

A photograph of Australian cricketer Shane Warne in a white uniform with yellow accents and 'alinta energy' logos. He is running and shouting with his mouth wide open, celebrating a wicket. In the background, another player in a white uniform and a helmet is visible, along with a blurred crowd.

*'Australians love
nothing more than
beating the Poms at
their own game'*

SHANE WARNE

GIDEON HAIGH ON THE ASHES

THE GREATEST SPORTING CONTEST OF ALL



ON THE ASHES

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Gideon Haigh was born in England and lives in Australia, with a parent from each. He was eight when he attended his first Ashes Test, twenty-four when he reported his first Ashes series. Gideon has written about cricket in *The Australian*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times* and in more than thirty books.

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Foreword

AN ASHES LIFE

The Ashes may have been in my stars. I was born in England, live in Australia, with a parent from each. I was eight when I attended my first Ashes Test, twenty-four when I reported my first Ashes series. I never intended becoming a cricket journalist, and would rather be considered a journalist who sometimes writes about cricket. But this collection, I'm bound to admit, makes an opposite case, collaging writings that cover almost a century and a half of Anglo-Australian cricket, people and places, news and olds.

Nothing compares to the Ashes, which in some respects is a shame, as this results from the lamentable abeyance in bilateral competition between India and Pakistan. But it is surely remarkable. After all, how many ideas endure from 1882, when creationism and phrenology flourished, nobody had heard of viruses or dreamed of X-rays, dreams of universal suffrage and a universal eight-hour day seemed fanciful, and cremation, of course, was a subject ripe for jokes? As the Empire sprawled mightily, the Australian continent was a mere patchwork of colonies reporting individually to faraway masters.

The Ashes has benefited hugely since by continuity, interrupted only by world wars, adulterated only by greedy administrators – I'm looking at those who inflicted ten consecutive Tests on us in 2013–14. The Ashes is always coming, even when it is finished. Especially in England, the intervening years are concerned with either soul-searching or brainstorming. There are, to be sure, bigger games in town. Indian visits line the vaults; World Cups gleam in the trophy cabinet. But the Ashes is

where hope, expectation, magic and chagrin flourish in equal measure, and performance is permanently burnished. Ben Stokes at Headingley 2019 would have been a marvel against any opposition; its additional gilding is that it came at Australia's expense.

Ahead of the Ashes of 2023, we find ourselves in a very particular period, where home advantage is bordering on the unassailable: Australia has not won a series in England since 2001, England not won a Test in Australia since 2011. But in a rivalry so long, everything can be deemed a phase. Even Bradman retired. Even Warne could be worked around. The Ashes, moreover, still connects. There is in marketing an established taxonomy of brands: the 'ritual' brand, identified with special occasions; the 'symbolic' brand, identified with a recognized logo; the 'heritage of good' brand, established as according a special benefit; the 'aloof snob' brand, nourishing a sense of superiority; the 'belonging' brand, which binds a self-perceived special group; and the 'legend' brand, which derives from an epic story. If it be possible, Ashes cricket works on all six levels.

But the Ashes is, of course, also more than a brand. Within it is the dynamic of rivalry, about which it is impossible to be neutral. I am not a particular patriot or partisan, except in barracking for Test matches: nothing so disappoints me as cricket that fails to rise to the occasion (such as, sad to say, the Ashes of 2021–22). But from my tangle of DNA and my hope for a worthy contest, I confess, arises a modest but unreducing satisfaction when England fares well. Australia is always competitive. They fight; they strike back. Since 1977, only once has Australia not won at least one Test in a series, and then, in 2013, they were about to whitewash England on home soil. This it is only possible to respect. It is England's measuring up to and every so often exceeding Australia's standard that completes the Ashes: their worst moments resonate uneasily with senses of national masochism and post-imperial marginalization. When these countries meet, in fact, there is always something slightly more at stake than cricket supremacy. They are saying something of themselves to the world.

What am I saying of myself? I grew up on anthologies of cricket writing: Pollard's *Six and Out*, Ross's *The Cricketer's Companion*, compilations from sundry mastheads and about particular series, and particularly the canonical treasuries of Cardus, Robertson-Glasgow, Arlott, Swanton, Kilburn, Robinson and Fingleton. To curate my own collection is a happy act of homage, as well as an attempt to cover the full arc of history, from

Charles Bannerman, the first Australian century-maker against England, to Joe Root, England's most recent Ashes captain. I've had a press box vantage on the last three decades; by profiles, interviews, reviews and obituaries I've sought a communion with the past. I hope that the partialities of *On The Ashes* will be pardoned, that the gaps will be overlooked, and that the forthcoming cricket compels an updated edition.

GIDEON HAIGH
Melbourne 2023

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GOLDEN AGE, DARKER LINING

Records are proverbially made to be broken; firsts stand for all time. Before the First World War, the Ashes was a blank tablet to carve feats into. So here are some of the carvers: the first scorer of a century, Charles Bannerman; the first taker of a five-for, William Midwinter; the first Ashes diarist, Tom Horan; the first giant series, 1894–95. The achievements have lasted as long as the lives associated proved short and benighted: Midwinter and captain extraordinaire Harry Trott became asylum inmates; Drewy Stoddart and Arthur Shrewsbury were suicides; Victor Trumper and Tip Foster, top scorers in the grand Sydney Test of 1903, were prematurely slain by illness; the whole belle époque would be drowned in mud, blood and disillusionment. But by 1914, the Ashes were established enough to survive, and nothing short of war has been equal to stopping them since.

The Ashes

SACRED SOOT (2017)

The Ashes fails almost every test as a modern sporting trophy. It confers no number one status, involves no massive cash prize and plods along in a slow-moving format widely considered obsolete. The small, frail urn would not catch your eye in a bric-a-brac shop, embodying the rivalry of a distant time, and riffing on a forgotten joke – about, for heaven’s sake, cremation. Although, considering what else was in vogue in 1882, England and Australia are lucky not to be playing for a trophy in the shape of Jumbo the elephant or the Eddystone Lighthouse.

In uniqueness, of course, lies the Ashes’ success. Aslant the priorities of contemporary sport, it occupies a universe of one. Its history can be expositied at voluminous length, or in a shorthand that summons legends by a name, by a year, or even by a single delivery, whether it’s Bradman b Hollies or Gattin b Warne. Better yet, success has exhibited a gratifying cyclicity: of seventy-two series, Australia have won thirty-four, England thirty-two, with six series drawn.

*

The totem’s origins are improbable – the fruit of youthful high spirits. When the fifth Anglo-Australian Test ended in a breathless seven-run victory for the visitors at The Oval, twenty-seven-year-old journalist Reginald Shirley Brooks secured immortality of a sort by inserting a death notice in London’s *Sporting Times* ‘in affectionate memory of English

cricket', with the addendum: 'The body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia.'

Some months later in Australia, a twenty-three-year-old nob, The Hon. Ivo Walter Francis Bligh, who had come as captain of an English touring XI, referred jestingly to his objective as 'recovery of the ashes'. The notion so captivated some Melbourne society belles, one of who became his bride, that they subsequently awarded Bligh a dark red pottery urn containing something sooty, popularly a burned bail, of which the Marylebone Cricket Club has been custodian since 1927. By then, the Ashes had gained a capital letter, thanks to the title of Pelham Warner's journal of his team's 1903–04 tour: *How We Recovered the Ashes*.

From the first, then, the Ashes has echoed and reinforced the relationship of the countries, playing out their differences in such a way as to emphasize their closeness. Perhaps only rivals with so much in common could afford such unbridled competition; at the same time, empire's bonds never sat so heavily on the colonized because of cricket's free play.

On a per capita basis, the Ashes has probably always meant more to Australians. 'Cricket was the great way out of Australian cultural ignominy,' wrote the novelist and republican gadfly Thomas Keneally. 'No Australian had written *Paradise Lost*, but Bradman had made 100 before lunch at Lord's.' England's frequent underdog status since the 1960s has also resonated with popular sensations of global decline, while also offering, every now and again, the salve of sporting superiority.

In the history of the Ashes, the decisive figure is Sir Donald Bradman, not merely because of his prowess, or his fame, or his statistics, but more generally the intensity his presence lent the contest. In piling up nineteen hundreds against England, he scaled the greatest heights; in provoking Bodyline, he engendered the most controversial countermeasures; in being knighted, he raised the cricketer to the level of imperial statesman. It helped universalize his popularity that Bradman was himself a conservative man, deeply respectful of the English institutions and assumptions he challenged. 'We want him to do well,' noted R. C. Robertson-Glasgow. 'We feel we have a share in him. He is more than Australian. He is a world batsman.'

In our own generation, Richie Benaud and Shane Warne have achieved something like the same warm regard, Benaud by blending perfectly into the English media landscape, Warne by standing out from it with a certain irrepressibly comedic Aussieness. In the shadow of the unforgettable 2005