

TRIBUTE TO "BUNS" by BRIAN JOHNSTON

Address given at the Memorial Service on October 27th, 1976

Our old friend Buns was a remarkable character, in these days of uniformity when such characters are becoming scarcer and scarcer. Standing up here I feel just as I did the first time I kept wicket for the Ramblers. At mid-off there was a large, fierce-looking figure with a faded Rambler cap and whiskers on his cheeks. He seemed to be watching everything I did, and as we crossed between overs didn't hesitate to say just what he thought of my performance behind the stumps, which incidentally didn't quite coincide with my own inflated opinion.

Now, once again, I've a feeling that the same familiar figure is looking down, and no doubt giving a critical running commentary on my performance at this lectern. I can assure you it's a daunting task, but I suspect that the many Ramblers in the congregation will also not get off scot free. Buns will I am sure be noting down those not wearing their Rambler bows the right way round, or whose ties are not of the approved shade.

By the way, if I do go on a bit about the Ramblers I must apologise to those here who are not Old Etonians—and I can see many—including Old Harrovians who, as a group, were Buns's natural enemies, but among whom, individually, he numbered many friends.

The Ramblers were, after all, Buns's life—he was secretary for 40 years and then president for another 21. I suppose certain people might say: "Running a successful Old Boys' Club?—that's not much of an achievement in a long life." All I can say is that I doubt if many of us here, when we die, will have been responsible for giving so much pleasure and happiness to so many people as Buns was. He provided for generations of Old Etonian cricketers a very special type of cricket—against the best sides, in the pleasantest surroundings and played in a unique spirit. Year by year the fixture list seemed to grow bigger and better, and the secret of the Ramblers' success lay in Buns's character.

He was irascible, gruff, critical and hated losing any game. There were, let's admit it, the occasional "little local difficulties" with the Ramblers' opponents. But no one ever seemed to take them seriously for long, and everyone looked forward to next year's encounter against "old Buns". That "old" is important because it was a term of affection. Behind the gruffness there was a twinkle in the eye and he was essentially a kind man. I know that, as I myself did, many of you received much kindness from him during his life-time. He was an especially good communicator with the young. He took a genuine interest in their doings, shared their jokes and strangely perhaps was a good listener to them. Each year he took the trouble to get to know and encourage the new entry so that he gained their confidence. In return they gave him their support and friendship. Mind you, running Rambler cricket matches was never easy. There were the last minute let-downs, those inevitable Rambler collapses, the casual and lighthearted Etonian approach, and that all too long a hop bowled down the leg-side when the opposition needed just 4 runs to win.

But Buns seemed to revel in it, and always came back for more. He was a splendid companion on a tour and shared in all the fun. He was the victim of unmerciful leg-pulling which he took remarkably well and usually got his own back—even when we put a whoopee cushion on his chair at an important dinner.

People who only knew him in later years may not be able to picture him at Blackpool riding on the giant switchback which he adored, or paying 6d. to peep through a hole in a barrel at the Rector of Stiffkey who was squatting inside. Or the occasion on the pier when we weighed ourselves on a talking weighing machine, and when Buns got on it, it said: "one at a time please!" You will all, I'm sure, have your own similar memories of the fun and happiness you shared with Buns.

Apart from cricket, at which he should have got his Blue at Oxford, he was a dedicated games player and always difficult to beat, especially at golf, or lawn tennis, at which he was good enough to play at Wimbledon. Surprisingly, he also helped to start Rugger at Eton in 1907, and was Keeper in 1908—the two years when he played for Eton at Lord's. He was a bit of a mystery man with his brief incursion behind the scenes in politics and his amazing capacity—in spite of never driving a car—of somehow managing to be at every big sporting occasion, puffing his cigar, or sipping champagne at so many social parties. He was one of a dying breed. Man about Town, clubman, sportsman, bon viveur and an inveterate betting man. When my wife, Pauline, went to see him in hospital, he even offered her odds of 7-4 against his own recovery!

He seemed to know everyone in all walks of life from the highest to the lowest. He once took some of us to have supper at Pratt's before the war, and we were sitting at the big table when Mr. Churchill, as he then was, came in. From his greeting, it was obvious that he and Buns knew each other well. But equally, the attendants or waiters at various events always gave the Colonel a cheerful greeting and he would usually share some joke with them—in spite of his insistence on good and efficient service and his loud complaints if he didn't get it!

He definitely had an eye for the ladies, and, I am reliably informed, made them feel good with his flattery and attention—plus, of course, that ever present twinkle in his eye.

He had a variety of interests. He loved the theatre, especially the music halls, and I often used to go with him in the old days to see people like the Crazy Gang and Max Miller, special favourites of his. He owned the odd racehorse—an apt description he would, I'm sure, agree! He even enjoyed soccer and in 1946 after a good lunch at White's he and I stood crushed and battered among the record crowd of 81,000 at Stamford Bridge to watch the Russian Dynamos.

He was a sun-worshipper and spent his holidays in sunny climes, in the days when England didn't have hot summers. In recent years he could be seen sitting topless in the Members' enclosure at the Oval, where they are less strict about dress than at Lord's. There he would sit without his shirt on, at the Nursery End, and if the match was boring, he would turn his back on it and watch the boys practising in the nets instead.

He was the only man I have ever known who regularly returned to you each Christmas the card you had sent to him the previous year, but with the names switched round! In dress he grew more and more eccentric as time went on, but he was for years a well known figure with brown cap, blue pinstripe suit, carnation of various colours and blue plimsolls. Abroad, he wore a variety of sombreros, always with a

Rambler ribbon, and created quite a sensation whenever he accompanied M.C.C. tours—especially in Australia, where they were intrigued by this large, outspoken Pommy from the old country. After one of his more outrageous remarks about Australia, they actually sent a photographer round to his hotel to take him in his bath! Possibly, the only occasion when he was photographed not wearing his Rambler tie!

In later years, he became more impatient and intolerant and grumbled incessantly about modern sportsmen, especially the first class cricketers. Charles Cobham, in his admirable obituary in the *Times*, recalled how someone had once seen Buns sitting in the Long Room at Lord's BEHIND the sight-screen. Asked why he was sitting there, Buns growled that it enabled him NOT to see a particularly dull England batsman. Although he still listened to the young and enjoyed gossip from his older friends, he grew very restless at the countless sporting dinners he always seemed to be attending. Many a speaker in full flow has been halted in his tracks by cries of "rubbish!" from Buns's table.

Inevitably he was often lonely but his interest in the Ramblers kept him in touch with people. He continued to keep up the Rambler records with meticulous care and attention, especially in the selection and arrangement of the photographs which, with his witty comments, are a social history in themselves. He also wrote the annual report right up to last year—a masterpiece of wit, veiled digs and words of encouragement and thanks.

By a shrewd mixture of good living and hard exercise, Buns had always been remarkably fit, and I'm afraid he didn't enjoy his last three months or so when he was really ill. He couldn't bear the fuss and indignities of nursing and carried on a running word battle with a friendly, kind, but tough Sister, who gave as good as she got. This was his last game and I fear he didn't win it.

But his beloved Ramblers sustained him to the end. He was touched beyond belief that they took him to Lord's this year to watch his last Eton and Harrow match. They cared for him in their Box and he was not only grateful, but more than that, was proud that he hadn't let them down by being taken ill—though he had to forego food and drink to achieve this.

I saw him a few days before he died and by his bed were stacks of letters and messages and picture post-cards, many of them those saucy sea-side ones he liked so much. I pointed to them and said: "Well, Buns, at least this rotten illness has shown you one thing—that you have a lot of friends." "Yes", he said in a whisper, "I do realise that. And now, old Brian, please go." . . . So I went, and that was the last I saw of him.

There will never be another like him, that large, shambling figure in the pinstripe suit.

There couldn't ever be another Buns. He was quite unique. May God bless him and I'll close—as I'm sure he would like me to—just as he always did at the end of his Rambler Report—

FLOREAT ETONA.