

John Harding, *Football Wizard: The Story of Billy Meredith*. Breedon Books, Derby, 1985. Cartoons, illus., memorablie. pp.240. £4.95.

Over the years British football has produced many brilliant players who have enthralled adoring fans and spectators. Few are remembered after they leave the game, and only a handful by passing generations. Harding points out that Billy Meredith was 'a football folk-hero...and, strangely his name is just as fresh and bright today as it was twenty-five, fifty, even ninety years ago' (p.9). Meredith can be regarded as soccer's equivalent to cricket's W.G. Grace (or should it be Don Bradman?) or baseball's Babe Ruth. Harding has set out to unravel the mystery of Meredith's enduring fame.

Meredith was more than an exceptional player - 'The Wizard', 'The Prince of Wingers' - who played at the top level for 30 years. He was a controversial figure who was at the centre of major and continuing struggles with officials as to his, and his fellow professionals, rights as a player. He refused to kowtow to the powers that be, being involved in celebrated and widely publicised clashes with clubs, the Football Association and the Football League. Besides his achievements on the field of play, his lasting contribution to football was his role in the formation of a players' union, now called the Professional Footballers' Association, in December 1907; the longest continuous players' body in professional team sports.

Born in Chirk Wales, in July 1874, Meredith started work in 'the pit' at twelve years of age. He played football for recreation with the village team alongside several Welsh internationals. He quickly impressed with his skills and joined Manchester City,

who were then (in 1894) in the Second Division of the Football League. Meredith was clever on the ball, fast, and a prolific scorer of spectacular goals. With the passing of the years, and with more able players around him, he developed his centering/crossing skills and made countless goals for others. On the field he had the somewhat odd habit of chewing a tooth pick, which was a source of delight to spectators, commentators and cartoonists alike. He helped Manchester City into the First Division and scored the only goal of the game in the FA Cup Final of 1904. He later played with the first famous Manchester United side before World War I (which won two First Division championships, an FA Cup, and the first ever Charity Shield). He eventually finished his career with Manchester City in 1924. Some idea of Meredith's prowess and longevity can be gained by noting that in 1919, at the age of 45, he scored for Wales in a winning side against England; and in 1924, at the age of 50, he scored for Manchester City in their FA Cup run which was stopped in a semi-final against Newcastle United.

Meredith was involved in a game fixing scandal at the end of the 1904/05 season as City sought to gain the First Division championship (a music hall comedian later based a skit on the incident, with Charlie Chaplin offering the bribe). He was suspended from football for a year and seemed prepared to wait out his time, given an apparent undertaking he had received from club officials. However, whatever agreement he had with the club fell through, and following further recriminations the FA conducted an investigation into Manchester City which blew the lid on 'illegal' wages and bonuses over the maximum wage of £4. Both players and officials were suspended and/or fined with Manchester City being all but decimated. Many regarded the FA's punishment, for a practice which was known to be widespread, as being over zealous and simply designed as an attack on Mancunian football.

The formation of the players' union, and, in particular, the strike/lock-out of 1909 was the occasion of Meredith's next major clash with authority. In 1909 the FA sought to destroy the union by requiring players to sign contracts which disowned the players' union. A major battle for the hearts and minds of players emerged. The Manchester United players were most conspicuous in their oppo-

sition to this demand. Eventually, the dispute was settled when the FA dropped their demand, and the players' union, after a ballot of members, decided not to become a member of the General Federation of Trade Unions. Probably the only major criticism that can be made of Harding concerns his account of the dispute. He tends to ignore and/or downplay the tactics adopted by the players' union, the role of the split which emerged between the FA and the amateur leagues, ignores the pressure exerted by clubs on the FA to resolve the dispute, and denigrates the significance of the dispute for the players' union. While they were unable to abolish the maximum wage or the retain and transfer system, they survived the FA's determined attempt to destroy them.

Harding has produced a lucid and clearly written account of Billy Meredith's life and times. Through Meredith, Harding shows how football developed from a somewhat ramshackle affair, near the end of the Victorian era, to a more organised, commercial and demanding form of entertainment through Edwardian times and into the 1920s; and the concomitant controls and pressures placed on players who were often treated in a paternalistic and high handed manner. No doubt, the more academically inclined would have liked footnotes and fuller bibliographic details to aid them in their research; and this reviewer would have appreciated more detail on Meredith's involvement with the players' union. Notwithstanding these minor quibbles, Harding is to be congratulated on his excellent work. His analysis will help perpetuate the legend of Billy Meredith.

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