Cricket Writing Culture: How the Interwar Works of J.M. Kilburn for the Yorkshire Post Transcended the Boundary Between ‘Journalism’ and ‘Literature’


Abstract

In many ways one of the most innovative writers of his age, the interwar work of the cricket writer, J.M. Kilburn, for The Yorkshire Post was so unique that it transcended the boundary between ‘journalism’ and ‘literature’.

His brand of writing pushed the definition of ‘journalism’ to a point where journalistic traits were lost; in its place he used literary styles and techniques, allowing for the application of literary analysis to an art form which Kilburn made his own between 1934 and 1939. This is a study of his work as Yorkshire (and England) cricket correspondent for The Yorkshire Post from across the six seasons before the outbreak of the Second World War, a time of great political, social and cultural upheaval, but also one of unmitigated success, on a sporting front, for the White Rose.

It is argued in this thesis that Kilburn, in transcending the boundary between literature and journalism, actually created a hybrid genre – a form of writing created out of styles pulled from the literary and journalistic worlds, and mixed together to create something unique to Kilburn.

His career began with the kind of flourish that would grace his writing over a forty-year tenure working for The Yorkshire Post, one of the largest publications in the country: cricket writing commendation from the great Sir Neville Cardus – the man seen as the most influential in the history of cricket writing – imbued onto Kilburn a status of high quality which he would always keep.

A bookworm childhood complimented by many hours sat on the boundary edge of Yorkshire cricket grounds ensured the foundations of Kilburn’s unique trade were well ingrained; a year spent roaming Finland polished his descriptive skills, and the posting of his travel pieces during this time endeared him to The Yorkshire Post’s then-editor Arthur Mann, whose vision it was to have as his chief cricket writer a man who could couple sound judgment with an ability to carry his readers from their living room to the field of play using only the elegance of the written word as a means of transportation.

For example, Kilburn uses what Roland Barthes describes as a ‘narrative luxury’ (in Furst, 1992, pp135-136) in his writing – a technique used by literary figures – as well as using characterisation by taking individual players and creating mythological, almost godlike figures out of them. His style echoes that of a generation of writers which Hynes (1976) labels as ‘the Auden generation’, a group whose prose goes beyond what has been seen before, to transform the written word out of a passive state and into an active role, tackling the era’s various cultural crisis.

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During the more than four decades he spent writing for The Yorkshire Post, Kilburn was never tempted away to a larger, national title like many of his contemporaries. His name is not nearly as well known as the likes of Sir Neville Cardus, R.C. Robertson-Glasgow or E.W. Swanton, all of whom were active during the majority of his career, but Kilburn’s unique disregard for his profession’s conventions made him one of the most interesting cricket writers of all time. This is the story of his early, interwar career at The Yorkshire Post.