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The Game of Our Lives

The Meaning and Making of English Football

Written by David Goldblatt

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The Game of Our Lives

The Meaning and Making of English Football

DAVID GOLDBLATT



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Introduction: England is Paradise

‘When you arrive in England for football it’s a paradise.’

Eric Cantona

I

Sir Richard Turnbull, the penultimate Governor of Aden, told Denis Healey, then Defence Secretary, that ‘When the British Empire finally sank beneath the waves of history, it would leave behind only two monuments – one was the game of association football, the other was the expression “Fuck off”.’¹ Spoken in the mid-1960s as the last remnants of the British Empire were abandoned, Turnbull’s predictions were perhaps overly pessimistic. A case can still be made for the lasting impact of English jurisprudence, engineering and education. The canon of English Literature may not have the demotic presence of rough Anglo-Saxon cursing, but it continues to shape the linguistic imagination of much of the world. Yet Turnbull was right to believe that among the most important legacies of nearly two centuries of global influence was a product of working-class industrial Britain. Cricket, the game of gentlemen, would leave its mark in much of the Empire, but football, the game of the people, would be present everywhere.

Working-class industrial Britain, certainly one that Turnbull and Healey would have recognized, has gone the way of the Empire, sunk beneath the waves of history. Even as they spoke, the long process of deindustrialization was underway. The steady shift in output and employment from manufacturing to services, and with it a profound shift in the class structure, culture and politics of the country, began in the 1960s and gathered pace in the 1970s. New global competition ate into British industry’s shrinking markets. Mass

unemployment, unknown for a generation, returned. Neither Wilson's attempt to modernize British industry in the 1960s, nor Heath's abortive efforts to break the power of the unions and deregulate the economy in the 1970s, had succeeded. The Wilson–Callaghan government was never more than a holding operation for industrial Britain.

Thatcherism broke the deadlock and played for keeps. The reversal of British economic decline required the fragmentation of the ideological consensus of the post-war era and the deregulation and privatization of the mixed economy, both of which tasks required the breaking of the power of the working-class institutions that had been so instrumental in their creation. High unemployment and the emergence of new economic sectors with no tradition of labour organization sapped the strength and bargaining power of the trade unions. The steady shrinkage and privatization of the state-owned industrial sector was a further blow. A wave of legislation, backed up by a huge battery of fines and punishments, massively curtailed the capacity of trade unions to conduct industrial action. Perhaps most important of all, the notion that the union movement was a legitimate representative of an important social constituency in the national conversation was entirely eradicated. The Labour Party was ideologically and electorally trounced. Its power bases in the trade unions, the public services and local councils were shrunk or, like the GLC, eliminated altogether. The sale of council housing shifted a significant tranche of its working-class support over to the Tories. The Labour Party was forced, in a series of successive retreats, to accept much of the era's reforms and ideological assumptions. When it finally returned to power after seventeen years in opposition, the party's relationship to working-class Britain was highly attenuated. New Labour was, as Margaret Thatcher herself put it, her greatest legacy. Thus when the dust settled on post-Thatcherite Britain its core working-class industrial and political institutions had been eviscerated. Many of its traditional cultural forms and consumption habits had faded: social housing was sold off or demonized, the Co-operative movement declined as the new supermarkets and branded retailers ate into their markets, the local boozer was closing up as

national drinking habits changed and the wine bar arrived. Blackpool and Butlin's were broke, good for sit-com nostalgia rather than family holidays.

Yet among the rubble of industrial Britain, football was still standing. In fact, football had reached its nadir in 1985, the year of Heysel, Bradford and the game's lowest-ever attendance figures. Since then audiences had been growing and the first serious television deal in the English game's history was signed with ITV. The Hillsborough disaster in 1989, a culmination of the dire state of British stadiums and policing, shook the game but did not destroy it. In fact the Taylor Report on the disaster would be the catalyst for profound reform. Despite the desperate tragedy of Hillsborough and the wide opprobrium in which it continued to be held, football endured. What could explain the game's seemingly ineradicable appeal? Writing in 1990, Roy Hattersley, then deputy leader of the Labour Party, thought that 'Football does more than provide unrivalled pleasure on a Saturday afternoon. It keeps us in romantic association with our individual and collective past. It is a game of industrial England. It is no longer the exclusive preserve of men and women who work in the mines and factories. For the mines and factories are not the force they used to be . . . But in general it is a game of the sons and daughters of that old working-class.'²

Although change was coming, football had not been entirely sanitized. Its rough edges remained on view and that, paradoxically, is what allowed its reincarnation. Its crowds still offered a raucous chorus. Its locations, its players, its character and demeanour retained a distinctive urban working-class form. Its iconography, identities and narratives were drawn from the fine grain of almost every corner of urban Britain. This made it rare. The already uneven distribution of wealth, power and influence between north and south, and between London and the rest, was magnified greatly under the Thatcher government. At the moment of its rebirth, football was drenched in nostalgic affection for the social formation that had just passed into history, for a world where large numbers of people would gather under one roof or in one industrial place; for a realm in which the old geography of Victorian industrial Britain still meant something.

Donald Trelford argued that 'Very often, as they move up the social ladder, these memories of queuing and jostling among football crowds are the only vivid recollection of the physical realities of working-class life', and recalled the metronomic solidarities of his own youth in Coventry: 'All the men solemnly reversing their small cars out of their garages into the communal back entry at exactly the same time on a Saturday afternoon. It was a ritual, like the carriages going to church in Jane Austen's England, as they set off for the ground in time for the 3pm kick off.'³ For Simon Inglis, an émigré Brummie, football was an emotional time machine that took him to a working-class industrial city that had been lost.

A weekend without the Villa is like a bag of chips without salt and vinegar; worth savouring but ultimately bland and anti-climactic. Times change. I live in London and I don't hate the Blues any more. There are no more football specials from Corporation Street, no more Guy Arabs, the Ansell's brewery has gone, Aston Cross has become no-man's land, and whole swathes of Birmingham have been lost to fast roads, grass verges and quick-build industrial units.⁴

The same voice can be heard in the two books that came to define the new football writing in Britain: Pete Davies's *All Played Out* and Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*.⁵ Published in 1991 and 1992 respectively, on the eve of the Premier League, both books were hailed as the voice of the new football. Self-reflexive, confessional and sociologically literate, they certainly heralded a new and diverse wave of football writing. They were, however, to a much greater extent, an elegy for the old football. While neither author was sentimental about the violence of the 1970s and 1980s, or the dilapidation and danger of its stadiums, both venerated the atmosphere and collective energies of the dwindling crowds, and sensed the arrival of the new commercialism which would sanitize them.

In the near-quarter of a century since the fall of Margaret Thatcher, under conditions of immense change, these sentiments have not disappeared; indeed, they remain integral to football's popular cultures: loyalty is prized but the dilettante, the arriviste and the mercenary are damned; the active commitment of match attendance stands morally superior to the passivity of distant TV spectatorship; connoisseurship

is preferred to consumption; there is space for individual brilliance but there is also a powerful sense of the value of collective action and a moral and sporting sense of the common good. It is this thick web of values, rituals, histories and identities that, I imagine, Eric Cantona sensed when he came from French to English football in 1992 and found it a paradise. Philippe Auclair recounts Cantona's memory of his first goal in English football: 'At the exact moment when the ball entered the net, the thousands of supporters who were behind the goal seemed to dive toward the pitch.' Only in England, he said, could such 'ecstasy be found'. Only in England could the delirious celebrations of young men have become the central expressive ritual in an act of historical remembrance.⁶

II

Cantona scored that goal for Leeds United, the champions in the last season of the old First Division. He would win the championship again the following season but for Manchester United in the Premier League. A transitional figure, with a foot in both historical eras, Cantona relished the delirium and theatricality of the old game, but became the first star of the new era – acquiring wealth, celebrity and status far in excess of his predecessors. He was touched by the raw passion of the English crowd, but he heralded a league in which the English would come to provide less than a third of the players and managers and less than half of the owners. He saw his own performances as a gift to the fans, but the charismatic brilliance of his play was instrumental in popularizing a game that was consumed by money. It is at this intersection, where Britain's deep-rooted cultural relationship with football met the arrival of new media and new money, that the contemporary form of the game emerged. The Premier League, in particular, likes to date the transformation of the game to its own inception in 1992 and explain its success in narrowly economic terms: the arrival of television money combined with investment in all-seater stadiums and the creation of the Premiership meant better players, playing better football in a safer

and more comfortable environment, and therefore attendances across the leagues have been rising ever since. All true, up to a point, but without the inheritance of over a hundred years of football culture and the good luck to acquire it at a moment when its social and historical meanings were more powerful than ever, the stratospheric ascent of the new game would have been impossible.

Together these economic and cultural changes have produced a remarkable shift in the place of football in British society. Once merely popular, even widespread, now football is ubiquitous and its status in both popular and elite cultures greatly elevated. Four things illustrate this: first, the relative size and importance of football when measured against similar phenomena – from theatre-going to soap-opera audiences; secondly, its presence in both popular and elite cultures – from television drama to poetry; thirdly, the degree to which a publicly advertised interest in football has become the norm among Britain's elites; and finally, the degree to which the nation's political commentators have taken on football as a metaphor for the nation's ills. Football is a complex phenomenon with family resemblances to many other cultural forms but identical to none. In its capacity to gather significant numbers of people on a highly regularized calendar, in a highly ritualized fashion, and, on occasion, create moments of community and collective ecstasy, it has something of the church about it. Shorn of any religious dimension, it is closer to the theatre. Like the cultures of music it combines a professional commercialized circuit with a huge web of amateur organizations and a great hinterland of informal play and practice. And ultimately, when seen not just as a sequence of unrelated individual matches but as the multi-character, multilayered narrative of a season, football's closest competitor is soap opera. On their own territory, football gives all of these activities a run for their money.

The average weekly attendance at Church of England services in 2011 was just over one million people. If we allow for the fact that the football season runs for only three-quarters of the year, and we consider league and cup games in the same way we would Sunday attendance and special one-offs like weddings and funerals, then football is managing around 750,000 a week. No one in church is

catching the highlights later though, and there isn't too much collective ecstasy either, though the new evangelical Protestant churches are doing their best.⁷ Music festivals are another ecstatic ritual on the British cultural calendar. They have grown enormously over the last twenty years and in 2009 annual attendance reached some 1.5 million, around a third of which is accounted for by Glastonbury and a few other really large events. Their influence on youth culture is greater than the numbers suggest, but still the crowd is barely larger than a season of full houses at Old Trafford.⁸ The theatre industry, well aware of the parallel with football and the competition for the 'leisure pound', declared in 2012 that it was 'outselling football'. Ticket sales, at just over 30 million, had inched ahead of attendance at professional football that year. The measure of football's power is not that it sold fewer seats than theatre, but that the theatrical establishment should even be casting it as serious competition.

Both soap operas and professional football are significant components of Britain's popular culture, but they are sharply separated by gender. Soaps retain a predominantly female audience and offer an infinitely more gender-balanced array of characters. Football, despite marginal shifts in the composition of its crowds and the growth of grassroots women's football, remains an overwhelmingly masculine world. The leading British soap operas attract regular audiences that are easily in excess of most live football and collectively offer a weekly programme at least as extensive as the football fixture list. *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, the old form of the genre, have the same kind of narrative and romantic connection to working-class urban Britain that football has acquired. The shows, like football, find themselves referenced and debated in a variety of other media, their stars endlessly featured in other contexts and their storylines taken as a sustained real-time commentary upon contemporary events. Football now manages all these and on a scale equivalent to the entire genre of soap opera. Moreover, beyond the emotionally disturbed, the soaps do not evoke collective ecstasy or carnival, nor do they provide the bedrock of collective identities. The Church, the theatre, festivals and soap operas – football has acquired a place in British culture that exceeds them all, for it alone

is the equal of each in their own domains of ritual, performance, ecstasy and national narrative.

The sheer volume of newsprint and digital space occupied by football is the most obvious marker of the game's ubiquity. From just a few pages a day in the 1970s, even in the most football-heavy papers, Britain's tabloids and broadsheets started devoting many times that kind of space to football. Football's presence on the internet grew even faster as websites, podcasts and blogs proliferated.⁹ In a media culture in which professional journalists have always interceded between players and fans, Twitter has proved an immensely popular alternative circuit of communication. The marriage of digital technology and football has been particularly successful in the realm of gaming, which itself has become a huge consumer market and a virtually ubiquitous practice among young men. Between 1995 and 2012 the most successful computer games in the UK have been the FIFA football series. *Championship* and *Football Manager* and the other simulation games have sold fewer units, but in console form, as well as the online fantasy football leagues run by the Premiership and national newspapers, they have over four million players annually.¹⁰

Perhaps a better measure of football's new cultural weight than the sheer volume of news output, or the uncountable hours devoted to video games in bedrooms across the nation, was the degree to which the game had become the subject of other cultural forms. Television, although it had covered football for over three decades, had never really explored its possibilities beyond the sports slots. Outside of highlights shows and *Football Focus*, there were just a handful of documentaries and one-off dramas, like John Boorman's *Six Days to Saturday* or Jack Rosenthal's comedy *Another Sunday and Sweet FA*. In the 1990s this changed. *Fantasy Football League* brought together the worlds of stand-up comedy, the chat show and football fanzine trivia, a combination which worked for Danny Baker on BBC radio. Drama departments, which had steered clear of football, dipped their toes in the water: Cheri Lunghi took on the dressing room as *The Manager*, Arthur Smith's bittersweet comedy *A Night with Gary Lineker* was hugely popular on TV and in the theatre. ITV ran its sex, shopping and shooting soap *Footballers' Wives*. Sky made fifteen series of *Dream*

Team, Roy of the Rovers for the Premiership era, reduced eventually to *Dynasty* levels of implausible plot line, death and betrayal. Conventional theatre also overcame its reticence when dealing with football. Historical revivals, like the 1913 drama *The Game*, proved popular. Local stories that focused on fans rather than players multiplied: *And Did Those Feet* was an account of a fanatical Bolton-supporting news-agent who walked to Wembley in 1923; *We Love You City* was the story of a group of Coventry fans who didn't make it to the club's 1987 FA Cup victory. Ben Elton and Andrew Lloyd Webber's West End musical *The Beautiful Game* took football in Northern Ireland as its improbable setting. *Sing Yer Heart Out*, where the atmosphere in a pub during an England game gets very ugly, played at the National Theatre. Thus, at the apex of the dramatic world, football was a theatre of either mawkish sentiment or atavistic hate.¹¹

From almost a century of cinema up until 1990, British football had featured in just a handful of films: the backdrop to a whodunnit in the 1939 *Arsenal Stadium Mystery*; the jaunty art-house documentary *Goal!* – the official film of the 1966 World Cup; in the early 1980s, there was the sweetly observed teen romance of *Gregory's Girl*, and the hapless hi-concept of *Escape to Victory*, Hollywood's take on 'football meets the prisoner of war escape movie'. They were all eclipsed by the short, but utterly heart-rending, football sequence in Ken Loach's *Kes* in which Brian Glover's PE teacher treats a coaching session as a chance to regress to his inner playground bully. The last twenty years, by contrast, have seen dozens of football movies released. The Sisyphean task of bending the arc of a Hollywood script to English football culture was tried again, but both *Goal!* and *When Saturday Comes* looked clunky and clichéd. A slew of hooligan movies, drawing on the new genre of hooligan memoirs, were equally dismal. *Bend it Like Beckham* had the easy charm of *Gregory's Girl* transported from new-town Scotland to multi-ethnic London, but was slight. *Mike Bassett: England Manager* – a low-budget comedy about the trials of the England boss – had its moments, but it paled beside the real thing: Channel 4's documentary *Impossible Job*, which followed Graham Taylor's final days in charge of the England team, was cruelly funny but bathed in the most acute pathos. As with so

many attempts to dramatize football, fiction has found it hard to compete with football's own spontaneous capacity for narrative. The art-house montage *Zidane*, released in 2006 and produced by the Turner Prize-winning artist Douglas Gordon and French filmmaker Philippe Parreno, succeeded by abandoning narrative entirely. Only *The Damned United*, an adaptation of David Peace's coruscating novel about Brian Clough and his time at Leeds United, and Ken Loach's *Looking for Eric* have risen to the challenge. Loach's film manages this by combining Mancunian magic realism with Ealing Comedy, gently telling the tale of a struggling post-office worker and Manchester United fan who sorts out his life with the help of a magical Eric Cantona, played by himself.

Neither TV nor film was ever going to bestow serious cultural capital on football. Its elevation in British cultural life owed more to the sudden engagement of key members of its male literary elite with the sport. What sporting energies had existed among British writers had hitherto been directed elsewhere, towards cricket especially, but the haul of literary encounters with football was meagre.¹² In the 1980s and early 1990s this changed. Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Sebastian Faulks, Geoff Dyer, Blake Morrison and Nick Hornby all published pieces on football. The leading literary journals, previously football-free zones, took note. Karl Miller, editor of the *London Review of Books*, started commenting on the 1990 World Cup in the magazine's Diary section, while three years later *Granta* published Ian Hamilton's *Gazza Agonistes*.¹³ Literary England had deemed football a permissible topic of inquiry, but despite this rapprochement football acquired only a very marginal place in the fictional landscape, more often than not used as a jokey satirical stage, like its cameo in Martin Amis's *London Fields*.¹⁴ Rare exceptions to this have been D. J. Taylor's *English Settlement* in which money laundering at a south London club becomes entangled in a wider story about the rise of the City, David Peace's *The Damned United* and its follow-up *Red or Dead*, which fictionalizes the football life of Bill Shankly.¹⁵

Of all the arts, poetry's relationship to football has been the easiest and closest, an amity facilitated by the shared interest of poets and crowds in chants, rhythm and rhymes. Three of the most significant

post-war poets – Larkin, Heaney and Hughes – all found space for football as a potent childhood memory or a telling element of the urban landscape.¹⁶ In the last twenty years poetry and football have moved closer together. Brighton and Hove Albion made Attila the Stockbroker club poet in residence; Ian McMillan was awarded a similar position at Barnsley. Andrew Motion, when Poet Laureate, backed the establishment of a nationwide football laureate.¹⁷ More substantively, Tony Harrison's *v.*, still the most significant poetic reflection on the end of industrial Britain, drew widely on the oppositional and conflictual imagery of the game. Motion's successor, Carol Ann Duffy, wrote a poem for the nation on David Beckham's Achilles heel, while Simon Armitage declared that 'I'd always thought of poets as the goalkeepers of the literary world.' Don Paterson, one of Scotland's leading modern poets, framed his own poetic account of national post-industrial decline through the story of a failing football club in his long collection *Nil Nil*.¹⁸

The royal family had graced football with their official patronage, and their actual presence on the big occasions, since before the First World War, but they had hitherto been studiously nonpartisan. In the last decade the Windsors have let it be known that the Monarch is a fan of Arsenal, a preference inherited from her mother. Prince Charles later revealed he was a Burnley fan of many years' standing; Prince William opted for Aston Villa, Prince Harry for Arsenal.¹⁹ Post-war prime ministers had been equally reluctant to reveal any affiliation, if indeed they had one at all. Harold Wilson had made a few headlines with his support for Huddersfield Town but Attlee, Macmillan and Douglas-Home all preferred cricket, Heath was a sailor and Thatcher simply loathed the game. John Major's arrival signalled a degree of change, for although predominantly a fan and a scholar of cricket he liked to watch Chelsea. However, it was with Tony Blair's election as Prime Minister in 1997 that a deeper shift in attitudes to football at Westminster became obvious. Blair's media chief, Alastair Campbell, was a lifelong Burnley fan, Blair was a somewhat less obsessive Newcastle supporter. In the run-up to the 1997 election, Campbell used football as a stick to beat the Tories with, authoring articles by Blair in the tabloids. He also ensured

there were plenty of photo opportunities of Blair playing keepy-uppy or sitting with his family in the royal box at Wembley. Football became both a political tool and the currency of everyday networking in the upper echelons of New Labour. Gordon Brown, the new Chancellor, was a shareholder of Raith Rovers. The core of the party's special advisers and young henchmen, who in due course would become the new party establishment, coalesced around a Sunday league team called Demon Eyes – the name a reference to the Conservative Party's 'scary Tony Blair' adverts used during the 1997 general election.

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties have for the most part kept their distance from the sport, many preferring individual games and country pursuits. William Hague's thing is judo while George Osborne plays computer games.²⁰ Nonetheless, David Cameron has considered it politic to make his love for Aston Villa well known (something he has in common with the Duke of Cambridge). Michael Howard, Home Secretary under Major and leader of the Tory Party between 2003 and 2005, was sufficiently engaged with the fate of Liverpool FC to publicly criticize manager Gerard Houllier and call for his resignation.²¹ The Liberal Democrat Vince Cable has publicly declared his obsession with York City and has not been averse to the use of football metaphors in his speeches.²² The City has been much less reticent about wearing its football colours. Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England for over a decade, claimed in a television interview that 'Supporting Aston Villa is much more stressful than being Governor of the Bank of England', and chose an obscure amateur celebration of the club's European Cup victory in 1982 as one of his desert island discs.²³ At one point both the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, and the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, were very public Arsenal supporters.

The new football emerged in an era characterized by increasingly wide economic and social inequalities in Britain and the very high concentration of wealth among small elites. This shift was accompanied by the development of a new vocabulary of high-end consumption and social differentiation: luxury goods, premium services and business class. At the same time a key tool of public policy was the use of league tables in the measurement of services. Thus the

language of football and the special aura of exclusivity and quality that surrounded the Premiership found their way into areas of cultural life previously off limits to the game. Reviewing the Booker shortlist in 1996 the *Independent* remarked that ‘Margaret Atwood is, by general consent, near the top of the world’s Premier League of novelists.’²⁴ Opening its survey of the state of British science the Royal Society claimed that ‘The UK has been in the top two of the scientific premier league for the last 350 years.’²⁵ From primary and secondary schools to hospitals and Michelin-starred restaurants, all could be promoted to or relegated from the Premier League. Martin Sorrel, the most important figure in the British advertising industry, attempted to explain the new economic global order in similar terms.²⁶ The art world, not known for its close links to football, extended the metaphor. Damien Hirst’s split from his long-standing gallery was seen in terms of the transfer market: “It’s not so much that these are defections, more that artists are more in control,” said the curator and academic Andrew Renton. “It’s like Premiership football. Why did Man City not get Robin Van Persie when they offered more than Man United? When you’re already worth tens of millions, it’s not just about money.”²⁷ At the other end of the table, the *Mirror* argued that ‘a new “Premier League” of art galleries and buyers fuelled by new wealth money was emerging, leaving smaller galleries and artists fighting for crumbs.’²⁸

For most of the post-war era politicians and commentators had been reluctant to use football as a guide to the state of the nation. In the twenty-first century they couldn’t stop. For some, like Prime Minister David Cameron, the Premiership was an unproblematic export success, an exemplar of Britain’s potential and a bridgehead to the rest of the world. Speaking in India he said, ‘We brought one of Britain’s great exports to the world, Premier League Football, [in] which I think you take quite a close interest in India as well.’²⁹ The left seized on the business practices of the game to denounce Britain’s wider economic structures and the attendant problems of under-regulation, vulnerability to globalization and soaring inequalities. Will Hutton went as far as to argue that ‘The beautiful game embodies everything that’s bad about Britain’, above all a political

economy in which private ownership and profit always trumped public provision and social needs. In a similar vein, Jonathan Freedland, writing after the Glazer family's leveraged buyout of Manchester United, compared the deal to Kraft's buy-up of Cadbury: 'Selling off the crown jewels of our collective culture in the name of a rampant capitalism that is both unsustainable and ultimately joyless. That doesn't just sound like the state of the national game, that sounds like the state of the nation.'³⁰

Predictably the right worried less about economic inequalities and injustices and more about football's meanings and moralities. Craig Brown fumed, 'I hate its imbecilic chanting and its self-righteous saloon-bar expertise, its ersatz working classness.'³¹ Peter Hitchens, in the *Daily Mail*, asked, 'Is football a pagan cult?' and concluded that it probably was. This, he wearily accepted, was the inevitable consequence of the failures of modern liberal Christianity, but football fans' shallow ninety-minute popular nationalism was another matter: 'I am almost permanently furious that they can rush on to the streets to show "patriotism" over a football game, but appear unmoved by the theft of our national independence, the rape of our countryside, the destruction of our culture and all the many real and lasting ways in which this country daily loses the Real World Cup of Nationhood.'³² The guileless masses soon transmute into the irrational mob. Michael Henderson, writing in the *Spectator*, thought that 'If you were looking for the authentic voice of the football supporter, at the start of another season, Mr Angry would make a fair representative.' Incivility and crudity were bad enough from the working class, but what really appalled him was that 'These were not proletarians but well-paid professionals affecting to be working-class. They swore loudly and behaved in an obnoxious way because that is how they thought working-class folk behaved.'³³ Henderson preferred an imagined golden age, when the salt of the earth would respond to a Johnny Haynes miss at Fulham with the words 'Oh luckless Haynes'. For a certain kind of conservative, football before the 1970s came to represent a much better Britain in which the working classes were deferential and the middle classes knew their place and voted Tory.

Now a metaphor of choice among elite commentators across the political spectrum, football's cultural ascent was unmistakable. Quite what it revealed remained to be seen.

III

What football reveals is the subject of this book. It is too soon to write a narrative history of British football since Hillsborough. We are only really beginning to get to grips with the 1980s. Yet when the histories of modern Britain begin to cover the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, we can be sure that football will play a bigger part in them than in any earlier era. While the dust is settling it seems wiser to review this era essayistically and thematically, and to ask how football both reflects the main trends of economic and social change in Britain, and where it runs counter to them. In chapter 1, 'Aspiration and Illusion', I argue that the emergence of highly commercialized football in general, and the Premiership in particular, was made possible only by dismantling the defensive regulations of the old order in which competing economic, sporting and social objectives were more finely balanced. Once these barriers had been swept aside the new forces of the post-industrial global economy could truly transform football. As with the wider economy, this has been a mixed experience: success and excellence at the top, uncertainty and hidden poverty at the bottom.

Potentially one of the most troubling aspects of football's commercialization has been its impact on the staging of the match itself. In chapter 2, 'Keeping it Real?', I look at the changing composition and behaviour of football crowds. I argue that for all the efforts of the media-football complex to control the event and shape it as a TV-mediated spectacular, the British crowd has resisted. The capacity to create collective identities, interests and cultures around the watching of football has survived. This is why football remains entwined, in both real and metaphorical ways, with the creation of class and urban identities and the politics of ethnicity and nation.

In chapter 3, 'English Journey', I take a tour of football in urban

England from metropolis to small-town backwater. I contend that, in the absence of powerful local government or strong provincial civil societies, football clubs have become a vital component in sustaining distinct urban identities. The location and architecture of football stadiums have become important components of both economic regeneration programmes and the definition of the wider cultural landscape. In the last couple of decades the already fraught relationship between club owners, their fans and their cities has become more conflicted. The arrival of embezzlers and crooks has produced struggles for the very survival of clubs. Asset strippers and property developers have used clubs as speculative investment opportunities rather than sporting organizations. Commercially minded owners have sought to appeal to global audiences at the expense of local traditions. As with much of local politics in England, the balance of power continues to lie with owners and developers, but football has proved a surprising site of local resistance.

Football clubs may have been a fount of civic identity, but it was not one always accessible to all. The players and much of the crowd were working class; part of the crowd and most of the shareholders were middle class; women were accommodated in small numbers; and until the 1960s they were almost all white. In chapter 4, 'Playing the Race Game', I begin by retracing the emergence of Britain's pioneering generation of black players from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, who publicly took the brunt of the game's and the nation's racism and made themselves an immovable part of English football. Alongside campaigners and supporters, they profoundly shifted the terms of the debate on ethnicity and made public racist abuse unacceptable in football and more widely. For once not merely a metaphor, football was at the leading edge of change. Whether it can continue to be so in the face of institutional racism and the new global migrations to Britain remains to be seen.

In chapter 5, 'Football at Twilight', I look at the way in which the United Kingdom's complex system of national identities has been reflected and even shaped by international football. Rarely among public or private institutions, the national football teams of the United Kingdom precisely correspond to the borders of the four

constituent nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Neither church, nor state, nor parliaments do this. In the international sporting realm tennis, rugby league and most Olympic sports field British teams. In rugby union, Ireland is an all-island affair, so too in cricket where England and Wales are conjoined. In golf we are all part of Europe. In Northern Ireland football has been embroiled in the ethno-nationalist conflict since the creation of the province. In the years since the Good Friday Agreement it has come to reflect the ineradicable differences and uneasy compromises of Northern Irish society rather than a new-found unity. In Wales, where the international game lives in the shadow of rugby union, club football has been an arena in which the nation's complex relationship to its huge neighbour has been played out. In Scotland the game appeared to be an important component of the broad social alliance in favour of devolution and the reassertion of Scottish civic nationalism but in recent years the Tartan Army has fought shy of supporting the movement for independence, and the political edge of football has been softened by the success of devolution. At the same time the nationalists have found that the penurious state of the game, inevitable for a small fish in the very big football pond, and its enduring sectarian problems, make football a much less attractive vehicle for their political ambitions. In England, the nation most bereft of unique civic institutions around which to construct a contemporary sense of national identity, the story of the England football team has been an unruly exercise in nation-building.

Cutting across the first five chapters of the book is the issue of governance. Who, if anyone, has been in charge of this process? Who, if anyone, represents the public interest and the common good? Who allowed the old economic regulations to be abandoned? Who was on watch when the flood of dubious owners took over much of professional football and the match fixers and double-dealing agents rode into town? The answer is the FA, and its fate over the last twenty years is an exemplar of a wider range of problems in British politics. In chapter 6, 'You Don't Know What You're Doing', I maintain that the FA was utterly unprepared for the world of football after Hillsborough. It lacked the skills, the structure, the capacity or

the intellectual energy to redefine its role in an era of highly commercialized football. Consequently it ceded enormous authority to the professional game in general and the Premier League in particular. The considerable efforts of the political classes and organized football supporters to force reform on the FA and the wider structures of power in football have been poorly rewarded. The governance of football represents the wider triumph in contemporary Britain of private interests and economic imperatives over the public good and social needs.

In my final chapter, 'Last Man Standing?', I explore some of the ways in which the hitherto overwhelmingly masculine world of football has been feminized, and the scale and viciousness of the backlash to this. Women's long march through the institutions has passed through the stands, the boardrooms and the officials' lockers but has not reached the manager's office or the dressing room of professional football at the Premier League level, the home of our leading folk devils and heroes. I ask what kind of men, what kinds of masculinity are on show and whom we have chosen to damn and to venerate.

In all of these domains, from economics to politics, from race relations to civic nationalism, the last twenty-five years of English football have seen gains and losses, advances and reverses. The economic penury and dismal infrastructure of the past have gone, but the creeping anodyne uniformity of consumer capitalism has replaced it. Crowds are bigger, the football is better, but the atmosphere, more often than not, falls short of expectations. The culture of football has been opened up to women and minorities, but its ruling masculinities remain stuck in a narrow groove. Football fans are more organized and networked than ever, but the governance of the game feels less democratic. We have been mourning the passing of industrial Britain for over two decades. The further we are removed from that era, and what we remember as its values, the more football has kept those notions imaginatively alive. Yet at the same time its ruling institutions have created an economic model and a system of governance that nurture their opposites. If England is, as Cantona thought, a paradise where the ecstasy of the crowd puts us in touch with a lost

and venerated world, then we should leave the final word to Milton and *Paradise Regained*:

The happy place imparts to thee no happiness, no joy –
Rather inflames thy torment, representing
Lost bliss, to thee no more communicable;
So never more in Hell than when in Heaven.