

Alex Ferguson (with Hugh McIlvanney), *Managing My Life: My Autobiography*. London: Hodder and Staughton, 1999. Xiii + 480pp. £18.99. ISBN 0-340-72855-8

Throughout the 1990s Sir Alex Ferguson has been as prolific with his pen as his team has been in winning trophies. This is his fourth book in seven years. *Managing My Life* is in fact Ferguson's first 'proper' autobiography (I use the word in its broadest sense as the book was actually written and edited by *The Times* sports writer Hugh McIlvanney, from Ferguson's notes). Ferguson's other three autobiographical accounts have been solely concerned with his managerial career at Manchester United. In this respect *Managing My Life* offsets the United bias of earlier accounts. The first thirteen chapters (of 25) are devoted to Ferguson's early life, playing career (at Queen's Park; St Johnstone; Dunfermline Athletic; Glasgow Rangers; Falkirk and finally Ayr United), and managerial career (East Stirlingshire; St Mirren; and Aberdeen) in Scotland.

Certainly the book's account of Ferguson's pre United career is as candid as one could expect from a man who has become infamous for his belligerent, stubborn and outspoken manner. Accounts of clashes with press, chairmen, board members and players make for entertaining and at times interesting reading and offer a partial insight into the character of a man who has adopted the motto 'no-one likes us, we don't care' as his own.

But, excuse a bad pun, this is a book of two halves. Such a candid account of his managerial career at Manchester United is conspicuous by its absence. On its publication, overwhelming coverage in the media has been given to Ferguson's 'fraught' and 'strained' relationship with United's Chief Executive Martin Edwards and the board. Ferguson goes into some detail regarding the problems he faced when negotiating his own contract with the United board, but on the whole is keen to praise Edwards and the freedom he has allowed Ferguson in managing the team. Ferguson also makes great play to stress Martin Edwards's role in providing the basis for United's current period of success suggesting that this is something the fans should be grateful for. This is done in light of the controversial attempt by BSkyB to buy Manchester United, a move Edwards and the board were in favour of, and one for which he has been derided and much maligned. On the BSkyB bid itself Ferguson is less forthcoming. There is but one brief but rather general mention when Ferguson states that he feels the club to be 'too important' to be put up for sale. Such a non-committed public stance by Ferguson is perhaps not surprising given that he is still an employee of the club and to all extents and purposes Edwards is his boss, but nonetheless it seems to suggest that the much reported 'rift' between manager and chief executive is as much a product of media hype as it is of relationships in the Old Trafford board room.

Indeed much of Ferguson's spleen is vented upon individuals no longer at the club, such as in the parts of the book that deal with the departure of United's assistant manager, Brian Kidd, who in December 1998 left United to take over as manager of Premier League relegation favourites Blackburn Rovers. At the time many considered Kidd, a member of United's 1968 European Cup winning team, most likely to inherit Ferguson's managerial crown at Old Trafford, and his leaving set a number of alarm bells ringing amongst the media and sections of United's support. But Ferguson reveals he always had 'serious reservations' concerning Kidd, whom he refers to as 'insecure' and a 'moaner', and his ability to manage a team like United.

These revelations have filled the majority of reviews of *Managing My Life*. There is one key omission from the book, however: Ferguson's relationship with the Prime Minister Tony Blair and New Labour. It is generally known that Ferguson is a close friend of Alastair Campbell, Blair's press secretary and spin doctor. During the 1997 General Election Ferguson acted in an informal capacity as an advisor to both Blair and Campbell on fitness and stress management. This relationship has since become more formalised with Ferguson taking a starring role in New Labour's European election campaign broadcast, and being knighted. There are also rumoured reports that Downing Street is planning to make Ferguson a New Labour peer with a seat in the new-look House of Lords. Apparently Labour consider Sir Alex as 'just the right person to bring politics into the living room'. Why Ferguson has seen fit to omit these political relationships from his autobiography – Ferguson is generally perceived as a very political person and staunch Labour supporter – is intriguing. Perhaps they will form the basis of next year's autobiography.

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