

Football, History and Memory: The Heroes of Manchester United

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Abstract

In recent years historians and sociologists have broadened their analysis of sport to include the study of sporting heroes, their changing styles and images and the meanings associated with them. This has been linked with the study of memory – individual and collective, private and public – and the way in which it provides a perspective of the past that is often quite different from mainstream, professional histories. This article attempts to combine these two approaches through a study of Manchester United Football Club and its leading players from the 1950s to the 1990s. It argues that the memories of these heroes, constructed by the sporting public and the media, are fundamentally connected to each other and to the popular history of the club, particularly the Munich legend of 1958. The identities or images of footballers are thus not simply the result of their athletic talents or of the era in which they played but are also the product of memory and the manifold associations drawn between the present and the past.

Introduction

Manchester United appears to be the epitome of the modern commercial market-driven football club. Not only do its operating profits and turnover easily outstrip any of its rivals in the English Premiership, it is in financial terms the biggest club in Europe, and probably the world.¹ Yet any visitor to Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium can hardly fail to be impressed by the way in which the club exhibits its commercial dynamism alongside a palpable sense of its history and tradition. The physical symbols of its glorious and not so glorious past – the statue of Sir Matt Busby, the Munich clock on the main stand, the club museum – have become fundamental elements of the club's self-image. Even the entrance to the new 'megastore' is adorned with images of four of the club's former players – Duncan Edwards, star of the renowned 'Busby Babes' team of the 1950s; Denis Law and George Best from the European Cup winning side of 1968; and Bryan Robson, captain of the team in the 1980s and early 1990s. Of course, this reflects a much broader link between heritage and commerce. Modern football clubs are only too aware that their history 'sells'; it helps to define and differentiate their 'product' in an increasingly competitive market place.² It also indicates, however, that a club's identity is shaped as much by its own particular history as by the more general development of the game.

This article explores the relationship between the particular and the general through an analysis of the leading players – the 'stars' or 'heroes' – of

Manchester United Football Club from the late 1950s to the 1990s. While it takes into account the significant scholarship over the last decade concerned with the creation of sporting heroes, it also ties this in with the legend of Manchester United itself, rooted in the Munich plane crash of 1958 and the 1968 European Cup triumph. From the 1960s Manchester United emerged as the first English club whose public support extended beyond the region to the nation, even establishing international loyalties. To what extent did its star players reflect the club's complex, ambiguous identity? What similarities and differences can be seen in the popular perception of the foremost players of the 1958-95 period: Bobby Charlton, Denis Law, George Best and Eric Cantona? These questions are addressed in the article.

I argue that the images and meanings associated with leading Manchester United players – both contemporaneous and historical – by the public and the media were not unconnected but crucially related both to each other and to the history of the club. If we are to understand the nature of sporting heroism and its construction, it is worth looking at the significance of the heroes of the past alongside the sporting qualities of players and the broader role of local, regional, national, ethnic and racial identities. In this article I examine the careers and representations of leading Manchester United players from the Busby Babes era of the late 1950s through the Eric Cantona era of the mid-1990s in order to examine the ways in which historical memories and identities are formulated and maintained over time.

Sporting Heroes

Recent research has focused closely on the figure of the sports hero. Much of the impetus for this work came from the European University Institute in Florence whose seminars and conferences on the theme of 'the sporting hero in contemporary Europe' encouraged academics throughout Europe to consider and examine the symbolic meanings attached to sports people in different national cultural environments.³ In British football, the period before the 1960s witnessed the primacy of the local hero. Studies of the Edwardian footballers Stephen Bloomer and Harold Fleming and of later hero Stanley Matthews have examined the importance of these players to their respective communities. All were essentially local lads, who were known affectionately as 'our Stephen', 'our Harold' and 'our Stan' and succeeded in giving their provincial towns a national prominence by virtue of their footballing skills.⁴ In the post-World War Two era, Newcastle United's Jackie Milburn and Middlesbrough's Wilf Mannion have been similarly perceived as organically linked to their local communities.⁵ Yet while all were undoubtedly heroes to the communities they represented, they were not all the same type of hero. The values prized in sporting heroes differed across time and space. The prolific goal-scorer or the skilful dribbling wizard were perhaps the archetypes but heroes needed to be neither skilful nor particularly entertaining. In the industrial districts of

northern England and south Wales, those players who had strength, courage, grit and determination were as likely to be embraced as those who mesmerised defenders and scored great goals.⁶

So the earliest football heroes were almost all local figures who managed to embody town, city or perhaps regional pride but whose celebrity rarely reached beyond the parochial to the national. Stanley Matthews, whose long career was capped by his famous performance in the Cup Final of 1953, was arguably the first truly national hero, eulogised as much in the pages of the *The Times* as in the *Blackpool Gazette*.⁷ But the nationally recognised footballer, much less the national hero, was still a rare phenomenon by the early 1950s when the Scottish manager Matt Busby began to assemble his young Manchester United side.

A number of writers have located the turning-point of the status of professional footballers in the early to mid-1960s, when the abolition of the maximum wage and the rise in salaries contributed to create a new type of football 'star'. According to James Walvin, this period witnessed the

emergence of the modern player, acutely conscious of his earning capacity, on and off the field, highly susceptible to lucrative and tempting offers and increasingly committed to a style of life and behaviour which was in many crucial respects new. It was a style which cut him off from his footballing forebears and perhaps, most importantly of all, from many of those working-class fans who formed the traditional bedrock of the game's supporters.⁸

For Richard Holt, the modest, ordinary professional hero was transformed into the 'contemporary sporting hero who exists as performer and celebrity, an ostensibly classless product of market values and the media'.⁹ Chas Critcher has offered a similar class-based analysis of the increasing dislocation of professional footballers from their working-class origins. By the late 1960s 'a good number' of players at the wealthier First Division clubs had become incorporated into the 'new' middle class or were what he termed 'dislocated superstars', inhabiting some indistinct and shadowing space between the mythical 'traditional world' of trams, wives and shops and the 'new world' of fast cars, Page 3 girls and boutiques.¹⁰

Steve Redhead has drawn attention to the weaknesses of such arguments, pointing out the important continuities for the mass of lower division footballers who remained largely unaffected by the 'new' opportunities of the 1960s. For him, 'the forward march of sporting labour', which was supposedly facilitated by the abolition of the maximum wage in 1961 and the Eastham Case of 1963, has been greatly exaggerated.¹¹ In an analysis of Scottish football stars, H.F. Moorhouse has also rightly criticised such approaches for their simplification of complex, often uneven, social and cultural developments but

also their narrowness of vision. As he noted, the meanings associated with footballers have rarely been straightforward and one-dimensional but have 'mixed and mingled', 'The stars in their courses send complex signals'.¹² Moorhouse's point is all the more pertinent if we accept that football heroes are rarely invented anew but are the product of public memory; a long heritage of characteristics and points of reference from players of the past. Heroes develop, or are constructed, in terms of a club's history and its previous heroes – most crudely by the lazy journalist who immediately proclaims a promising youngster as 'the new Cruyff or 'the new Best' but also in more profound and powerful ways. The heroes of Manchester United provide a perfect example of this, as it was a club whose past always loomed large in its present.

Munich and the 'Making' of Manchester United

In popular memory, the history of Manchester United does not begin conventionally with the club's foundation in 1878 or even the arrival of Matt Busby as manager in 1945. Manchester United as it is understood today is the child of the Munich air crash of February 1958, when eight of the team died returning from a European Cup tie in Belgrade. The club acquired its foundation myth at Munich: according to Walvin, 'No discussion about Manchester United and their subsequent successes and failures in the intervening years has any meaning unless set in the context of February 1958'.¹³ As one journalist has noted, 'the club's past, present and future will forever revolve around that year'.¹⁴ Club histories often speak of the legend associated with the club after Munich, 'the extra ingredient that makes Manchester United that bit special'.¹⁵ Despite the human tragedy, Munich effectively 'made' Manchester United.

This is not to say that the history of the club before Munich was completely undistinguished. United won the First Division championship twice before the First World War but suffered from periodic financial difficulties and tended to be overshadowed by local rivals Manchester City, who were more successful on the field and attracted marginally larger crowds. There was no dramatic change after 1945, even though United under Busby became more successful and football crowds in general boomed. Despite winning the championship in 1952, the attendances at the start of the decade were close to the first division average and far below those of the best-supported clubs in the north-east, Merseyside and London. Matthew Crick and David Smith have noted that the transformation in attendances came after the first Busby Babes' championship victory in 1956 when crowds flocked to see the exciting football played by the young United team.¹⁶

Another crucial context was, of course, Europe. In 1956 Manchester United had ignored the Football League's resistance to midweek European football and became the first English club to compete in the European Cup against the great Continental sides of the day. From the mid-1960s, in

particular, it is evident that United's national and international appeal was bolstered by European success. Between 1964 and 1969, the club was engaged in European competition in all but one season, reaching the semi-final on four occasions and winning the 1968 European Cup. Representing the reputation of English football in Europe undoubtedly increased the national profile of the United side, enabling it to draw support towards Old Trafford and away from the smaller clubs in the north-west and west Yorkshire. But there is evidence that United were also beginning to attract supporters from London and more distant areas of England, as well as internationally from Dublin, Malta and other parts of Europe. This emerging international dimension has led Gavin Mellor to suggest that even in the 1960s Manchester United 'were gaining the aura of a super-club whose status and reputation placed them some degree apart from the rest of the [Football] League'.¹⁷

But it is the Munich crash which has been viewed as precipitating the full transformation of Manchester United into the first 'national' club side in England. There was clearly no immediate metamorphosis and it seems likely that the event has been mythologised in the official memory of the club as well as the private memory of its players, supporters and the press. David Russell, for instance, has recently pointed out that while Munich was undoubtedly crucial in shaping the club's broad popular appeal and national profile, it took the best part of a decade to make its full impact. He argues that the club's attendances, like those of many others, actually fluctuated according to playing success in the post-Munich seasons and that it took a particular combination of factors in the 1966-67 period – the publicity gained from European Cup successes like the 5-1 defeat of Benfica in Lisbon, the 1967 English League championship and the exceptional and entertaining nature of the team which contained the famous 'Holy Trinity' of Best, Charlton and Law – to fully secure Manchester United's 'privileged position as England's first modern "glamour" club'. Russell concludes: 'The Munich story may have only begun to exert a powerful influence on the club's image once that image had already been shaped by the late 1960s'.¹⁸ Nevertheless for our purposes the widespread perception of Munich's pivotal, and *immediate*, impact on the future of the club is of greater importance than this more complicated reality. Bobby Charlton's view, which in one form or another has been repeated often since 1958, has become effectively ingrained as the orthodox interpretation: 'Before Munich it was just Manchester's club, afterwards everyone owned a little bit of it.'¹⁹

The Bushy Babes as Heroes

The national profile of Manchester United was also apparent in the image attached to its players – the 'Busby Babes'. Holt has suggested that the side was at the forefront of the new media presentation of both the game and the professional player: 'The spread of television brought the "Busby Babes" into the living rooms of the nation and made them a focus for the future of English

football'.²⁰ Some writers have also linked the rise and appeal of the 'Busby Babes' to new forms of youth culture and other cultural innovations. The hint of rebellion and lack of respect for authority inherent in Bill Haley's rock'n'roll, and extended by the likes of Elvis Presley, Little Richard and the new Teddy-Boys have been used to contextualise the United side of the mid-1950s.²¹ For Eamon Dunphy in particular, the Babes symbolised these wider developments in the way they approached and played football. For him, when the left-back Roger Byrne faced Stanley Matthews and Tom Finney, great wingers but 'conventional English heroes', it was 'a sign of changing times'.²²

Such a view overstates the element of change inherent in the heroic image of the Busby Babes. In many ways the players, taken as individuals, had much in common with the 'traditional' footballing hero who remained connected socially and culturally with the working-class community from which he came. Most were local boys from around Manchester or the north of England whose skills had been honed by Busby and his staff at Old Trafford from a young age. Though their exploits made them national figures, perhaps even before Munich, there is no indication that they were perceived as 'stars' in any particularly new sense. They still lived in Manchester and socialised in and around the city: they did gradually move to more up-market restaurants and night clubs, and one or two bought cars, but they can hardly be said to have become dislocated from their class roots. Moreover, most descriptions of the players emphasised a rather established set of attributes – toughness, bravery, dependability – that embodied the working-class masculine ideals of many of the club's supporters.²³ Like Matthews and others, the players in Busby's emerging team were not particularly flamboyant or colourful but strikingly ordinary. Yet collectively they represented the fresh face of English football – uninhibited, fearless and successful on the new European stage.

If one player could be picked out as a hero in his own right it was Duncan Edwards. Arthur Hopcraft has argued that 'It was the death of Duncan Edwards which gave the deepest, most lasting pain to the community'.²⁴ Only 21 years old when he died at Munich, Edwards was regarded by many as the complete player – big and strong with speed, control, finesse and courage. Even in his brief career he achieved a great deal. He made his debut for United at the age of sixteen and played for England alongside Matthews, Billy Wright and Nat Lofthouse just two years later. Edwards' temperament was said to match his talent and he emerged as a mature and authoritative figure in the Manchester United championship sides of 1956 and 1957.²⁵ Yet what really singled Edwards out as an heroic figure in the history of the club was not what he had done but what he might have done. He would, it was widely believed, have become the greatest English player of all time. In many ways Edwards came to symbolise the unfulfilled promise of the young United team which was destroyed at Munich. The death of Edwards was to personify the Munich disaster for future generations.

Bobby Charlton

The 'Busby Babes', then, became a reference point, or a touchstone for future Manchester United teams, while on an individual level many future heroes were constructed in relation to Duncan Edwards. Bobby Charlton, however, embodied the survival of Manchester United and the reconstruction of the club. He was a year younger than Edwards at Munich and had just established himself as the new wonder boy of the team. His public profile was bound up in his association with the Munich tragedy but he managed to transcend this both with Manchester United and England. Busby referred to him as 'one of the foundation stones' for the side that captured the European Cup in 1968: he added that Charlton's presence 'was a great source of inspiration to keep working for the restoration of Manchester United'.²⁶

As a player, Charlton was highly respected. He began with United as an inside-forward but after Munich moved to outside-left, his surging runs and body-swerves mesmerising defenders. But he became best known as a centre-forward for both club and country. He was not the conventional English number nine but played more as a deep-lying midfielder, whose accurate short and long passing supplied Law, Best and others with space and goalscoring opportunities. Charlton was not just a playmaker; he was also a goalscorer. It was not so much that he scored goals frequently, though he did – a record 198 for his club and 49 for his country – but how he scored them. His shooting could be explosive and powerful, especially if he hit the ball on the run, but it was also elegant. When Charlton struck the ball he was 'never clumsy or desperate in movement', indeed he could 'rise very close to the athletic ideal'.²⁷ On the field he was the model of the *Boy's Own* footballer of schoolboy comics – a model hero for boys to dream of becoming.

Yet Charlton's status as a Manchester United hero and his relationship with the club's supporters was never straightforward. He was indisputably loyal to the club – a 'one-club man' who played 606 games in nearly 19 years as a first team player. He joined United as a 16-year old in 1953 and finally left to manage Preston North End in 1973 but returned to become a director in 1984, a position he still held in 2000. In a wonderfully successful career, however, Charlton transcended Manchester United to become an English hero. Many of his greatest performances were reserved for the international stage, including his two goals for United against Benfica in the European Cup Final of 1968. By then his performances and goals in the 1966 World Cup, and his selection as English and European Footballer of the Year, had confirmed his status as a national, even an international figure. It became a cliché that everyone across the world – from Moroccan youths and Portuguese taxi drivers to New Zealand pensioners – recognised or had heard of Bobby Charlton. Though a director of Manchester United, Charlton has really acted over the last decade or so as an unofficial ambassador for English sport. He was closely involved in the Manchester Olympic bids and England's European Championship and World

Cup bids and was officially embraced by the establishment when he was awarded a knighthood in 1994.²⁸ As a sporting hero Charlton clearly belongs to England rather than Manchester.

More than this, Charlton fits the model of a particular type of English sporting hero. On and off the field he was not unlike that breed of English professional cricketer like Jack Hobbs and Len Hutton about whom Holt has written. These were 'unexceptional people, modest, respectable and rather ordinary off the field but calm and courageous with an aristocratic sense of command and grace when playing'.²⁹ Charlton's ordinary modesty and basic decency was elevated to heroic levels by that key creator of star players, the press. When Charlton received his knighthood, the *Manchester Evening News* delivered an emotional eulogy to the qualities of the player and the man. 'Bobby Charlton', it said, 'is an icon not only for the game but for an era ... He was ... a knight in unblemished shining armour in an age when chivalry was dying fast'.³⁰ In the match programme for Charlton's testimonial in 1972 Matt Busby celebrated 'this remarkable man who stands for the important values of both football and life'. Geoffrey Green, *The Times* journalist, described Charlton as "'our kind of guy", a Mr. Everybody whom all could identify with'.³¹ Yet, although respected, Charlton was never really the favourite of the supporters, particularly the manual working-class fans who watched from the Stretford End. It seems significant that according to former teammates he was never really considered to be 'one of the lads', apparently preferring to socialise with the club directors than his teammates.³² Indeed despite his impeccable working-class background, coming as he did from a north-eastern mining community and a family of famous players, Charlton was, and still is, often perceived as somehow distanced from the supporters – acceptable to the establishment and too respectable to be 'their kind of guy'.

Denis Law and George Best

Part of the same team that won two championships and the European Cup for Manchester United, Denis Law and George Best were very different kinds of sporting heroes. While neither were Englishmen, they were arguably more celebrated figures and retain a stronger place in the collective memory of the club's supporters than Charlton. Law was in some respects an unlikely Manchester United hero. Unlike Charlton, he was not a 'one-club man', coming to United after playing for Huddersfield Town, Torino and, most significantly, United's local rivals Manchester City. He left United in 1973, admittedly with some reluctance, to join City again and in that season – his last as a player – he ironically scored the famous back-heeled goal that sent his former club down to the Second Division. However, Law's account of the incident in his autobiography, which has been subsequently repeated often in the press and media interviews, clearly emphasises his ambiguous relationship with, and his continued fondness for, his old club. He had apparently not wanted to play and

admitted that 'I felt sick. I have seldom felt so depressed in my life as I did that weekend'.³³ A prolific goalscorer, Law was taken to the hearts of the supporters in a way that neither Charlton, nor indeed Best, ever were. He was labelled the 'King' of Old Trafford and became the central figure of the chants and songs of supporters in the 1960s.

How do we explain this extraordinary popularity? Some of it was certainly due to the way he played. Nobody ever described him as the complete player: he 'was never a ball juggler, never an artist painting pretty pictures, but he went where it hurt and it counted'.³⁴ He was voracious and extremely quick in front of goal, qualities that he combined with incredible anticipation and aggression. Unlike Charlton, he was often cautioned and sent-off, and became regarded as the stereotypical volatile, undisciplined 'fiery' Scot. But what probably endeared him to the Manchester supporters, in a similar way that Holt has noted of Scottish football fans, was the irreverent style evident in his play and his attitude to the game's authority figures.³⁵ With his shirt worn outside his shorts, his hallmark held-down cuffs and saluting of the crowd, he looked and acted quite differently from most of the 'Busby Babes'. The press also fostered an image of Law as a rebel. This was evident most clearly in 1966 when he tried to challenge Manchester United's notoriously rigid wage structure and its low wage rates, which five years after the abolition of the maximum wage were well below those at most First Division clubs. Law was threatened with the sack, then forced to publicly apologise, but secretly Busby gave him half of the pay rise he had requested. To the public, however, the whole incident bolstered his image as a self-confident professional; less deferential than earlier players and prepared to fight his corner but ultimately loyal to Manchester United.³⁶

If Law showed signs of being a new type of football hero, George Best was the finished article. For many writers and contemporary observers, Best has come to exemplify the new superstar status of footballers that developed in the 1960s. Moorhouse has rightly pointed out that Best was hardly the first player to achieve notoriety through his romantic liaisons, his taste for alcohol and his failure to deal with the various pressures of professional football.³⁷ The difference, however, was that Best did so as a fully-fledged media personality, straddling the worlds of sport, showbiz, fashion and pop music. And while Best is probably taken too readily by academics and other writers as a symbol of how the professional player was catapulted into this modern world of wealth and glamour, the orthodox picture nevertheless seems fairly accurate.³⁸ Yet, we are less interested here in Best's role as the first football superstar than in what he meant as a hero in the context of his club. Clearly Best's outstanding talent as a footballer, and his involvement in Manchester United's successes, particularly in the European Cup, made him extremely popular amongst the club's supporters. But his relationship with the club was always more fragile than that of Law. By the early 1970s and particularly with the retirement of Busby, a rift developed between Best and the Manchester United management,

as he missed training and occasionally failed to turn up for matches. At this time, in his own words, 'he attracted the attention of the boo boys' and would be jeered by sections of the crowd, whether the team won or lost.³⁹ Furthermore, as well as having his racy lifestyle splashed across the newspapers, he publicly criticised the club, its management and other players in newspaper articles and in at least two autobiographies published while he was still with the club.⁴⁰

Best's relationship with Bobby Charlton at this time can provide an insight into the former's connection to the club and its heritage. Clearly the two were never great friends. They were from different generations and led very different lifestyles but more than this, they represented different perceptions of the image of the club. Charlton felt that Best's behaviour was letting the club down and that his selfishness both on the field and in the media gaze overshadowed the other players.⁴¹ Best, for his part, believed that Charlton should have retired and that his almost untouchable position at the centre of Manchester United was damaging to the club's future. Best recognised why Charlton felt 'so proprietorial about United' and linked this directly to his experience of the Munich disaster. 'To many people', Best said, 'Charlton, along with Sir Matt, of course, was Manchester United'.⁴² Their rift reached its height when Best refused to play in Charlton's testimonial match in 1972, believing this would be hypocritical. Best, the representative of the 'dislocated' football superstar, spent the night drinking rather than celebrating the career of the Munich survivor.

Since finally leaving Manchester United in 1974 Best has continued to proclaim his devotion to the club despite a series of generally unsuccessful spells at other English, Scottish and American clubs. His popularity – perhaps his notoriety – is still indisputable. His most recent biographer commented that when he returned to Old Trafford in March 1997 for a speaking engagement 'the queue for his autograph had more twists than an alpine coach tour, and put the new "Babes" in their proper context'.⁴³ And as the stream of autobiographies, biographies and other merchandise with Best adorned in the club colours attests, he still remains very much a Manchester United 'product'. Notwithstanding all this, and as his relationship with Charlton suggests, he has never been truly accepted by the Old Trafford establishment. Indeed despite playing for the club for the requisite ten years between September 1963 and January 1974, the board of directors refused him a testimonial in 1979 on the grounds that 'he had not played long enough'.⁴⁴ Despite his outstanding talents, Best was clearly never seen as the successor to the Manchester United legend; indeed, for many he subverted and rejected it. He was too wayward and unpredictable to be compared to the calm, focused and determined temperament of the 'Busby Babes', particularly Duncan Edwards. And unlike Charlton and Law, who continued to live around Manchester and became 'favourite sons' of the city, Best remained separated from it, more at home (even during his playing days) in London. It is indeed perhaps not going too far

to suggest that the club Best played for was irrelevant. His popular image was as a star who happened to play for Manchester United rather than a Manchester United hero.

Eric Cantona

The 1970s and 1980s were Manchester United's 'wilderness years' as they struggled on the pitch and changed managers regularly. It was certainly not an era without stars. The side that emerged out of the Second Division to win the 1977 FA Cup was built around the solid central defender Martin Buchan and included Lou Macari, Steve Coppell and Sammy McIlroy. In the 1980s United won the FA Cup twice with talented players like Norman Whitehouse, Paul McGrath and Mark Hughes. It was the midfielder and captain Bryan Robson, however, who came closest to achieving the heroic status of the Busby Babes and the 1960s team. His attributes as a committed, courageous and motivational player showed similarities to those of Duncan Edwards, and it is probably no coincidence that the two players are depicted side-by-side above Old Trafford's new 'megastore'. But it took the arrival of Eric Cantona in 1992 to bring the club a hero comparable with Charlton, Law and Best. The significance of Cantona in the history of the club both on and off the pitch cannot be underestimated. He is, as Simon Gardiner has noted:

identified as one of the main reasons for the return of the glory days of Charlton, Best and Law in the late 1960s and stands alongside them in the hero stakes. He has generated a whole sub-industry within Manchester United's gargantuan marketing machine and become an all-time folk hero with Manchester United fans.⁴⁵

It is saying nothing new to recognise that Cantona's public image in Britain was paradoxical. On one hand, he cultivated himself as a thinker, a philosopher and an artist while on the other hand he was seen as a mindless, unpredictable thug who lashed out at other players and, famously, supporters. He could be loved and hated at the same; both a hero and an anti-hero. Much of this ambiguity has been explained by his nationality. It has been argued in recent papers by Anthony King and Gardiner that the treatment of Cantona was *defined* by his Frenchness, and thus his fundamental difference from other players.⁴⁶ According to these accounts, the supporters of his first English club, Leeds United, embraced him as a cult figure but did so by celebrating and emphasising his nationality. They adopted the English parody of Frenchness, by wearing onions, berets and stripped T-shirts to matches and basked in his status as the *enfant terrible* of French football. When he left to join Manchester United, Leeds' most intense rivals, his subsequent vilification by the Leeds supporters took the form of anti-French sentiment and intense xenophobia – 'a more traditional *hatred* of difference'.⁴⁷ In the process of being first canonised

and then demonised, Cantona, according to this view, was perceived throughout by Leeds fans less as a symbol of familiarity than of otherness.

In view of this it might seem reasonable to suggest that Cantona became a new, unique and fundamentally different kind of Manchester United hero. In reality, however, Cantona came to represent a lot that was familiar to supporters and stood in direct relation to the club's former heroes. Cantona's British autobiography is instructive here. Obviously the book was written for supporters of Manchester United and targeted and marketed towards enthusiasts of the club above all else. Notwithstanding these considerations, it is interesting to note that the book begins with a chapter entitled 'The Legend of Manchester United' and a description of the Munich disaster. Cantona goes on to note that 'Here at Old Trafford everyone remembers this with great emotion. The directors of the club told me about it as soon as I arrived at the club. But I already knew'.⁴⁸ The book goes to great length to connect Cantona to the club's history and its former heroes. Cantona talks about his father's memory of the team of the 1960s, and of the importance of these 'icons of the past', these 'real, living legends' who ensure the club's continued 'prestige and grandeur'. By contrast, he notes, 'French clubs seem to me to be far more capricious and selective in the memories that they hold of the great players who have made a contribution to the club'.⁴⁹

It is possible to take this further and see a number of parallels and connections between Cantona and one particular former hero. Of course it is hardly surprising that his impact on the fortunes of Manchester United led to comparisons with players of the past. The journalist David Meek commented that Cantona reminded him of Charlton: 'Bobby moved so gracefully and was the nearest thing in football to a ballet dancer. I can see that in Eric as well'. Meek also likened Cantona's role in United's success, and what he described as his 'magic and skill', to Best.⁵⁰ But it was the other member of the famous triumvirate, Denis Law, who seems to fit the Cantona model most easily. Looking closely, the similarities between the two are striking. Firstly, Cantona, like Law, had played for a rival club – Law at Manchester City and Cantona at Leeds. Secondly, Cantona had an established reputation as a rebel from his time in French football. Both had famously walked out of former clubs after disciplinary problems – Cantona at Nimes and Law at Torino. And Cantona's disdain for the football establishment, together with the fact that he often got into trouble with referees, served to reinforce the similarities with Law. Even in his emphasis on a distinct, individual appearance on the field – with his collar turned up and shirt worn outside his shorts – Cantona was, whether consciously or not, linking himself to the memory of Law.

But most importantly, of course, Cantona was hailed as 'King Eric'. The epithet had been given to Cantona by the supporters long before his ban for the infamous 'kung-fu' kick on a Crystal Palace fan, but after his return its significance was perhaps even greater.⁵¹ The incident polarised press and

public opinion alike but for many Manchester United supporters it only served to reinforce Cantona's role, like Law, as an anti-establishment figure, even an anti-hero.⁵² The reception given to Cantona for his comeback match against Liverpool in September 1996 is illuminating in this context. Some supporters continued to wear the onions and berets first favoured by the Leeds fans but most interesting of all were the hundreds of tricolours adorned with Cantona's face and inscribed with the message 'Eric the King is Back'. This example illustrates the complicated and ambiguous identities and meanings attached to football heroes. The supporters (as well as the entrepreneurs who produced the flags) were simultaneously defining Cantona in terms of his 'otherness' and his familiarity, a point which Gardiner, admittedly writing in an altogether different context, has failed to grasp. For Gardiner, Cantona's 'persona as a proud Frenchman, his turned-up collar, his studied aloofness, has reinforced his difference'.⁵³ Yet, for a club's supporters the characteristics of players never exist in isolation. Cantona was obviously different from former heroes in many ways but in their willingness to acclaim him as 'King Eric' the fans were recognising him as more than a current favourite. He was perceived as a significant figure in the history of the club, symbolically linked to its heritage and more specifically to the last 'king'.

Conclusion: Football, History and Memory

In football as elsewhere in life, the past helps to order and give meaning to the present. Even the most present-minded of football supporters retain a continual awareness of the past, if only through a knowledge of the traditions, records and histories of their clubs and the competitions in which they play. Such memories are subject to revision and reinterpretation, at a personal level as recollections fade and subsequent experiences contribute to a reordering of the past, as well as at a public level, where the past is presented to the consumer in a new, repackaged form.⁵⁴ In recent years supporters have not only been able to buy official histories of their club – they have also been able to visit museums dedicated to the past glories of the club and its players and to eat in restaurants or sit in stands named after former players or directors. In an age of extensive refurbishment and relocation of stadia, clubs are naturally anxious to retain a link with the past, even if this is less a matter of preservation than of reconstruction to suit the needs of the present. In certain respects, then, modern football stadia have been reinvented as 'places of memory'.⁵⁵

To recognise the role of popular and public memory in perceptions of the present is not of course to make any unique claims for football or sport in general. In every sphere of political, social and cultural life, individuals and groups are judged by the standards and shaped in some part by the actions of their predecessors. Nor am I suggesting that Manchester United is exceptional in this respect; the club merely provides a particularly good example of the relationship between the heroes of the past and the present. The Munich

disaster had a crucial impact on the club itself and the city of Manchester but its resonance was much wider precisely because it coincided with a period when the existing parochialism and insularity of English football was under challenge and the horizons of the football public were being broadened by the growth of television, the media and European competition. Munich by itself did not make Manchester United into a national club, nor its players into stars, but it did give the club 'an aura which differentiated itself from all others'⁵⁶ and which became inextricably linked to the fortunes of the rebuilt side of the 1960s as it began to win championships and European trophies. In this respect Charlton, Law and Best may have been examples of new types of football heroes but any understanding of what they meant to contemporaries is incomplete without reference to Munich, the 'Busby Babes' and Duncan Edwards. That history, memories and perceptions of the past are key factors in understanding any football club goes without saying; the point is that these elements seem to be more obvious, more striking, in the case of Manchester United.

Before the arrival of Eric Cantona in November 1992 Manchester United had not won the league championship since 1967. With the new 'king' at the helm the club proceeded to dominate the new Premier League, becoming champions in 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1997. The club's history was inescapable at every stage. The side which manager Alex Ferguson created was built on a strong youth policy that was naturally compared to that developed by Busby from the early 1950s. In parallel with the 'Busby Babes' the media christened the team 'Fergie's Fledglings'; the youthful talent of Ryan Giggs made him the 'new George Best' and various journalists and 'experts' advised Ferguson to learn by the mistakes of the past and to protect the protegee from the media gaze and the potential excesses of a superstar lifestyle. For the other young players like David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and the Neville brothers, the 'Busby Babes' cliché is never far away from the journalist's pen; occasionally Charlton, Best, Law and other less eminent heroes are wheeled out for quick and easy comparison. Manchester United's recent victory in the 1999 European Cup Final prompted the inevitable contrasts and comparisons with the heroes of 1968. Yet all this is not merely media construction. In a more fundamental sense these players are a part of the popular memory of the club and any search for 'meaning' must take this into account.

NOTES:

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4. T. Mason, 'Stanley Matthews', in R. Holt, ed., *Sport and the Working Class in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 159-78; T. Mason, "'Our Stephen and Our Harold": Edwardian Footballers as Local Heroes', in Holt, Mangan and Lanfranchi, eds, *European Heroes*, pp. 71-85.
5. R. Holt, 'Football and Regional Identity in the North of England: The Case of Jackie Milburn', in S. Gehrman, ed., *Football and Regional Identity in Europe* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1997), pp. 49-66; N. Varley, *Golden Boy: A Biography of Wilf Mannion* (London: Aurum, 1997).
6. N. Fishwick, *English Football and Society, 1910-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 84; R. Holt, 'Heroes of the North: Sport and the Shaping of Regional Identity', in J. Hill and J. Williams, eds, *Sport and Identity in the North of England* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997), pp. 137-64; M. Johnes, 'Fred Keenor: A Welsh Soccer Hero', *The Sports Historian*, 18, 1, 1998, 105-19.
7. Mason, 'Stanley Matthews', pp. 170-73.
8. J. Walvin, *Football and the Decline of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 34.
9. R. Holt, 'Champions, Heroes and Celebrities: Sporting Greatness and the British Public', in *The Book of British Sporting Heroes* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1998), p. 13.
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11. S. Redhead, 'You've Really Got A Hold of Me: Footballers in the Market', in A. Tomlinson and G. Whannel, eds, *Off the Ball: The Football World Cup* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 55.
12. H. F. Moorhouse, 'Shooting Stars: Footballers and Working-Class Culture in Twentieth-Century Scotland', in Holt, ed., *Sport and the Working Class*, pp. 181, 195.
13. J. Walvin, *The People's Game: The History of Football Revisited* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1994), p. 171.

14. J. Roberts, *The Team that Wouldn't Die: The Story of the Busby Babes* (St. Albans: Mayflower, 1976), p. 183.
15. M. Crick and D. Smith, *Manchester United: The Betrayal of a Legend* (London: Pelham, 1989), p. 6.
16. Crick and Smith, *Manchester United*, pp. 121-36.
17. G. Mellor, 'The Genesis of Manchester United as a National and International "Super-Club", 1958-68', *Soccer and Society*, 1, 2 (Summer 2000). p. 155. Mellor does not regard the national and international positioning of United as a deliberate policy on the part of the club or the result of a single event but of a combination of factors, including the Munich disaster, European success and broader social, cultural and economic changes.
18. D. Russell, *Football and the English* (Preston: Carnegie, 1997), pp. 183-4. Mellor has expanded upon Russell's observations to provide a convincing assessment of United's unique status as 'the world's premier national and international "super" football club', see Mellor, 'Genesis of Manchester United', pp. 151-66.
19. Quoted in *Manchester Evening News*, 2 February 1998.
20. Holt, 'Heroes of the North', p. 155.
21. Roberts, *The Team That Wouldn't Die*, pp. 24-6, 45-9.
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23. See the short biographies of these players in G. Dykes, *The United Alphabet: A Complete Who's Who of Manchester United FC* (Leicester: ACI and Polar, 1994); Roberts, *Team that Wouldn't Die*, pp. 60-146.
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25. H. E. Bates, 'The Manchester United Disaster', in B. Glanville. ed., *The Joy of Football* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), pp. 201-03.
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27. Hopcraft, *Football Man*, p. 82.
28. C. Boli, 'Exploration of Professional Football in England Since 1945: Case Study of Manchester United Football Club', (Unpublished MPhil Abstract, De Montfort University/ University of Nantes, 1997).
29. R. Holt, 'Cricket and Englishness: The Batsman as Hero', in Holt, Mangan and Lanfranchi. eds, *European Heroes*, p. 50.

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31. Both quotations are from *Bobby Charlton's Souvenir Testimonial Programme*, pp. 3, 14-15.
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33. D. Law, *Denis Law: An Autobiography* (London: Queen Anne Press, 1979), p. 159. The account of the event in his latest autobiography has not changed, D. Law (with B. Bale), *The Lawman: An Autobiography* (London: André Deutsch, 1999), pp. 193-6.
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36. See Law, *An Autobiography*, pp. 100-101; Dunphy, *Strange Kind of Glory*, pp. 262-3, 301-03.
37. Moorhouse. 'Shooting Stars', p. 191.
38. See M. Polley, *Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport and Society Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 117. For a more considered treatment of Best as an 'exceptional' case see Russell, *Football and the English*, p. 179.
39. G. Best (with R. Benson), *The Good, The Bad and the Bubbly* (London: Pan, 1990), p. 69.
40. See S. Wagg, *The Football World: A Contemporary Social History* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), pp. 142-3.
41. Lovejoy, *Bestie*, pp. 221-6; Dunphy, *Strange Kind of Glory*, pp. 357-9.
42. Best, *The Good, The Bad*, p. 80.
43. Lovejoy, *Bestie*, p. 364.
44. Lovejoy, *Bestie*, pp. 300-01.
45. S. Gardiner, 'The Law and Hate Speech: "Ooh-Aah Cantona" and the Demonisation of "the other"' in Brown, ed., *Fanatics!*, pp. 257-8.
46. A. King, 'The Problem of Identity and the Cult of Cantona', *Salford Papers in Sociology*, 1993; Gardiner, 'Law and Hate Speech'.
47. Gardiner, 'Law and Hate Speech', p. 257 (emphasis added); King, 'Cult of Cantona', pp. 15-37.

48. E. Cantona, *Cantona: My Story* (London: Headline, 1994), pp. 7-8.
49. Cantona, *My Story*, p. 15.
50. I. Ridley, *Cantona: The Red and the Black* (London: Vista, 1995), p. 189.
51. On the development of 'the King' nickname see R. Kurt, *Cantona* (London: Four-Four-Two, 1996), pp. 90-94.
52. Gardiner, 'Law and Hate Speech', p. 258.
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54. For a broader discussion of this issue, see D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
55. Boli, 'Exploration of Professional Football'.
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