OUR ONE NATIONAL HERO?

There has been one national hero … The Don … a title in itself rich with associations of chivalry, but also informal, intimate; the Don came even more to embody the Australian character ideal.¹

John Carroll, The 2001 Alfred Deakin Lectures

Sport to many Australians is life and the rest is a shadow. Sport has been the one national institution that has had no ‘knockers’. …To play sport, or watch others play, and to read and talk about it is to uphold the nation and build its character.²

Donald Horne, The Lucky Country

In the course of his 2001 Alfred Deakin Lecture, ‘The Blessed Country: Australian Dreaming, 1901–2001’, John Carroll made the bold claim that the world’s most esteemed cricketer, Sir Donald Bradman (1908–2001), has been Australia’s one national hero. Bradman’s nomination for the post of the Australian hero is perhaps to be expected. As cultural commentator Donald Horne wrote during the 1960s in The Lucky Country, sport is often viewed as this country’s ‘one national institution’.³ Cricket in particular has long had a dominant presence in Australian popular culture, and we are without question a nation that worships sporting achievement.
While I do not go as far as Carroll does in declaring Bradman the only national hero, he is without doubt an enduring figure in the cultural landscape. Yet few have considered his unique place within the national imagination. The question of why a cricketer – a man who retired from the game over half a century ago – became the embodiment of Australian nationhood is regularly asked, but never has it been thoroughly investigated. This book is just such an investigation, looking in detail at the various ways in which he has been figured on and off the field, in the media and politics and through film and literature. It seems appropriate to begin, however, by briefly recalling a little of his life and the reactions to his death, his extraordinary achievements and his status as hero.

**Death of a legend**

Sir Donald George Bradman died on 25 February 2001, aged 92 years. Four days later, around 5,000 fans lined the streets of Adelaide to pay their respects as the Don’s hearse and its entourage made the one-hour journey to the private funeral.

News of the demise of the nation’s greatest cricketer created a ‘flashpoint’ in contemporary Australian culture, completely dominating television, radio and newspaper reports. Bradman stories spilled well outside the boundaries of routine media coverage, and tributes, dedications and specials poured forth. Flags were flown at half-mast and newspaper headlines announced, ‘A Nation’s Farewell’, ‘Death of a Legend’, ‘The Nation Loses its Hero’, ‘A Loving Son and Nation Mourn Australia’s Greatest Sports Hero’, ‘The Don: The Greatest Innings Ever’ and ‘Nation Mourns the Great Don’.

Maudlin ‘Bradmania’ consumed the pages of newspapers and magazines, hours of radio, half of television news bulletins and current affairs programs, and entire television specials. In a mixture
of obituary, nationalism, politics, myth, nostalgia and history, the life and times of Bradman was reviewed. Public veneration flowed in letters to newspaper editors, on talkback radio, via on-line forums, and messages left in condolence books at 4,500 post offices. Former Australian rugby captain, John Eales, said the Don’s death was similar to that of American President John F. Kennedy, saying, ‘You will always remember where you were the day Don Bradman died.’ Political commentator Paul Kelly wrote that Bradman’s unrivalled Test batting average of 99.94 runs ‘equates with the prime ministership and the great Australian novel’ in the antipodean cultural imagination. The Sydney Morning Herald editorialised that Bradman’s life ‘fuse[d] nationalism and sport in an heroic and pure way that has now been lost forever to the trivialities of commercialism and celebrity.’ Cricket writer Ken Piesse declared that Bradman was, ‘Australia’s quintessential sporting hero, a true superstar who had an incredible impact on the game and the Australian psyche’. The Don was compared to Shakespeare, which had followed from earlier comparisons to Einstein and Mozart. Prime Minister John Howard stated: ‘In many ways he was the most remarkable figure that Australia has produced in the last 100 years. He had an impact on our country that is difficult to properly calculate’. We were assured that Bradman’s death would not diminish his legend and that his stature as a national hero had moved from unquestioned in life to untouchable in death. These occasionally overstated responses represent an emotional celebration of a man who has been entered into the register of sacred Australian history and who has been framed as a universal symbol of an idealised nationhood. In line with this, most of the journalists, politicians, sportspeople and public figures that honoured Bradman appeared to believe that they were speaking on behalf of all Australians,
irrespective of people’s interest in the Don or cricket, and that the entire nation was in agreement over Bradman’s status as the Australian hero.

On 25 March, a public memorial service was held in his honour at St Peter’s Anglican Cathedral in Adelaide. Over 700 invited guests attended the memorial and a few thousand more watched the service live on screens at the Adelaide Oval and the Sydney Cricket Ground. Those who attended the memorial service included former male Test cricketers Neil Harvey, Bill Brown, Sam Loxton, Doug Ring, Bill Johnston, Ron Hammence, Greg Chappell, Rod Marsh, Bill Lawry, Sir Vivian Richards, Sir Everton Weekes, India’s Nawab of Pataudi, as well as the wife of Ray Lindwall, Peggy. Amongst the politicians in the audience were Prime Minister Howard, then Opposition leader Kim Beazley, former South Australian Premier John Olsen and former Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Speakers included members of the Bradman family, former Australian captain and Channel Nine cricket commentator, Richie Benaud, and the then Governor-General, Sir William Deane. The memorial was the culmination of a special ‘Bradman week’ and was broadcast live on ABC television (to an estimated viewing audience of 1.45 million) and radio, and replayed later on Channel Nine (estimated viewing audience 333,000).

Given Bradman’s extraordinary public prominence, the reaction to his death was bound to be exceptional. In the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, public polls selected Sir Donald as the preferred person to light the Olympic cauldron, even though he was not an Olympian. As of 1998, there were 22 major thoroughfares in Australia bearing the Bradman name, and the PO Box number (9994) in all capital cities for the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, is a respectful reproduction of Bradman’s ‘totemic’ Test batting average: 99.94 runs per
Our One National Hero?

Innings. An industry built around Bradman’s name and image sells books, videos, songs, souvenirs, prints, autographed limited edition bats, statuettes, caps, ties, scarfs, jigsaw puzzles, calendars, biscuits, tea spoons, golf balls, fridge magnets and sunglasses cases. Spectators can sit in Bradman stands at major venues including the Sydney Cricket Ground, the Adelaide Oval and Manuka Oval in Canberra. Visitors to the State Library of South Australia and the National Library can pore over a full 52 specially bound and inscribed volumes of Bradman scrapbooks. Just as ‘Ruthian’ (after baseball legend Babe Ruth) became an adjective to describe individual success and heroism in America, Australian vernacular has a term that connotes excellence and endurance: ‘Bradmanesque’.

Bradman excelled at cricket, regarded as the ‘cornerstone sport in Australian culture’. Many Australian people are said to relate more to cricketers than they do to their politicians, and in the cricketing context, Bradman’s achievements are unprecedented. He is the key reference point with which to consider the merits of every successful batsman in world cricket. Neville Cardus marvels that:

Bradman’s achievements stagger the imagination. No writer of boys’ fiction would dare to invent a ‘hero’ who performed with Bradman’s continual consistency. Nobody would even suspend disbelief as he read such fiction.

Rather than once again merely reiterating awe or restating truisms and popularised myths, this book challenges those very modes of thinking and talking about Don Bradman. Having become idealised as the human character of Australian nationhood, Bradman is a fascinating subject, and the complexities of that fascination are those that this book attempts to unravel.
Records and achievements
To the uninitiated, cricket statistics can appear both esoteric and boring, yet they are the currency of player evaluation in the game. Bradman’s record is the bedrock upon which his heroism is built (see Table 1, Appendix).

The Don’s Test career ran from 1928 to 1948, with his first-class career spanning from 1927 to 1949. After scoring a century on debut for New South Wales against South Australia in Adelaide, he was selected for the national team the following season, making an inauspicious start (18 and 1) to his Test career against England in Brisbane. By the Third Test of the same series, however, he had made his maiden Test hundred, a prelude to his record 974 runs in the 1930 Ashes series in England. In his career, Bradman experienced victory in 8 Test series and defeat in only 2. His first loss was in 1928–29 when he was an unestablished 20-year-old youngster and Australia faced a strong England side, and the second was in the controversial 1932–33 bodyline series (see Chapter 4). Also, of the 28 Test matches in which Bradman made a century, Australia won 22, drew 4 and lost just 2, while his 29 Test centuries included 10 double centuries and 2 triple centuries. Upon being appointed captain of the national side in 1936 his startling success continued. The Don never captained a Test team to a losing series, although this has not prevented criticism of the manner and style of his captaincy (see Chapter 7).

Bradman’s overall batting record is exceptional: he has the highest average of any Test cricketer (99.94 per innings; South African Graeme Pollock is second, with 60.97); he scored 6,966 runs in 80 innings in 52 Test matches, with 29 centuries and 13 half-centuries (see Table 2, Appendix). This outstanding record saw him selected as Wisden Cricketers’ Almanack’s greatest cricketer of the twentieth century, by unanimous vote of 100 judges, and
also nominated as captain of the Australian Cricket Team of the Century.

Bradman also received numerous awards and honours throughout his lifetime, joining esteemed company both inside and outside sport (see Table 3, Appendix). He received a Companion of the Order of Australia (1979), was voted the greatest male athlete of the past 200 years by the Australian Confederation of Sport, and was nominated by *International Who’s Who* as one of only two Australians among the top 100 people who have done the most to shape the 20th century. Yet, while his records and awards tell us something of how his reputation has been attained and maintained, they do not effectively explain why he is venerated as an outstanding and uniquely Australian icon.

**Bradman’s heroism**

‘He’s Out.’

These are the two words that appeared as a London newspaper headline banner during the 1930s Ashes tour. Clearly, the ‘he’ was Don Bradman, and the two words continue to be reproduced in books, exhibitions and films about him. Bradman’s extraordinary popularity makes him the only one, the only ‘he’ to whom anyone talking about cricket could have been referring. Becoming this kind of hero requires the admiration of a large cross-section of a community, and in the case of the Don, of the nation. As the nation’s ideal, Bradman represented the figure of ‘Australianness’ in the 1930s – the white heterosexual Protestant male, a family man and businessman who played sport at the highest level. In contemporary life, conservative politicians have continued to draw upon his legend to push their own agendas. Prime Minister John Howard, perhaps the most socially conservative politician in Australian post-war history, is very much a ‘Menzies man’, and like
Menzies, idealises Bradman as the quintessential Australian, however anachronistic that figure is to contemporary Australian life. Despite the major shifts in the make-up of Australian society since the late 1940s, Bradman remains – however nostalgically – very much an idealised figure, and it is the complexity of his enduring heroism that is addressed throughout this book.

Many books and videos have celebrated Bradman’s heroism over the years, but they have tended to be limited by commonly held views on what Bradman did and who he was. They have concentrated on describing the events of Bradman’s Test career between 1928 and 1948. Much of the literature tends to veer away from the negatives, the critics and the controversies. As such, more appears to have been obscured about Don Bradman than revealed. As one thoughtful critic puts it – ‘So much has been said and written about Don Bradman over the years that ... the person has been lost behind what others have thought’. The man and the myth are, therefore, inseparable and their indivisibility is largely the subject of this book, which is not a conventional biography. It does not cover the life and times of Bradman or attempt to find out what he was ‘really’ like and log his strengths and failings. Moving between the figure of Bradman, the cultural setting of the sport that he played, and the wider national culture, I suggest that Bradman is both an emblem of Australian culture and a shaper of it. His complex mythological character and the ways that it has been constructed and used are the focus. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that people’s connections to popular representations of Don Bradman are deeply emotive. We need only consider the actual
and media ‘turn out’ to his various memorial services to make this clear. Bradman is, therefore, a complex cultural symbol, and there are many different ways of understanding him: the relentless run-machine, the nation-builder, the unseen hero living in retirement (see Chapter 2); the boy from the bush (see Chapter 3); the brave fighter facing up to bodyline bowling (see Chapter 4); the businessman and administrator, the trademark (see Chapter 5); the apolitical sportsman (see Chapter 6); and the devoted husband (see Chapter 7). All of these have had different effects at different times, and all of these aspects of ‘The Don’ deserve attention.

The mass of Bradman materials has never been systematically assessed. Books and articles tell us ‘what happened’: Bradman’s adventures in England, on-field feats and off-field activities. Fine writers such as Neville Cardus, Irving Rosenwater and R.C. Robertson-Glasgow paint absorbing pictures of the contests, scores, period and personalities. However, there is no in-depth synthesis and reading of these and other available sources – magazines, newspapers, images, museum displays, memorabilia, programs, songs, videos and documentaries. In order to understand Bradman’s cultural significance properly, we need to carefully analyse these materials.19

Also, this book is primarily concerned with the contemporary fascination with Bradman’s heroism, and explains this with reference to historical accounts. In building my analysis I have used the biographies, autobiography and cricket histories that review Bradman’s life, and then compared these with many of the most recent books, reports and accounts in order to see how the past informs and shapes the present and vice versa.20

This book is not just about a cricketer who became an icon: it is also about Australian culture and nationalism. It investigates what Bradman means and represents and what these meanings
and representations say about Australia, helping us to understand how Bradman’s heroism informs and constitutes the nation’s culture as much as reflects it. Those who would claim that an icon such as Bradman simply reflects the Australian character ignore that people also live and act through what they see in the mirror.

My concern here is with the function of Bradman within Australian culture. This emphasis is driven by both practical and future agendas. Particularly as no one has yet attempted this type of project, it had to be kept within manageable limits. In terms of future studies, I hope this volume fuels examination of Bradman in other cultural settings, especially in Commonwealth nations where cricket is a popular and established sport. Throughout the book, I make repeated references to the Bradman myth. I do not claim that accounts of Bradman’s career have been falsified, but rather show how his story has been constructed in quite specific ways. The concept of myth signifies that a heroic image of Bradman has been generally accepted as categorically true, while at the same time it ignores the more critical accounts of his career and significance (see Chapter 4).

Connected to the issue of myth is the way I use the name Bradman and ‘the Don’ interchangeably throughout the text. It is possible to conceive that the name Bradman once simply referred to the man. ‘The Don’, however, is a much larger character, a mythical cricket and Australian legend who moves in many different directions and on many levels throughout the nation’s popular culture. Understood in this fashion, the man and the myth are one and the same. The usage of Bradman’s popular moniker is also indicative of his prominence in the Australian collective conscience. When I have spoken or written of the Don, most people have correctly assumed that I am referring to Sir Donald Bradman. Only one person has admitted believing that I was speaking of