricochet
travelling to
the ever alert
and close-in
David Gower.

5
Colin Wells,
in a County game,
1980, backs up
the batsman,

only to see a
straight drive
brush the flared
pants of
the bowler

and cannon
into the stumps.

6
Andrew Symonds
as ever,
smashes one,
but this time

so powerfully,
it crashes into
the non-striker
Clarke's ankle,

and tamely
loops up to Dilshan
walking in
at wide mid-on.

7
Like Gooch,
Vaughan loses
control for a moment
missing his sweep shot.

The ball not really
endangering the stumps
but Vaughan decides
to brush it away
anyway,

and the Indians appeal.

8
Inzamam, after
reaching his
hundred,

plays a full toss
back to
Steve Harmison

who quickly picks
up and throws
down the stumps.

Inzamam, shielding
himself from the ball,
is run out.

9
Salman Butt,
in the same series,
slashes a wide one

but straight onto
the forehead of
Trescothick.

Geraint Jones,
following
the ball closely

dashes, dives
and takes the rebound
cleanly.

10
de Villiers facing
Ashraful, watches
as a poor delivery

bounces twice in
front of him.
de Villiers

goes for the pull,
mistimes it and pops
the ball back

to a surprised
Ashraful. de Villiers
claims the 'no ball',

and Bucknor
sends him
on his way.

11
Tom Pugh,
in another
County game,
has yet to
score, when
he ducks
into a full toss.

The ball cracks
his jaw in
two places, right
in front of
the stumps, and
the umpire's
finger reluctantly
goes up:

'jaw before wicket'.

This poem is based on a Cricinfo article '10 Bizarre Dismissals ... and one that got away' by Andrew Miller and Will Luke.

LUNCH BREAK, INDIA, 1988

At the interval arrives the lunch –
With nappies for the hardier bunch.

This poem refers to the First Test between New Zealand and India in 1988. A virus had struck down the New Zealanders and makeshift nappies were worn by some of the players still on the field.

JOE

Joe walks through the park talking to himself, the way he always does. He comes up to meet us, a group of cricketers dressed in Saturday whites. We keep focused on the game.

“Afternoon Gentlemen,” Joe says as he starts to deliberate about his hat. Joe’s wearing a toy Policeman’s helmet. “See this, I got it given to me at a party recently ... bloody good eh! I always wanted to be a Policeman. Hey,”

he says, coming over to read the scorebook. “What’s the score, are yous 6 down eh? That’s right eh – 6 down. I know a bit about cricket.” He moves over to the scorer.

“Don’t distract me Joe,” I’m scoring. Joe talks away, and the scorer gets perplexed. “Hang on Joe, I’m doing the scoring.” Joe soon gives up, wanders off, and onto the

field of play ... He’s quickly told to stay off, and he says before leaving, “Now you won’t call the Police on me will you?” “Have a good day Joe,” the scorer says.

I watch his words aeroplane up and down his breath.

SEX LIFE

‘So, how’s your *sex life*?’ –
friends will say to you
like it’s some kind of sport.

It’s like being at the nets.
‘Get any wickets this week?’
translates as ‘*Made love yet?*’

And ‘Be careful of run outs’
means ‘keep her from
your mates’. Or, alternatively,

‘What’s your best score?’
could mean ‘Ever made it
with three or more?’

To me it’s all a bore.
Maybe something’s wrong
with *me* – and my ‘sex life’.

‘FIERY’ FRED

Freddie Trueman (1931-2006)

“...someone described him as a young bull and there was in his approach that majestic rhythm that emerges as a surprise in the Spanish fighting bull.” – John Arlott, *Fred*

Once the service
and the tributes are over,
and the dust settles as it must

History is what is left,
and History always looks
to change the strike.

Once, when on a visit
to Wellington, I met you
from a distance.

“Please welcome Freddie Trueman.”
The applause broke out
in our college assembly hall.

Different, I suppose, to
the unheeded noise as each
new wicket was snared.

That day, after assembly
and school had finished,
I went home and found my book,

looking for your action to follow.
In my room, I tried in vain
to arc my arm like the photo

as if I was a kid mimicking you
in the stands at Headingley
or The Oval. And now that you're gone

records remain: the first
to 300 Test wickets, devastating in
the home series against the Windies.

Those 300 wickets appear a long-broken
record now, especially in this
age of 700s, but I figure, even so,

you'd still be looking to include
yourself in any historical XI,
ruefully turning the strike over yet again.

BEN HOLLIOAKE

(1979-2002)

The night you jumped
in your car, drove, and then sadly
sped from life was an accident
few of us cricketers

fail to forget. No other
English Test player ever died
so young. 22 makes you seem
as tragic as a First World War poet.

You had the talent that's
for sure, your innings Vs Australia
in 1997, coolly dispatching
McGrath and Warne, at Lord's.

As you batted, so you lived flashily.
Today your brother Adam
was back on the field
playing for charity, and his

reappearance in the game
reminded us again of you, those
'what ifs?'. I think of your Wisden photo,
the shades still covering the loss.