

Richard Holt  
DeMontfort University, England

## ***Jackie Milburn: The Exemplary Life of a Regional Soccer Hero***

Jackie Milburn was born in 1924 into the mining and football community of Ashton (the largest mining 'village' in the world) near the north eastern English industrial city of Newcastle upon Tyne. He came from an extended family of miners and footballers, four of his cousins were professionals and a fifth, Cissie, was the mother of Jack and Bobby Charlton, two of the most famous English players of modern times. He became a miner before World War II and continued in this 'reserved occupation' during the war when he also began to play professional football for Newcastle United. He was a fast, stylish attacking player who helped his team win three Cup Finals before his retirement in 1957, scoring nearly 200 goals.

He achieved local fame as a player but it was his personal reputation after his playing career that makes him especially interesting. For Milburn was not simply admired as a player he was loved as a man—as a symbol of what was best about working-class male life in the north east. He was famous for his loyalty—he never played for another club and was a Newcastle 'fan' as well as an ex-player; he was known for his modesty and remained unaffected by the popular adulation around him, even when he was made a Freeman of the City and the subject of television documentaries, books and musicals; he never became rich through sport and lived and died in the same streets where he had been born. Most importantly for our purposes he was a good husband, happily married for forty years, a devoted father and loyal son.

These commonplace male virtues were increasingly commented upon as the old working class culture of the area went into irreversible decline from the 1960s. The pits closed, unemployment rose for men offset by growing part time low paid work for women. From the perspective of the older residents, the region was going into a decline epitomised in the growth of football hooliganism. The myth of Milburn as 'a good man'—'a gentleman'—was promoted in the local and national media as these older masculine characteristics seemed to be disappearing with the splitting of the traditional working class into a more upwardly mobile stratum and an increasingly desperate inner city 'underclass.' Hence the myth of the 'moral man' was constructed around Milburn to shore up the old moral and gender order; it was an act of nostalgia for the days of 'labourism,' of full employment and the welfare state, where men and women knew their respective roles and kept to them. Milburn was not only popular among men but admired by women, too, as a wholesome 'family man' whose image in the media was affirmed by the experience of the community in which he lived.