

## 14. A Game of Cricket

An oil painting by Russell Drysdale from 1948 depicts three stick-like figures playing a game of cricket in a desolate outback setting. A parched earth street with a pub and a store opposite stand in front of a few skeletal gum trees, in the distance a single shanty with a tin roof. The low horizon gives way to a big sky, brown turning to red and black at the top. One stringy young man is bowling, another in front of the peeling wall of the pub has his bat ready. The single fielder is an Aboriginal leaning against the tall upright that holds up the pub veranda.

The dry Australian outback is a desert, and perhaps because I am Australian born, and loved the outback, I love deserts generally. I have enjoyed working in the Sahara Desert and the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, and I am most at peace in the deserts of the Southwest United States where I now live. The picture on my wall is right beside a window to this very different desert of cactus forests and Palo Verde trees of the Sonoran desert. But the picture is much more than a picture of a desert place. It is haunting and full of tension from the people, and it is the game of cricket that one must focus on immediately, even though the figures are so small relative to the scene. An article from the National Gallery of Australia declares that:

National identity had been established on the cricket pitch as early as 1877 when a combined team from New South Wales and Victoria defeated the English touring team in the first test match. Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister, was a cricket umpire, and most of his successors have shared his passion for the game. Russell Drysdale's *The Cricketers* succeeds as art by abandoning any pretence to illustrative realism. It is one of the most original and haunting images in all Australian art.

Why is the picture haunting? First there is the starkness of the place - the outback

township with its rundown appearance and few shabby buildings. There is a drought or else the setting is in the very dry outback, the only vegetation being those few tall thin trees, white-barked against the brown sky and with few leaves. The red-brown sky radiates baking heat. The only people in this austere scene are the three gaunt young men or boys, each of them seeming to lack substance. The figures are small in the somber scene, creating a feeling of loneliness and desolation.

The two principle figures are dramatically involved in their game, their poses vigorous and their shadows joyful. They display an enthusiasm for cricket that makes them in some way heroic, because of the lethargy expected in this grim implacable landscape. The fielder stands resigned perhaps indicating something of the Aboriginal dilemma.

Drysdale's works apparently convinced British critics that Australian artists had a distinctive vision of their own, exploring a physical and psychological landscape that is starkly beautiful. In contrast to the pastoral, bucolic imagery of Australia that dominated art in the first half of the twentieth century, recorded by artists in blue and gold palette, Drysdale's brutal images of the outback, painted in brown and red tones, provided a alternative that shocked. Initially rejected, by the 1950s the paintings of Australia's barren interior were eventually promoted as the quintessential national landscape.

In 2003 Tim Jamieson, arts editor for the Herald Sun went on a search to find Australia's greatest work of art, and Drysdale's "The Cricketers," was voted Australia's most important painting. It has indeed become a national icon and is the most reproduced image of 20th-century Australian art. Valued in 2004 at \$6 million, it was last seen in

public in 1998 and is owned by a Melbourne-based investment company, JGL Investments, in Collins St. The picture I have is a photographic print of this famous painting.

In an interview in 1960 the artist says:

Most of the paintings that I have done have been about subjects in the country, and figures and landscape; but that is simply because I spend a great deal of my time there. It is an environment which I love and which I like to go back to, and for me it has a tremendous appeal, these curious and strange rhythms which one discovers in a vast landscape, the juxtaposition of figures, of objects, all these things are exciting. Add to that again the peculiarity of the particular land in which we live here, and you get a quality of strangeness that you do not find, I think, anywhere else. This is very ancient land, and its forms and its general psychology are so intriguing as compared to the other countries of the world that it in itself is surprising

Russell Drysdale (1912-1981) was born in England and arrived in Australia in 1923. He grew up and spent most of his life in Australia where he became enchanted with the outback and the harshness of life there. His images of isolation and endurance seemed to reinforce the idea that all non-indigenous Australians were transplants, people from other lands, no matter how profound their ties were to their new home. It was a quality the artist readily acknowledged in himself: 'I know that I can never look at Europe like a European and as a painter never really be other than a half-caste.' In this regard Drysdale was a true humanist, and through his art he encouraged tolerance that would ultimately lead to acceptance, an achievement with permanent relevance.

A sense of belonging both in England, where he was born and later went to art class and had solo art shows, and Australia where he was really a true bushman, meant he was never a person belonging completely to one land, and the feeling was probably common among those of his generation, so many of whom were immigrants. The term

‘geographical schizophrenia’ was a contemporary term devised to describe this unsettling condition. Drysdale’s life was further polarized. He did not live in those empty menacing towns or harsh landscapes he painted, and he did not paint the cities in which he lived.

I too understand this geographical schizophrenia. I grew up in Australia, and developed a passionate love of the bush, of eucalypt trees and of open-air life. I had a charmed childhood of freedom to walk in the bush and row on the lonely upper reaches of the muddy old Brisbane River. I entertained myself with things thoroughly Australian and kept a scrapbook of Australian scenes, beside each of which I copied bush ballads in a large round hand. My parents and grandparents though, kept British habits, and revered English culture. My mother took an English magazine called “Homes and Gardens” that she and I spent many hours with each week, and from which she was inspired to build rock gardens, curved paths of flagstones through the lawn, irregular shaped beds for herbaceous borders.

My schooling emphasized English history and literature, and at eighteen, I could almost swoon over the songs in Shakespeare’s comedies, Shelley’s Skylark poem or Keats’s Ode to Autumn. I couldn’t wait to travel and see England for myself, and when I got there I stood on Westminster Bridge, reciting Wordsworth’s poem about it and felt that finally I had arrived in the center of the world. I fell in love with England and I fell in love, lived twenty years in England and grew to be myself, in love with life and London. For the last twenty years, in the United States where I now belong, I have intense nostalgia for both England and Australia, and have difficulty defining my home. Of course it is here in Arizona, but two other countries divide my love and when I think of my life in each, then each becomes in some way home.

The dislocation of having three such different homelands has perhaps made me more attentive to some basic elements of this human life, rather than just life seen in one place alone. There is a need to reach for the elemental nature of a person or a people, and get beyond one's first reactions. I feel in touch with Drysdale's realism, his focus on the enigma of people and place, and muse about the possibility that his involvement with both raw Australia and cultivated England brought inscrutable wonders to the surface - that this may be why the pictures somehow combine austerity and tenacity, toughness and quietude.

It is particularly relevant that the game is cricket. One thing above all binds Britain, Australia, and other Commonwealth countries, and former Commonwealth countries - cricket. The game was imported to all of England's colonies, and in all of them it took firm hold. If there is anything that is an emblem of Englishness it is cricket. It was a favorite spectator sport in my Australian childhood, the game played by all the boys on my street, the passion of both my brothers. I have watched small boys playing in the most unlikely village streets all over India. In my first English summers, work places would be deserted as people drifted out to Lord's Cricket ground to watch the matches there, and one year when I went to watch part of a five-day Test match at Lord's I saw a performance of the famous batsman, Geoff Boycott (the first England cricketer to pass 8,000 runs in Test Matches).

In Victorian times it seems that cricket operated according to a model in which cultivated style and carefully defined notions of grace under pressure worked to keep most people out of the sport. Terms such as sportsmanship, dash, courage and

temperament were important. Cricket was through and through a “gentleman's” game, and all others were excluded by their inability to demonstrate an understanding of cricket's image of the ideal Englishman. Perhaps these idealistic features helped to make cricket the icon of Englishness. The expression, “It’s just not cricket,” which I heard so much as a child in Brisbane when someone did anything unfair, is an indication of that cricket ethic that was more than nationalism or religious affiliation.

But cricket didn’t begin that way. It is a game with some similarities to baseball but with an earlier origin, perhaps played as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century in England, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the game was popular as a rough rural pastime. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the leisure classes took up the sport, especially in southern England and by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century cricket was being played at every level of society, from village greens to wealthy estates. The first and most influential cricket club was formed at Hambledon, Hampshire, in the 1760's. Wealthy patrons sponsored the club, but the players were local tradesmen and farmers. The Hambledon club established techniques of batting and bowling which still hold today, and Hambledon claims a page in history books as the “Birthplace of Cricket.”

Later, the centre of power in the game shifted to London, most notably with the establishment of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), which had its headquarters at [Lord's](#) ground. In 1835 the MCC gave cricket its first formal laws, which still stand today. A major boost for cricket was provided by public schools such as Eton, Harrow, and Winchester and was so popular among the well-to-do students that an annual match called “Gentlemen vs. Players” took place at Lord's from 1806-1963. The amateur “Gentlemen” from the schools and universities played their semi-professional

counterparts, the “Players” in a match that was a highlight of the season.

My English husband, Reg, possessed the patience and interest to sit through three-day matches, though he could persuade me to go to Lord’s Cricket Ground in London only for odd afternoons, and I never minded when *bad light stopped play*. Like all Englishmen, he had played cricket as a boy and knew the fine points that quite escape me. Later, he practiced in backyards with his son, and again later with his grandson. In India he would stop to watch a group of boys in a muddy yard and applaud a spinning ball or a bit of clever fielding. Many English men I knew were like Reg, and took delight in the minutia of the game, the precise amount of spin, the angle of the bat, the ability to catch difficult balls. Conversations about anything could include *being stumped, hat tricks, sticky wickets, on a good wicket, googlies* and of course, *it isn’t cricket*.

The big moment, when the ball is about to leave the hand of the bowler and the batsman is in suspended readiness, is shown in Drysdale’s painting; anything could happen with that ball. The picture hangs in a spare bedroom where someone lying in bed can look at the picture brightly lit from large windows facing south and the rich desert of southern Arizona. The painting, and the view through the window both show deserts, but very different ones. The Arizona Sonora desert supports hundreds of species of plants though most of them are unfriendly with their spines or sticky resins. There is diverse and highly visible bird life and the feeling is of a splendid richness in a place unlike anywhere else on earth. Everything about the painting is Australian in a desolate kind of way – outback scene, a feeling of isolation, the game of cricket, and the attitudes of the different individuals. Like my other pictures of Australian scenes that have particular meanings for

me, “The Cricketers” highlights the complications of my attachment to place, the strange triangle of the three countries where I have lived the longest, my fretful schizophrenia about what is home, and at the same time my thrill at belonging in three such different countries and enjoying the particular characteristics that make each country special. Cricket, which belongs to two of them, is long gone from my life, but there it is for me to remember in Drysdale’s painting, a print of which I found at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where I wandered in a recent bout of nostalgia for Australia.

Of all my pictures, this one captures desolation, and the strange little figures display emotions in a harsh place during a cricket moment. I am possessed when I look at it by the multitude of meanings and an excessive love of Australia and cricket, which surpasses my actual affection for the place or the game – such is the power of the art.