



'There are times when I need the brilliance  
of Mr Andrew Cotter.' TIM RICE

# OLIVE, MABEL & ME

Life and  
Adventures with  
Two Very  
Good Dogs



ANDREW COTTER

## 1. Game Gone, Game On



When asked to name your favourite year, I'm not sure that 2020 would be high on anybody's list. The CEO of Zoom might disagree, perhaps sailing around the Caribbean on his yacht pulled by a fleet of swans. But almost everybody else who has lived through it will have very distinct memories of the deep unpleasantness – lockdown lost jobs, strained relationships and even worse. And above all, the overriding *oddness* as our lives were utterly transformed by a global pandemic. For me, that feeling was only heightened by something I brought upon myself in the spring, as

I somehow fashioned our entirely unwitting Labradors, Olive and Mabel, into viral stars of the internet.

In my normal job (which, admittedly, is not particularly normal) I am a sports broadcaster – commentating on all manner of events, mainly for the BBC, but really for anybody who will employ me. It is a hugely enjoyable profession and one that I am very fortunate to do – travelling around, describing the action in golf, rugby, tennis, athletics and other major events besides. But it does rather depend on sport actually taking place, which has never been an issue. Until this strange year of 2020.

It was during the Six Nations rugby tournament – one of the highlights of my working calendar – when we started to feel that things were perhaps going slightly amiss. A couple of events had already been cancelled because of the coronavirus which was moving across from Asia into Europe and beyond. Matches in Italy and Ireland were now being called off and there were murmurings of far worse to come. In early March, French authorities also decided to put a ban on mass gatherings and their final game was postponed. By the entirely appropriate date of Friday the 13th, only one fixture was left standing – Wales against Scotland. I was due to commentate and was getting ready to set off for Cardiff when the texts and emails started arriving.

‘Game gone. Give me a call,’ came the short, slightly harassed message from the editor. Two minutes later, an email arrived from Augusta National Golf Club: ‘Unfortunately we have decided at this time to postpone the Masters Tournament . . .’ and this was quickly followed by the disappearance of the London Marathon – which would seem quite a thing to mislay. And so the sporting house of cards started to collapse. Event after event was being called off and it didn’t escape my notice that being a freelance sports commentator

with no sport occurring anywhere in the world might prove tricky.

Of course, for most people in that position their immediate thought will be, ‘Can I pay bills and the mortgage?’ And yes, this did cross my mind. How my next thought came to be, ‘Well... perhaps I should commentate on my dogs eating their breakfast and then put it on Twitter?’ I’m still not quite sure.

That said, ego is a fairly strong suspect – the firm belief that other people *very* much need to hear your voice and listen to your opinions or, indeed, that you like to try and make people laugh. These are traits which will probably be found more in broadcasters than other members of the human race, but most people have them to a certain extent. That, after all, is what fuels social media – feeling the need to share. So, on that fateful day, suddenly jobless, I went out, iPhone in hand, the dogs questioning why I was looking for a more scenic location than their usual feeding spot by the washing machine and the slightly grubby skirting-board. Although for them it was just another offering of food and they would eat it by the bins if necessary. They would then try to eat from the bins. But on this occasion they certainly wouldn’t have cared or noticed that I was beside them, filming as they ate and offering a little bit more chat during their meals than I normally do.

And that was it. Although, in fact, I sat on the video for a couple of weeks. Not initially convinced that it was riotously amusing anyway, and I tended to live by the Twitter rule, ‘If in doubt, just don’t do it.’ But in those next weeks, my working diary emptied entirely: the Boat Race, Wimbledon, the Tokyo Olympics and the Open Championship were either postponed or cancelled. So I was left at a very loose end. ‘I was bored’ as I wrote in the tweet which I finally decided to release into the wilds of the internet.

One click and it all began.

## 2. Bored Game



I like to think that I am used to a reasonable amount of attention. Through my work I have a small profile which means that once in a while people outside my close friends and family might know who I am. Occasionally in the past I might even have put out a tweet that gave two or three people the urge to type ‘LOL!’. But what I was about to experience was on an entirely different level.

‘I think your Twitter might be going a bit mad,’ said my partner Caroline, after just a few minutes. Indeed, Olive and Mabel eating, with a bit of commentary thrown in, already had thousands of

views, likes, retweets. Very quickly it managed to leave far behind any occasion when I might have made a cutting yet brilliant observation about Tiger Woods.

Caroline was keeping a keen eye on proceedings and shouting through, at fairly regular intervals, some notables who had retweeted it. Rattling off names as if running down a list of potential guests for a mid-morning chat show.

‘Gary Lineker . . . Simon Mayo . . . Dara Ó Briain . . . Kirstie Allsopp . . .’

When something goes viral on the internet the fascinating thing is how it spreads. You can see it happen and chart its progress. Those shouted names then became a live commentary on the video’s movement from domestic to international.

‘Toby and Josh from *The West Wing* have retweeted.’

‘RYAN REYNOLDS!!!!’ texted a friend, as I sat watching television, eating cereal and feigning disinterest in the cyber-wildfire. Head to Twitter and yes, there is Deadpool himself offering a quote from the dog-commentary and a laughing emoji. I was very close to replying with ‘Thanks, Ryan! LOVED *La La Land*!!’ but realised just in time my Ryan-based confusion.

It had also been picked up by ESPN and by Buzzfeed – huge Twitter accounts which accelerated the spread. One million . . . two million . . . three million views. The counter whirred. ‘Damn . . . I had Mabel!’ tweeted Ron Perlman aka ‘Hellboy’ of those films, as our virus appeared to be hitting superheroes particularly hard.

It seemed strange to me how much this tweet was being appreciated in the United States. In my head, the humour of it was in a semi-recognisable sports broadcaster turning his hand to something utterly mundane. But in America nobody would be aware of who I was or what I did. In fact, there were a significant number of

comments expressing the idea that I should try to become a professional sports announcer because ‘You sound just like one’.

The reaction was extraordinary. Every morning I was waking up to messages and emails of appreciation from the furthest reaches of the globe. Every day brought dozens of requests for interviews. Initially – suddenly a novice in the ways of the media once more – you say yes to them, because . . . well, why not? Then you realise that this is only the start and you probably should have paced yourself. Skypes, FaceTimes and Zooms followed with the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, CBS, ABC, even Kennel Club TV in America. There were chats on radio stations in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa and Canada. And countless other enquiries which had to be turned down. The world was suddenly looking in on and sharing our two dogs, who remained blissfully ignorant of the clamour, as indeed they are about most things.

At that point this odd little video, which I very nearly didn’t bother uploading, had racked up somewhere around eight million views. Once you’re past a few thousand views, the figures become harder to comprehend. But this number is somewhere in the region of the population of London. And then there are the other numbers – the ‘followers’ as they are called on social media, with hints of religious fervour.

The faithful flock of my Twitter account had been not small, but certainly not Kardashian in scale and was operating around the 45,000 mark. Bear in mind that this had been accrued over a period of eleven years, during which my work as a broadcaster had given me some interest from people who were keen on the various sports which I covered. But the diversity of my portfolio probably didn’t help – some might have drifted in thinking that I would tweet about golf and drifted quickly out again when a rugby tweet appeared. Likewise

tennis or athletics fans came and went through the revolving door when they realised I mostly posted pictures of mountains, or links to videos on YouTube of pets falling over.

Besides, before Olive and Mabel took off, my interest in and fondness for Twitter had all but disappeared. I had been a fairly early adopter, back in 2009, and it seemed to be a friendlier, more enjoyable place then. Somewhere you could be a bit silly and have some fun, all with the feeling of an enjoyable sideshow.

With the rise in the popularity of Twitter came a change in its tone. More people joined and more serious matters were discussed – and by ‘discussed’ we of course generally mean people shouting abuse at each other from opposing sides of the arguments. Silly and fun had been replaced by criticism and outrage. It quickly morphed into a far more divisive place than the unifying, agreeable and altogether pleasant force it was probably designed to be.

Also, as a broadcaster, I became well aware that you had to put up with a certain amount of feedback on Twitter. In decades past if somebody watched an event where they were upset by a commentator – if a mistake had been made or they strongly disagreed with something you had said and they desperately felt the urge to tell you, then it would have involved a lot of effort on their part. Get a piece of paper and a pen, write down the all-important critique, then find an envelope and a stamp and track down the relevant address at the BBC before heading to the postbox. Then sit back for a couple of days, possibly fuming at some other stuff on TV or life in general and wonder if your letter was ever read by any human eyes.

With the advent of social media – and in particular Twitter – the process was almost immediate. From disagreement, to rage, to typing angry thoughts and pressing send. Received by your target and all done and dusted in just a few seconds.

My safeguard against such correspondence was to simply deactivate my account before commentating on a major sporting event. I wish I had done so when providing the commentary for the BBC on the opening ceremony at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Not that I said anything controversial or incorrect at all, but it's impossible to give the history of all 207 countries trooping into the Maracanã Stadium without upsetting somebody, somewhere. Draw attention to the fact that a certain nation didn't compete in the Games until 1972 because before that it had still been under the control of a colonial power and you would suffer the wrath of the Twitter righteous:

'Jeez . . . @mrandrewcotter seems to be longing for the days of empire . . .' was a fairly standard message that greeted me on the way back to the hotel.

Curiously, tennis often seemed to prompt the fiercest backlash, from the dedicated fans of whichever player you were commentating on – those devoted to the big three of Roger Federer, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic were particularly vocal and if you didn't offer constant gushing praise throughout one of their matches, you would fear the worst when switching your phone on afterwards.

'I hope you die of a really virulent form of cancer' was one from a Djokovic fan which sticks in the memory, after we had mentioned during the second set that he was struggling with his forehand.

There's no doubt that there was still plenty that was good and entertaining about Twitter and social media in general – you could find links to some very funny content popping up in your timeline. And, of course, it could be used to receive a feed of news or interesting stories. But then, if you only follow like-minded people, which is the way most of us operate, you tend to be only seeing things from your own viewpoint.

We are constantly told that the world is more connected than ever, as if this is an amazing gift for our generation, but it also means that the unpleasant side of human nature can spread as quickly as the good and that the divisions become more obvious. I would constantly long to be rid of Twitter – to just get off the grid, switch off and escape. But then you are told, by those in the know, that in the media industry you simply *must* have a social media presence – in particular if you are self-employed because the business is, to a certain extent, about self-promotion. Another part of life and work with which I've never felt comfortable.

So I kept my Twitter account alive, but only barely and with no real enthusiasm for it. And that's where I was – treading water, but not particularly interested in trying to swim – when the Olive and Mabel wave hit.

As mentioned, very quickly that first video had a London-sized number of views. Accompanying that was a commuter-town's worth of new followers. Having climbed slowly and steadily over eleven years to get to 45,000, that figure now shot up to 90,000 within just a few days. In a way it was quite humbling – over a decade of occasional, pithy remarks about life and sport in 140 characters or fewer, matched by one tweet of dogs eating.

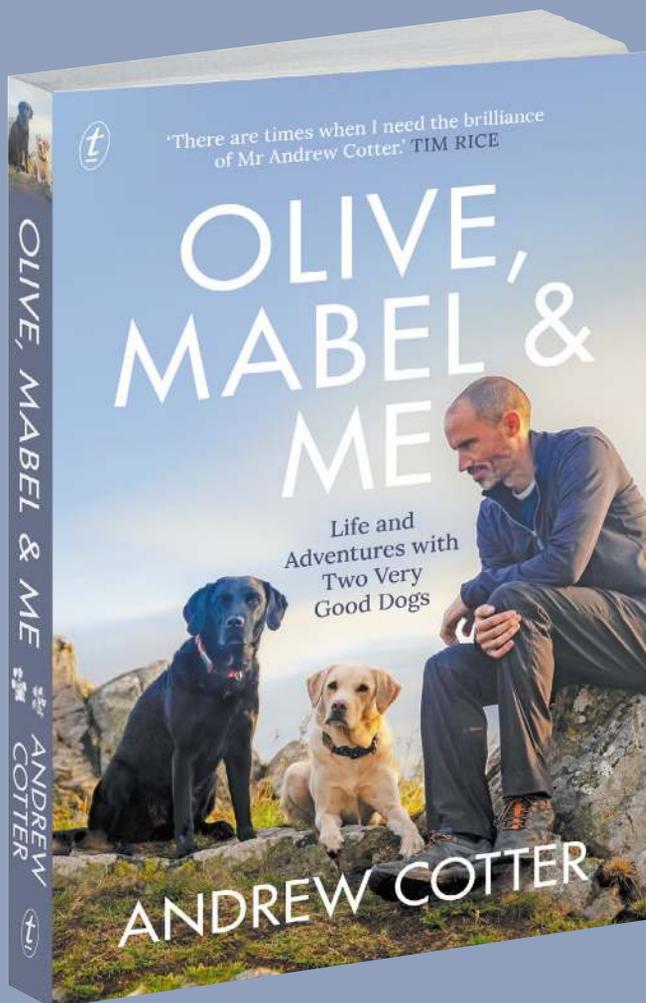
The other remarkable thing – given the breakdown in my relationship with Twitter, citing irreconcilable differences – was that, in this little corner of the app at least, things were pleasant and polite again. People were still messaging in their thousands and, strangely for this tainted social medium, they were all positive.

How nice, I thought, as I prepared to get back to doing other things – returning to whatever it was I had been concerned with before this video happened and content to think of it as a one-off.

Perhaps something to be laughed about in years to come, remembering ‘that Olive and Mabel viral thing’.

But then I started noticing that while the messages about the video were all grateful and generous and kind, a huge number of them also contained a question.

‘When’s the next one out?’



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