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Title:

Literary football reporters: An examination of the writings of the men who elevated British sports journalism

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Abstract

For many years the journalism on the sports pages of British newspapers was looked upon with condescension, seen as frivolous in comparison with the serious intentions of the news and op-ed departments. However, this attitude failed to recognise the contributions of several sports writers whose use of metaphor and allusions to high culture elevated sports journalism in Britain. Among the most important and innovative writers in the post-war period were the *Guardian*'s Don Davies and the *Observer*'s Hugh McIlvanney. Davies brought a deep knowledge of classical literature and culture in writing about football in his native North West of England before his death in the Munich air disaster in 1958. McIlvanney, whose inventive use of metaphor and striking turn of phrase saw him revolutionise sports reporting in and become the only sports writer to be voted Journalist of the Year in Britain.

Introduction

> Mannion is Mozartian in his exquisite workmanship. His style is so graceful, and so courtly, that he wouldn't be out of place if he played in a lace ruffle and the peruque.
>
> (Don Davies in Cox 1962, p. 146)

> Using Shakespeare's words to praise somebody we know is bound to be a rather wild risk, but at that dinner in Manchester I took the chance, invoking Mark Antony's lines about Brutus: 'His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that nature might stand up and say to all the world "This was a man."' It did not seem over the top at the time and it still doesn't.

(McIlvanney 1997, pp. 120-121)

Sports journalism has traditionally been viewed as not being among journalism's 'most prestigious disciplines', and as 'the toy department of the news media – that is, in a place dedicated to fun and frivolity' (Rowe 2007, p. 386). In the hierarchy of journalism, sports reporting is positioned as soft news less important and less vital than its kin; a refuge for those that did not want to do the work of hard news journalists, a place populated by fans with typewriters (Boyle 2006, p. 181). However, since the mid-twentieth century, a small number of erudite sports journalists, including those writing about football specifically, in Britain at least, broke new ground and established new traditions and practices; practices that have resulted in a body of work worthy of literary consideration. Writers including Henry Rose, John Arlott, Geoffrey Green, and Brian Glanville reported on sport in philosophical and 'high-brow' terms. They saw it exist in the same cultural and moral space as classical music, art, and literature and argued that it tells us much about the human and national conditions. Hugh McIlvanney (2019), one of two writers under close examination here, noted that:

> After more than 30 years of writing on sport it is still possible to be assailed by doubts about whether it really is a proper job for a grown person. But I console myself with the thought that it is easier to find a kind of truth in sport than it is, for example, in the activities covered by political or economic journalists. Sports truth may be simplistic but it's not negligible. (para. 3)

This is not to say these writers saw sports journalism, to borrow the oft-quoted Bill Shankly aphorism, as important as the life-or-death nature of news and current affairs; but they recognised equities, certainly parallels, and realised opportunities to reflect on the artistry they saw in the game, in ways that would match a fans' own reverence. This chapter argues the football writing of McIlvanney, and that of his natural predecessor, Don Davies, innovated and

elevated the form and intent of sports journalism. In light of their work, it would be taken more seriously and become more difficult to dismiss. We do not suggest these men are pioneers, as we note there are others worthy of analysis, merely that these two were instrumental in their profession's capacity to capture greater cultural acceptance and that they did so by drawing on their knowledge of the arts and their employment of an array of rhetorical and literary devices that turned football journalism into literary football writing.

The quotes that open this chapter illustrate its key themes and reflect its primary purpose; to examine the ways British sports journalism has been elevated beyond the traditions of journalism by two writers, Don Davies and Hugh McIlvanney. They had different educational backgrounds. Davies attained a scholarship at the University of Manchester and turned to journalism while working as a schoolmaster. McIlvanney, the son of a miner, eschewed university to take the then conventional route from local newspapers to national papers in Fleet Street. Yet their working-class upbringing would shape remarkably similar outlooks on sport and its writing. They shared a love of the arts and developed styles that often incorporated metaphor, simile, and intertextual allusion. They were perfectionists; Davies 'had nothing but contempt and scorn for anything that was slipshod or unworthy' (Cox 1962, p. 13), while McIlvanney's regard for accuracy was uncompromising, 'maddening', and often, 'intrusive' (Mitchell 2016, paras. 7-9). They were not the only journalists known to be meticulous, but they were renowned for their fervency and accuracy. Neither were they the only journalists to employ narrative elements, but they are the best, or at least among the very best, in the heroic elevation of the prosaic events of a traditional match report. They also developed successful careers in broadcasting alongside their print journalism; Davies on BBC Radio's fledgling *Sports Report*; McIlvanney as the suave presenter of sports documentaries. Their reports, woven through with dramatic narrative threads, conveyed hidden depths, the subtexts and or greater

learnings of sport for the spectator, alongside the humanisation of their protagonists. Their triumph, ultimately, was a masterful transportation of the quotidian.

Davies' quote (above) notes Wilf Mannion, an English player of distinction in the 1940s and 50s who played for Middlesborough FC for most of his career and was universally revered. Rather than be concerned with the player, our concern here is the writer's use of complex metaphor, alliteration, and allusion. The humorous comparison with Mozart belies the seriousness with which we should consider Mannion's skills, paralleled as they are with the great German composer. The obvious alliteration is much more carefully chosen than a first glance suggests. The composer is heralded for the clarity, balance, and transparency in his work, particularly where surface-level simplicity and airy delicacy mask his work's exceptional power. The allusion to Mannion's uncommon technical ability, his balletic grace, fleetness of foot appeared incongruent to his remarkable dynamism and robust strength. The references to attire and wig may seem dowdy and possibly a little tacky today, but they speak to an eye for detail, extension of the metaphor, and no small amount of erudition – who would know on first pass that a peruque was a particular shape of wig? There is also a lively relationship between form and content, the kind of verve captured in description of the artists, Mannion and Mozart, in their own right. In the late 1940s, like Mannion's prodigious talent, writing like this had not been seen on newspaper sports pages.

McIlvanney's quote (above) appeared as the conclusion of his obituary for his friend and legendary Manchester United manager Sir Matt Busby in the *Sunday Times* in 1994. It juxtaposes a keen understanding of Shakespeare, in this case the tragedy of *Julius Caesar* (1599 [2003]), with depth of understanding of his audience. Again, rather than focus on the quote's subject, Busby, our concern here is the writer's use of intertextual allusion. Choosing to recall

Mark Antony's view of Brutus from the end of the play would be risky for several reasons, but far more apt seen on the initial surface. Brutus is arguably more commonly and simplistically seen as a traitor to Caesar. In a successful playing career, before joining the club, Busby had turned out for United's fiercest rivals, Liverpool and Manchester City. By the end of the play, Antony recognises and paints Brutus as a principled defender of democracy, as the most honourable of men. McIlvanney seeks to depict Busby in the same light. There are additional parallels. The irony of the events that followed the play's narrative – Octavius, Caesar's heir and a key ally to Antony in the defeat of Brutus' forces, dishonours Antony and becomes the first Emperor of Rome, the very principle that Antony and Brutus struggled against. Busby stood steadfastly for what was right at the club, despite the pressures to submit to change, and even returned out of retirement to managerial duties when things were going badly. McIlvanney nimbly acknowledges Busby's grace and fortitude in the comparison, but also runs the risk that his audience, not as familiar with Shakespeare's work, would miss the layers of meaning in the compliment. Even without this intertextual allusion, McIlvanney's notion of what a "man" is before a room full of footballers – most likely exercising overt hypermasculine sensibilities – is well placed, even where the speaker's reach for such literary comparison risks seeming pompous or worse still, the potentially dangerous proposition of condescension. The quote illustrates McIlvanney's acknowledgement of these risks, to compare Busby to Brutus, but it is the final refrain that is the most telling. His thoughts on his choice of phrase highlights a confidence in his gamble on the reference at the time and his reflection in the prevailing years had not shaken him from certitude.

Before we discuss the elevation of sports, and primarily, football journalism, it is important to note that journalists, in predominantly English-speaking domains at least (the outer limits of this study), have tended to work to traditional parameters, bound as they are in the 'inverted

pyramid' model. The model guides information presentation of the most important or newsworthy facts of a 'story', as directed by a subjective hierarchy of prominence, often determined by the journalistic publication (Keeble 2006). The inverted pyramid incorporates the five Ws of journalism; the who, what, why, where, and when, which inform the 'lede' and or opening paragraphs and provide a summative understanding of the story's most important elements as early as possible. Additional detail is provided to fill out each of these elements as the 'story' is developed. The journalist maintains arms-length 'objectivity' throughout, characterised by distant third person point of view. Predating word processing or computer-aided production, the origins of this method of approach emerged in the print production practices adopted and adapted in Britain and the USA and increasingly regarded as outmoded, outdated, and among the many factors contributing to declining standards of journalism (Scanlan, 2003). The formulaic, utilitarian nature of the inverted pyramid and its distillation of the facts of a story based on perceived import can skew and/or lead to neglect of the deeper, often more fascinating, narrative for journalist and reader alike.

Football journalism is a subgenre of the broader category of sports journalism, itself a subgenre of traditional journalism (Rowe 2007). Football journalists have comfortably operated in breach of the traditions of journalism since Don Davies and his peers exploited the tensions inherent in fan as reporter. We employ the term 'fan' here in its most common usage, not as a fan of a specific team with "an identity rooted in the unbreakable reciprocal relationship between fan and club' (Guilianotti 2002, p. 27) but to denote a person with passion for their subject. Davies may have followed a particular team, but what shone through in his writing was a love for the game. He was objective in his match reports, but his passion for football and his thoughts on players and managers was far less so. If Davies opened the door to subjective perspectives in football journalism, McIlvanney, writing about football, boxing, and horse-racing with equal

reverence, more than any other flung open the stadium gates. In their documentation of the ubiquitous game (Walvin 2014), these writers eschewed the inverted pyramid and elevated our view and understanding of football by subverting traditions held fastidiously in other schools of journalism. For the sake of scope and scale, we focus on a small number of quotes and a small number of rhetorical and literary devices, including complex metaphor, alliteration, and intertextuality. There are additional limits to the study. It is rooted in the idiosyncrasies of British sports journalism and the customs and practices that produced this form. We are English speakers and researchers working in the areas of Media and Communication and Creative Writing. We can therefore only speak to the traditions of football writing in English and that of the British national press in the twentieth century.

This chapter builds on research related to football writing by Paddy Hoey, Lee McGowan and David Forrest (2022). It situates the work of Don Davies and Hugh McIlvanney within the historical development of literary football writing (see McGowan 2019). These writers are among a small number of erudite sports journalists credited with the elevation of football writing to its current standing as a crucial and specialised component of popular journalism. Harry Pearson notes that McIlvanney did not see football as 'a puzzle to be solved, but an expression of character to be experienced' (2019, para. 5). These writers arguably treat football with the same reverence and respect that fans hold for the game.

The chapter will adopt textual analysis (see Hartley 1999; McKee, 2003; Belsey, 2013) to examine a small number of articles, which are representative of each writer's work and the ways a limited range of rhetorical and literary devices, more characteristic of creative non-fiction writing, are employed. Before the textual analysis, the chapter will review and distil football journalism's development as a form. It begins in the 1930s with a brief look at Don Davies'

contemporary, Henry Rose. These writers were among the first to 'speak' to fans directly (see Mason 1993). We consider the 'purple prose' of Geoffrey Green, from the 1950s, whose football reports were littered with literary references before touching on Brian Glanville's substantial contribution to football writing. A prominent cultural shift in writing about football occurred in the 1980s with the emergence of the fanzine, a new type of football journalism, characterised by the game's 'outsiders' and their influence on the rise of the literary football writer in the 1990s (for further reading on football fanzines see Brewster 1993; Dixon 2020; Haynes 1995; Hoey et al. 2022; Millward 2008; Rowe 2005). However, inclusion of discussion on their respective impacts on the form are outside the scope of this chapter's focus on two writers. In the next section, we contextualise Davies and McIlvanney's significant contribution to the field for football journalism. This informs our analysis of a small number of examples of their work. To effectively illustrate the historical development of British football writing between the 1930s and 1970s we now consider a small number of prominent writers whose works each marked the form's evolution.

The British football journalist as pioneer

In the interwar years, British football writing became the domain of aspirant though amateur sports writers, hiding behind pseudonyms, such as 'Left Half', 'Home Goal' or the 'Corinthian'. These writers initially and regularly produced dense, detailed, rigid columns thick with text replete with mundane references to the classics over actual reportage of the football match (Fishwick 1989). When American sports writing, alongside other cultural exports, music and film for example, became fashionable in Britain during this period, it forced the authors of turgid football reports to adjust. The writing became less formal and increasingly, and at times heavily, influenced by Americanisms. British football journalists, Jeff Hill argues, 'forsook the prosaic for the imaginative, the human drama and the 'behind the scenes' story' (2002, pp. 44-

45). Lengthy text heavy columns became interspersed with images, graphics and sub-headings, and shorter sentences added to a more dynamic sense and use of page space. Davies's frequent lapses into Lancastrian dialect in print were perhaps a resistance to the specifically American influences in British sports writing but he was central to more general shifts in tone and style of sports writing towards the literary. McIlvanney was profoundly influenced by a generation of American writers, particularly boxing writers such as Bud Schulberg and the *New Yorker*'s AJ Liebling. The latter's seminal book, *The Sweet Science* (1949) was gifted to the young writer at his first job on the *Kilmarnock Standard*. He said, 'On the one hand, Liebling's standards were liable to frighten the life out of me. On the other, the book confirmed that writing about sport could be worthwhile.' (McLaughlin 2016, para. 13).

Among the writers who can lay claim to influencing the changing face of British sports writing in the immediate post-WWII period, is Henry Rose, Davies' closest contemporary. Sadly, Rose, was one of those, like Davies, who died in the Munich air disaster in 1958 which also claimed the lives of many of the Manchester United players who were known as the Busby Babes. His career started under the pseudonym 'Taurus', which he dropped in early 1931 (Dee 2014, p. 431). His timing was exquisite. British sport was emerging from its relationship with amateur constraint and sporting purity (See Bolsmann & Porter 2018). Prior to the exponential growth in consumption of, predominantly, radio and television media, newspapers had been established as the primary source of information in Britain. Rose began writing for *The Daily Express*, which with four million daily sales, was Britain's most popular newspaper (Seymour-Ure 1991, pp. 28-29). Rose's work resonated so effectively with the newspaper readership he was offered a bi-weekly column, which soon became a daily feature (Dee 2014). His short, snappy, highly personalised style was constructed on a carefully nurtured reputation for the controversial (Collins 2008). In his report of the 1938 annual international match between England and

Scotland international, he notes, ‘Five minutes after I had left the Wembley Stadium I had completely forgotten about the international’; and does not hold back, adding, ‘The worst international I have seen…for long stretches my notebook lay undisturbed, as were the two goalkeepers’ (Rose in Dee 2014, p. 16).

Rose’s success was founded on several factors: a willingness and ability to reflect his readers’ discussions and opinions (Collins 2008); his capacity to leverage access to extensive industry networks, which afforded exclusive ‘insider’ insight that he could and would share with his readers; and an expert knowledge of the game that would see him regularly offer informed predictions. These factors aligned with the British public’s love of gambling and coincided with the growth of ‘the football pools’, a systematic scheme that allowed betting on a spread of football matches. Rose’s work would soon become essential reading for ‘punters’, those people playing the pools. The newspaper took advantage; adverts for ‘pools’ companies regularly appeared alongside his column (Dee 2014, p. 434). Subsequently, Rose became ‘as popular as the people whose deeds he described’ (Collins 2008, p. 28). He fast became a celebrity; his journey to national prominence could be seen to reflect the path of British sport toward modernisation and commercialisation.

Geoffrey Green emerged as a football journalist in the early 1950s. His work was characterised by a canny combination of the strengths of Davies’ passion, erudition, and engaging football writing with Rose’s polished gift for and understanding of the value of ‘insider’ knowledge and the benefits of attentive curation of a public image. Coming from wealth and privilege, he had the family background, the confidence of elite society and the imprimatur of a Cambridge University education. Decades before the BBC dressed *Italia 90* in opera, Nick Hornby produced *Fever Pitch* (1992), or Simon Kuper edited the literary football writing journal,

Perfect Pitch: Home Ground (1997), Green determined that football journalism should not be relegated to the back pages of a newspaper and championed the game as high-brow cultural experience. In his 1950s campaign to shift football's nominal position within its field of cultural production, he would produce the type of match report that satirists still mock today. For example, in response to the verbal challenges of a ballerina in a Madrid Club, Green (1992) would write:

> There is ballet in the movement of the players; music in the roar of the crowd—now fortissimo, now diminuendo. The field is a stage on which a play is acted. But in football you never know the ending. It can be different every time. (p. 101)

As a statement on football's position as art and his own cultural credentials, it typified his work.

In the same ways Rose did, Green made use of 'insider' insight and 'celebrity' status. He appeared to be familiar with every important European political, entertainment, and sporting figure of the day. His openly acknowledged drive toward literary standards, and a wish to have football writing accepted as such, would see him push out the boundaries. His masterful prose had an impressive influence on the public perception of football, particularly English football. More remarkable still was his ability, under deadline pressure, to dictate his articles free form over the phone to editors in London (Green 1985).

Known for his straightforward approach to commentary and reportage on every level of football, Brian Glanville is perhaps the most revered of all British football writers. His work, like Green's, emerged in the 1950s. He was also driven to improve the cultural position of football and would go on to write about the game for over 50 years in newspapers, magazines, and books – non-fiction and fiction (novels and short story collections). In 1950, aged 19, after persuading his father to pay for its publication, he wrote Arsenal icon Cliff Baston's biography.

This allowed Glanville to establish himself as a prodigious talent, experimenting with, and excelling in, most every kind of football writing (Hoey et al. 2022). He attained national recognition in the 1960s with an unmatched prolificacy for football reportage, literary output, and the documentation of world football's most significant social and political changes. He attended and chronicled twelve World Cup tournaments. No other writer has been able to bring that depth of knowledge of the field or breadth of vision to football writing. An example that spans a cross section of Glanville's writing qualities is illustrated in a piece he wrote the night before the 1979 FIFA World Cup second round match between hosts Argentina and their bitter rivals Brazil. After a visit with the famous Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, Glanville (1978) noted:

> The Brazilian team goes through their muted gyrations, uncharacteristically limp and dull, I think how strange it is that these events on a soggy field in a little stadium, so tedious to the eye, will lead to such furore in Brazil – to anticarnivals, the burning of effigies, suicide, murder. (para. 12)

Recognition of the quality of the work of these writers' efforts remained muted in British literary circles or outside of their readers, within their own industry. Their work was generally regarded as neither literary nor 'real' journalism until McIlvanney won the prestigious British Journalist of the Year award in 1976. He was the first – and only – sportswriter to achieve the respectability that Rose, Davies, Green and Glanville had sought. The next and final part of the chapter echoes the response to these writers' works in offering more serious consideration of the ways football journalism is discussed. Before considering literary attributes in their writing, the next section provides some brief further background on Davies and McIlvanney.

Don Davies: "not only the best of the soccer writers; he was also something of a poet"

Don Davies, Chief Football Correspondent at the (then *Manchester*) *Guardian*, writing as 'An Old International' (on weekends only), was most clearly and positively associated with ringing in changes in the form. Described as a writer 'of considerable literary skill who brought to the genre of sports reporting a thoughtful, articulate and broadly philosophical approach' (Goldlust cited in Boyle 2006, p. 35), Davies was known and appreciated for a tendency toward the artful digression.

Born in 1892, Davies was a Bolton Grammar School alumnus destined for the University of Manchester prior to WWI. Having joined the forces in 1916 he became a pilot in the Royal Flying Corp. Shot down over Northern France in 1917, it was as a prisoner of war that he studied languages and read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cox 1962). Davies weighed only six-and-a-half stones when he returned home, and after recuperation, he taught apprentices at Manchester engineering giant Mather and Plant, while studying for his degree in the evenings. He would rise to become principal of the school. From an early age he had developed a passion for the arts, classical music, theatre, poetry, and literature, often visiting the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester. His daughter Deirdre noted that his:

> Study walls were decorated with Durer prints, brought back from his footballing trips to Germany. On the mantelpiece were busts of Wagner and Beethoven. His bookshelves were as full of poetry books as of books on sport. Goethe, Heine and Schiller were his favourites. (Cox 1962, p. 191)

Cox notes Davies' 'preoccupation with the arts' was manifested in his love of Goethe and Heine (in the original German) and in his always carrying 'a selection of Heine's works in his pocket.' (Ibid., p. 13). These enthusiasms shaped his football writing (Williams 2008) and his lively,

poetic style brought him a sizable readership. His last ever report on 5 February 1958, the evening prior to the Munich air disaster, in which he was killed, captured the vibrant prose:

> Who would be a weather prophet? At Belgrade today, in warm sunshine and on a grass pitch where the last remnants of melting snow produced the effect of an English lawn flecked with daisies, Red Star Belgrade and Manchester United began a battle of wits and courage and rugged tackling. (Cox 1962, p. 206)

Davies worked rhetorical devices, such as the rich contrast between the cool green landscape, the springtime perfection of the revered English lawn, and the heat of 'battle', into much of his work in chronicling the emergence of the 'Busby Babes'. The 'Babes' were a group of prodigiously talented young Manchester United players who came to national prominence through the mid to late 1950s. They were named for the coach who trained them, Scotsman, Sir Matt Busby. The day after the noted Belgrade match, along with seven other journalists and seven Manchester United staff members, eight of those players died when their plane crashed at Munich-Riem airport. At the memorial service, Davies' eulogy underlined his writing and its literary description of football. His *Manchester Guardian* colleague, Neville Cardus remembered him as 'something of a poet' (Williams 2018, para. 2). Davies' standing in his community was reflected in colleague John Arlott's obituary in the *Manchester Guardian*. Arlott was a household name for radio and television commentary; he had written for the London *Evening News* and described as the poet laureate of cricket for his lyrical articulation of play and players. To have Arlott write the obituary was a great honour. To add to the sorrow Davies had joyfully accepted Arlott's seat on the doomed flight.

As described in the introduction, Davies' work was suffused with biblical, literary, musical, and popular culture references. He saw no separation between the working-class spectacle of

football and his own literary and cultural life. While his work for BBC radio, collected by Jack Cox, is markedly less literary in its outlook, his work for broadsheet newspaper, the *Manchester Guardian*, with its deeply radical left-wing history and readership, exploited the freedom he had to combine his passions. His influences are clear where he describes Hull City's defender, William McCracken, as the 'Irish Mephistopheles'; the reference to the demon in the Faustian myth is taken further when Davies adds that McCracken is 'the game's arch-obstructionist' (Cox 1962, p. 121). In a match report for a Manchester United Burnley fixture, an unlikely opportunity to reflect on humbled genuflection of the man credited with the construction of Babylon, Davies wrote, 'at first we wondered whether Dawson, the centre-forward, had been modelling his training on Nebuchadnezzar, for he spent so much of his time on his hands and knees' (Ibid., p. 139). The great Welsh all-rounder John Charles, as equally accomplished as a defender as he was a forward and a rare talent to succeed in Italy, is described by Davies as 'the Admirable Crichton of the football world' (Cox 1962, p. 147). The reference draws on JM Barrie's play *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), which was successfully adapted for the screen (Gilbert 1957). Crichton is a butler who becomes the highly practical saviour of his marooned aristocratic employers in Lewis Gilbert's comedy of manners. In another report, Davies notes the way Manchester United 'danced' onto 'the pitch in their Tennysonian strip "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful", white stockings and all' and adds wry humour, 'One almost expected Robert Helpmann to emerge dribbling a ball' (Cox 1962, p. 159). The use of a quote from the famous Arthurian legend, *Idylls of Kings* (Tennyson 1859) and the leading male dancer of the day sees Davies make the rare connection between narrative poetry and contemporaneous ballet in a football match report. His repertoire would also see him characterise Old Trafford as '"one vast substantial smile"' as the jolly Mrs. Fezziwig from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. (Cox 1962, p. 162) and reference the opera (and perhaps his many visits to the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester) in his description of Argentinian midfield great Alfredo Di Stefano,

whose colleagues, Davies noted could no more that be expected to revere and ‘play up to him’ than an ‘orchestra should play up to’ famous conductors such as impresario Sir Thomas Beecham or conductor and cellist, Sir John Barbirolli (Cox 1962, p. 161).

On Davies’s death there came an outpouring of grief from the football authorities, his peers, and his readers alike. Invoking the work of the great British writer and broadcaster, Mr E. Sutcliffe said, ‘this “Alistair Cooke” of the football world will be missed not only by those who cherish good football, but also those who cherish good writing’, (1958, para. 2). The Rev W. Winchurch noted Davies’, ‘classical allusions, quotations from Shakespeare, anecdotes, humorous examples of Lancashire dialect, as well as a perfect picture of the match and the players’, while Ada A. Cooke wrote:

> his genius for description made me see whatever was possible for an ignoramus to see in the game … It was as though I stood before a large picture and someone who understood it was showing me, with simplicity and sympathy, its inner meaning. (1958, para. 1)

Perhaps the most glowing tribute to Davies came from F. Jasper:

> We will miss that simile which made us smile all day, or a line of the classics which evoked such pleasant reflections. He could command in his service literature from the Old Testament to the nineteenth-century novelists. One recalls, for instance, his description of Finney’s rapier wit, cutting the Gordian knot of Manchester City’s defence (1958, para. 3).

Intricate, insoluble problematic back fours aside, Davies’ highbrow approach to the relatively low brow world of football writing came as no surprise to friend John Heaton who wrote to the *Guardian* saying:

> Our friendship began through our common love of Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis". Mr Davies regarded that and Francis Thompson's Essay on Shelley as the finest prose works in English Literature. I (and, I imagine thousands of others) regarded Mr. Davies's prose as the best of all football writers' (Heaton 1958, para. 1).

This 'best of' address would also be assigned to McIlvanney. While their similarities were many, there were differences in approach too. If Davies was judicious in his deployment of simile and literary allusion, McIlvanney latter did so with an immense sense of his own greatness and place as the most pre-eminent sportswriter of his age.

Hugh McIlvanney: a trailblazer with dazzling imagery

In addition to his Journalist of the Year award, McIlvanney would be awarded the sports writers prize on multiple occasions. At a time when the precursors to what became known as New Journalism came to see the potential in the writer's position at the centre of the tale, writers of the calibre of Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, and McIlvanney maintained a dignified distance from the events and stars being covered. He may have embodied the classic reporter in his writing, but McIlvanney's reticence to implicate himself in the story did not stop him echoing the likes of Rose and Green. He cultivated the role of *grand homme* of British sports writing. As befitting someone who had a deep knowledge of boxing and horse racing, he created and nurtured a suave, urbane image in tailor-made suits, always puffing on a Cuban cigar. He was deeply aware of the power of his words. His safeguarding of his own brand was akin to auteur film directors maintaining their own unique style and standing. However, it was more than merely image, on his death obituaries emphasized that he was the man who did most to lift British sports journalism from the 'fans with typewriters' toyshop ghetto.

Born in Kilmarnock in Ayrshire in 1934, McIlvanney came to serious sports writing via a very conventional route in post-war British journalism, beginning as a trainee reporter on his local paper. By the end of a career which had taken in the *Daily Express*, the *Observer* and *the Sunday Times*, he was described as "very probably the best writer ever to apply words to newsprint" (Randall 2005, para. 17). Perhaps as a direct result of writing about favoured working-class pursuits of football, boxing, and horse-racing, he is still celebrated as a working-class hero. His own roots, the same working-class upbringing as those footballers and boxers he reported on enhanced his work and enabled a clear connection with the people he aimed to 'speak' to. When he wrote of Jock Stein that, 'his was the kind of loyalty to his roots that made his principles universal' (1997, p. 22), McIlvanney could have been writing about himself. McIlvanney's writing was cultured, precise, and conveyed a deep understanding of football and other sports. He wrote in ways that had rarely been seen, even in the work of those noted previously. His renown can be credited to his unerring capacity to concisely address and articulate the essence of a given subject in a single sentence (Randall 2005, para. 16), often through the employment of metaphor, wry humour, and startling imagery. The headline of his obituary in the *Independent*: 'Hugh McIlvanney: A trailblazer whose dazzling imagery made him one of the greatest sports journalists' (Shaw 2019). Allied to this, he also had a talent for conveying the atmosphere of big sporting events, such as a FIFA World Cup, where he illustrated a keen eye for that which took place away from the pitch, in the crowd or the press box. On the occasion of Celtic's ground-breaking 1967 European Cup Final win, McIlvanney chose to open his match report with, 'today Lisbon is almost, but not quite, back in Portuguese hands at the end of the most hysterically exuberant occupation any city has ever known' and that 'at the airport the impression is of a Dunkirk with happiness' (McIlvanney 1997, p. 17). Like his predecessors, he developed lasting friendships with sports stars of huge significance, football managers Bill

Shankly (who he dubbed a ‘warrior poet’), Matt Busby, Stein, and the footballer George Best among them.

Best, the Northern Irish winger who spent most of his career at Manchester United, is still regarded by many as the greatest player who ever lived, including Pele, the player most often given the label (before the emergence of Messi and Ronaldo and the label’s flagrant mis- and overuse). McIlvanney’s use of language does not speak simply to a description of a footballer in action:

> With feet as sensitive as a pick-pocket’s hands, his control of the ball under the most violent pressure was hypnotic. The bewildering repertoire of feints and swerves, sudden stops and demoralising spurts, exploited a freakish elasticity of limb and torso, tremendous physical strength and resilience for so slight a figure and balance that would have made Isaac Newton decide he might as well have eaten the apple. (1997, p. 89)

The first few words ascribing Best’s feet with exceptional skill, lightness of touch, and the surreptitious dexterity of a cunning thief’s fingers are a now famous, oft-quoted simile. However, the comparative intertextual allusion to epiphanic work of English mathematician, astronomer, theologian, and author Sir Isaac Newton (another master of his craft) is arguably the more powerful image. Best’s apparent defiance of the physicist’s laws speaks simultaneously to his mercurial footballing abilities and his rebellious persona off the pitch. At a syllabic level, McIlvanney’s sentences dance the way the player did. The writer employs a range of alliterative devices to capture Best’s gifts. Plosives (pressure–hypnotic, exploited-freakish-elasticity) are interspersed with consonant sibilance, specifically the alliterative repetition of hard t sounds known as a ‘dental’ consonance (torso–tremendous). Instances of sibilance, the alliterative ‘s’ sound (swerves, sudden stops, demoralising spurts; (re)silience for

so slight) are interwoven with assonant vowel sounds (control, most violent, hypnotic) to present movement akin to the push and pull of breath, the touch and tap of a ball. Rather than simply noting the action, these sounds resonate, imitate Best's evasion of his opponent, the physical action being described. Then there is the protracted approximate of polysyndeton in the second sentence, 'feints and swerves … stops and demoralising spurts, … limb and torso … strength and resilience'. The repetition of paired verbs, nouns, and then adjectives enact the gravity defying balance, show the player through a series of images and devices that share the relationship with the weight-less illusion, a break with the real and concrete. The reader is moved by the words even as Best's poor opponents were dumbfounded by his footwork.

McIlvanney was arguably the last of his kind, he extended a working-class respect for the sport and treated it with the same verbose reverence of the ordinary fan on the terrace. Rather than let football journalism be diminished or positioned as a profession, he, like Davies before him, sought to imbue his love and respect for the game through his writing. His world view and career seemed preoccupied by why people, particularly the working classes, are so preternaturally attached to sport and sporting figures as a means of identification and enjoyment. For McIlvanney those people involved in this relationship, the great players and managers, deserved to be elevated to the same standing culturally as the great historic figures, a paradox given his belief and description of sport as 'our magnificent triviality' (Mitchell, 2016, para. 1), but for him, Busby and his fellow Scottish football management trailblazers, Stein and the great Bill Shankly, embodied the greatness and drama of Shakespearean figures like Brutus or Caesar. The story of Best, whose unfulfilled talent would come to symbolise so much about British culture, is a symbolic picture of decline, a tragedy in all its classical form.

Conclusion

At their deaths, Davies in 1958 and McIlvanney in 2019, the outpouring of grief reflected more than just their standing as leading practitioners of their art in their respective eras. A remarkable feature of the published obituaries, and in Davies' case the incredible letters from his readership, is the frequent use of examples from their works and references to their stylistic approach and their consistent and seemingly relentless capacity to capture extraordinary human endeavour in the most compelling ways.

Unlike Davies, McIlvanney worked at a time where he was not confined by the constrictions of the match report or preview. He would often find the space to set sport and sporting figures in much deeper social and political contexts. He was at his best estimating the cultural and historical worth of his chosen sports and their leading, triumphant, and often broken figures. He knew, like Davies, that sport reveals those truths that other aspects of everyday life cannot.

Their part in the evolution and elevation of football writing and its journalism is evident in their use of more expressive narrative elements, the rhetorical and literary devices a reader would be more likely to find in a work of literary fiction. Taking just a small number of examples we better understand their influence on football journalism and realise their attainment, and more, of their goal to make football writing worthy of literary consideration. We do not argue for wholesale equitable consideration on a par with more prestigious forms of journalism. Rather this chapter argues that, alongside a handful of notable others, McIlvanney, the last of his kind, and Davies, the likely progenitor of narrative voice, allusion, and complex metaphor in football reporting, innovated the form and in doing so reframed the intent of sports journalism and re-situated the game within our cultural understanding. They made it too difficult for their work, and that of their peers, to be dismissed and relegated to the back pages.

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