

## John Finch's cricket books

John Finch and I were contemporaries at school; we used to exchange chess problems under the desk during Latin, and I have often felt that one reason why this country now produces so few chess problem composers is that Latin is no longer taught in our schools. He later became a respected figure in the world of chess composition, but it is as a writer, and in particular as a writer on cricket, that he will be remembered. I like to think that I write reasonably well, but John was in a different class.

He was a schoolmaster at Uppingham, and he and two colleagues used to spend their summer holidays watching County cricket. This generated two books, *Game in Season* devoted to that part of the 1981 season which fell within the holiday period, and *Three Men at the Match* covering the whole of the 1988 season. But these are far from ordinary cricket books. Yes, they describe the cricket, sensitively and sympathetically, but they also revel in the minor incidents which the spectator remembers long after the match details have been forgotten.

For example, there is the hypnotic sight of an elderly gentleman sitting a few rows away peeling an apple, oh so slowly and carefully, so that the peel forms one unbroken spiral, which he then triumphantly takes and deposits, still intact, in the nearest litter bin. There are quirks and vagaries of cricket-ground seating both old and new. There are meetings with people who turn out to be the parents of one of the players. There are tart reflections on the judgement of local weather prophets. There are attempts by two respectable schoolmasters to bribe their way past the gateman barring their entry to a match which they had not realised was all-ticket (the third member, who normally handled the admin, was absent on this occasion). There is a somewhat fraught journey on a packed train from Kettering on the day of a Nat West Trophy final, followed by a complete loss of orientation in The Regent's Park on the way from St Pancras to Lord's (one of the trio was a classicist who insisted on 'The', which is apparently part of the correct name).

Likewise, many of the illustrations, at least in *Game in Season*, are well out of the ordinary. The incident of the apple peeler inspired a full-page cartoon by Bill Tidy, who, commissioned for six, liked the book so much that he contributed eight. There are evocative pictures of some of the grounds. There is a pair of photographs featuring a fielder lying prone on his stomach saying Hello to a small dog, which eventually comes up and rubs noses. And there is a curious little enclosure at Derby, approximately twenty feet by ten and devoid of seating or indeed of anything else, reserved for players' wives.

*Game in Season* was published by John himself, but it attracted immediately favourable attention which caused Queen Anne Press to commission *Three Men at the Match*. This, having been written to a publisher's brief, is less idiosyncratic, but it too contains some excellent material and will reward anyone who reads it. The chapter in which he describes a trip to Guildford to watch his beloved Surrey is particularly happy (his profession may have taken him elsewhere, but John remained deeply a Surrey man at heart).

In an obituary for our school's Old Boys' Newsletter, I described these books as minor literature of the best kind: the work of a man, skilled in the use of words, writing about one of his enthusiasms. Whether to go further, and to call them minor classics, is a judgement I leave to those who will not have been influenced by friendship with the author. But I think I can fairly say that any future anthologist of cricket writing should include them among the sources which he trawls. Unfortunately, *Game in Season* may be hard to come by; I could not find it in the British Library catalogue, and while this may well be a comment on myself rather than on the catalogue, *Three Men at the Match* came up loud and clear. But there will be copies in the hands of his friends and of discerning cricket enthusiasts, and one surfaces from time to time on the second-hand market (try [www.ABEbooks.co.uk](http://www.ABEbooks.co.uk) or specialist cricket book dealer J W McKenzie).

John died, sadly, in his early fifties. His health was going, or had gone, he had had to retire from teaching; his eyes had been repaired once already and may have been deteriorating again; he had had enough. But what matters is not how long you live but what you achieve during that life, and he achieved much more than most of those whose lives had run their normal course. As far as I know, he had no brothers or sisters, and he never married; I do not know who has inherited his copyrights. But it would be a great pity if future cricket enthusiasts had to wait until 2061 to be regaled by what he had to offer.

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