Memories of a Changing ‘G’

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Brian Matthews
THE TEMPLE DOWN THE ROAD
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The Melbourne Cricket Ground was established on its present site in 1853. The first cricket match was played there the following year. It was a busy time in the early life of Melbourne: the University of Melbourne, the State Library of Victoria, the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society and The Age newspaper were all founded at this time. At a recent social gathering in Melbourne, someone asked which of these institutions was the most important and influential. Nobody hesitated in reply: it was the MCG, of course.

For the uninitiated, the MCG may be dismissed as a big ugly concrete bowl where uncouth things happen. Yet, for generations of Victorians (if not Australians), it is a place of sphere so undeniable, so heady and so exhilarating that even of the MCG. It is a meander through the history of the site and the stadium, a personal memoir of events and experiences, and a reflection on the role of the MCG in the sporting, spiritual and cultural landscape of its city, and beyond.

The MCG is, after all, the birthplace of Test cricket and of Australian Rules football. It was the main stadium for the 1956 Olympic Games. In addition to hosting countless other big sporting events over its 150 years, it has been the site of many other major events: political rallies, royal tours, religious gatherings and rock concerts. The MCG has set so many many other major events: political rallies, royal tours, religious gatherings and rock concerts. The MCG has set so many 150 years, it has been the site of many other major events: political rallies, royal tours, religious gatherings and rock concerts. The MCG has set so many other major events: political rallies, royal tours, religious gatherings and rock concerts. The MCG has set so many
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If you ask anyone who’s been to the MCG to describe their most vivid memory of the place, invariably what will be recollected is its size, the noise of the crowd and the heightened sense of occasion that each of these elements lends to whatever event is taking place on the oval. Yet, however hard-fought the contest, however intense the emotions of the spectators, this is a site of play. The mock-seriousness of it all means that the MCG can be a place of irony, as Matthews demonstrates in numerous stories about crowd humour. It also means that all the gritty confrontations that the ground has ever staged, in whatever sport, become ‘expressions of a society peaceful and unified enough to build, expand, value, patronise and stage spectacles at a stadium like the MCG’.

This is a timely book, not only to mark the sesquicentenary of the MCG, but also as there is a massive redevelopment of the stadium now underway. With more than half of the stands being knocked down to be replaced by modern facilities, aficionados are wondering if the place will be half as good after the transformation. Many of the photographs in The Temple down the Road are by Megan Ponsford, granddaughter of the Australian (and Victorian) cricketer Bill Ponsford, after whom the now-demolished Ponsford Stand was named. The photographs are of the old parts of the ground, before the wreckers moved in. Often empty of people, these are intimate and melancholic images of a condemned place awaiting its fate. Megan Ponsford has also produced her own collection of MCG photographs, Home Ground (2003), published by Hardie Grant.