

# Poison Pen

The prelude to Christmas and the dawn of the real new millennium produced little good cheer. In the subcontinent, implausible umpiring decisions, life bans for Mohammad Azharuddin and Ajay Sharma, and continuing investigations by Sir Paul Condon's team of 'sleaze-busters' cast a pall every bit as bad as the evening smog in Faisalabad.

In England, Mark Ramprakash's search for pastures new, which seems to have been going on for ages, again made the tabloids. In Australia, West Indies suffered the humility of sound drubbings by the all-conquering Australians, despite the arrival on the scene of Brian Lara's new girlfriend. Even the hacks were involved in an outbreak of dog eating dog.

In the case of the hackle-raising among the hacks, the *Daily Telegraph's* Michael Henderson, pronounced C-O-N-T-R-O-V-E-R-S-I-A-L, was the prime player. Michael writes well, if not always with the keenest insight into the game. He speaks his mind and he should be admired for that. But his judgements are sometimes unnecessarily harsh. When his targets are players, such as Ian Salisbury or Graeme Hick, his views are tolerated at least by colleagues, although some may wish for a kinder way of describing failure. When he picks on a venerated former plier of the same trade as himself, no longer in a position to answer back, such as E. W. Swanton, the fur tends to fly. Several pieces in *The Guardian* and one in *The Times* gave Michael a fair old roasting.

Stories that Henderson's original obituary of Swanton, written fittingly in his capacity as cricket correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph*, suffered a severe case of the spike may or may not be true. Certainly no appreciation under Henderson's by-line appeared. Since then, his determination to get his views into print have surfaced in the December issue of a cricket magazine (yes, there are others besides *The Cricketer*). The opportunity presented itself when a book, paying homage to Swanton, was published.

It isn't so much that some of what he says about the EWS style of writing, his occasional pomposity and lack of poetry is not valid. None of us is perfect. Jim's writing was once famously described in an after-dinner speech by J.J. Warr as 'the 10 Commandments written by Enid Blyton'. Swanton was there and nobody laughed louder than he. It is more the motivation behind Henderson's criticism. Swanton was

no Cardus, nor yet was he Arlott. But he was a professional journalist to his fingertips. Cricket was a passion. He ran tours overseas. He made things happen. Above all, he made *Telegraph* readers feel that he was the voice of cricket and that was an achievement in itself. He wrote for the *Telegraph*; writing for *The Guardian* demanded other gifts, the facts sometimes secondary to the style. You pays your money and you takes your choice. But it is ungenerous to demand that anyone who is not possessed with the lyrical gifts of a Cardus or an Arlott, or indeed a John Woodcock, should be rubbished because of it.

Suspensions lurk that there may be a hidden agenda, one hidden even from Henderson himself. Maybe subconsciously you are supposed to be searching as a result of phrases in the Henderson review, for someone who does meet the Henderson criteria, so when Michael writes: '*...he was a poor writer. There was no romance in his soul and no poetry in his veins. Swanton never surprises the reader*', are we supposed to look around and ask ourselves who does possess these virtues among present day correspondents? And are we supposed to come up with the present music-loving, teddy bear-carrying cricket correspondent of the *Telegraph*, recently voted second best cricket correspondent of 2000 in some poll or other - second only to his predecessor, Christopher Martin-Jenkins, now of *The Times*?

Michael certainly surprises the reader, whether by a nicely turned phrase, his apparent disregard for the difficulties involved in playing cricket at the highest level, or by his castigation of the catering at Leicester.

On the basis that all publicity is good publicity, Henderson may be doing a good self-promoting job. Less flamboyant, much nearer the Swanton mould, Christopher Martin-Jenkins has been voted cricket writer of the year for the fifth successive season. Irksome for Michael as a former *Times* man himself, but not fatal providing he remembers that good writing can be compassionate without hiding the truth.

Enough of all that. Swanton's immense output can look after itself. Which is more than can be said of Brian Lara these days. It is a sign of the times when the *Mail On Sunday's* cricket correspondent finds himself indulging in thinly disguised psycho-babble in an 'exclusive' from Brisbane devoted to Lara and his girlfriend Lynnsey Ward. Swanton, thou shouldst be living at this hour! According to Peter Hayter, Lara 'is finding comfort with the new love of his life'. Despite failures in the first two Test matches and allegations of match-fixing, Lara apparently kept calm in the face of an increasingly hostile Australian media and criticism of him and of the whole West Indian team from former West Indies players out in Australia.

While not as overtly crude as a piece in the *Daily Star*, the following day, another piece in the *Mail On Sunday* describes how 18-year-old Lynnsey, while working as a receptionist at Chester-le-Street for Durham, met Lara and was immediately captivated. Like the *Star*, the *Mail* has Lynnsey previously linked with Formula One's Eddie Irvine and a 'star' from Eastenders. Unlike the *Star*, however, the *Mail* story was not broken under the fetching headline GIRL LYNNSEY HAS LARA BY THE GOOGLES. Nor did the *Mail* reveal that Miss Ward rejoiced in the title of 'The *Daily Star's* Millennium Babe' before she flew out to Australia.

Meanwhile, the England team in Pakistan battle on with commendable spirit in the face of adversity. With several of their number writing for English papers about the team and their efforts, there is no shortage of information. The only question is: how much can it be relied upon? Atherton and Hussain write in *The Sunday Telegraph*, Caddick in *The Independent On Sunday*.

On the third day of the match immediately preceding the First Test, Caddick blew up at a poor decision, the batsman, Akhtar Sarfraz, having been given not out by the Pakistani umpire. It was an explosive moment on a tour of extreme sensitivity. Hussain's piece in *The Sunday Telegraph* stated: '*Caddick felt he had got someone out. We all agreed... I must emphasise that*

*Caddick did not say anything to the umpire, did not call him names or anything like that. He just had a few words with the batsman'. Meanwhile, back in The Independent On Sunday, Caddick was writing of the same incident. 'On my way back to my mark, I mentioned to the umpire that he might have been incorrect and in the heat of the moment I might also have suggested I had been happier in places other than Pakistan'.*

Those who feel it would be far better if cricketers played cricket and cricket writers wrote about it, have a point. Truth and objectivity are all important, more important than the hunt for kudos which leads sports editors to shoulder each other aside in order to get players of note to lend their names to various pieces. It is high time someone or other in charge of such things in the cricket world put a stop to it.

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