

The search for a great Scottish football novel

A talk delivered by Andy Mitchell to the British Society of Sports History at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, on 28 August 2015



Here's a headline in the *Herald* from a couple of weeks ago.

It's just an excited reference to a Champions League game involving Celtic, but in a way it sums up the challenge facing Scottish football fiction.

Real life football provides suspense, crime, passion, drama and the unexpected, which is why TV

companies pump in billions of pounds to show live matches, and why newspapers and magazines devote so much space to the written word.

So is there is simply no need for a fictional alternative? Is the game itself always going to out-do anything that a novelist could ever dream up?

Actually, I would like to think that football fiction presents an opportunity, a chance to bring to life elements of the game that traditional forms of football writing do not.

How about social commentary, tackling contentious issues, analysing emotions or even flights of fantasy? These are all fairly common themes for an author, and football is a popular sport, so you might think that a decent Scottish football novel would be commonplace. But that's not the case. Where in Scotland are you going to find such a thing?

It is a question which has both intrigued and annoyed me for quite some time. So this talk is about my quest to find a Scottish football novel worth reading.

I have collected a few titles over the year – there are not many - although I'm aware that this is such a sub-genre that there are probably works out there that have escaped me. In fact I discovered some new titles while I was preparing this talk and haven't yet managed to read them all. Feel free to suggest any more.

THE NOVELISTS

I'm going to start by stating the obvious, as whenever you ask someone to name a good Scottish football novel, chances are they will nominate Robin Jenkins' *The Thistle and the Grail*. I'll come to that later on, but where are the others?

I've had to conclude that the book trade does not believe there is a market for football fiction, particularly for adults – although perhaps a series of *Scottish Footballer's Wives* might make them sit up...

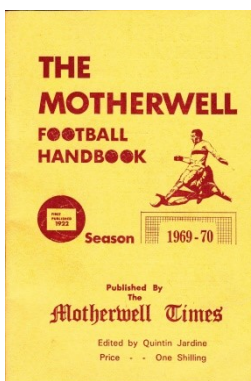
It has been at least 20 years since Nick Hornby wrote *Fever Pitch* and helped to create a class of 'soccerati' but if you take a look at this year's Edinburgh Book Festival programme, there is not a single event on football, or indeed on any sport.

Yet paradoxically, among the authors in the programme, there are some well-known Scottish football fans.



Take Val McDermid, one of the biggest names in crime writing, who has a stand named after her at her beloved Raith Rovers and sponsors the team shirts.

Raith Rovers also feature in Ian Rankin's books with Inspector Rebus (who curiously morphed into a Hibs fan in the TV version).



One of crime writer Quintin Jardine's first ventures into print was the Motherwell FC handbook, and he is a lifelong fan of the club, but no football themes in his novels.

Christopher Brookmyre, who follows St Mirren, drops football references into his books; in fact he wrote a short play called 'Bampot Central' in which he makes fun of Falkirk fans (an easy target).



Even Irvine Welsh, celebrity Hibs supporter, has introduced football episodes into his books and the odd short story, such as the Granton Star Cause, but has yet to write a full blown novel about the game's seamy underbelly.



And bizarrely, Welsh has a science fiction contribution in the anthology of Scottish writing called Children of Albion Rovers, such a confusing title that it could regularly be found in bookshops on the shelves of the sports department. It was a flippant reference to the underground poetry collection, Children of Albion, and none of the six stories it contains has any kind of football

content. That didn't stop the publishers from adding to the confusion by using promotional cards of the authors in, of course, Albion Rovers strips.

So, here we have a range of established, bankable Scottish authors. But none of them have written a football-themed novel.

Why is that? Why do Scottish writers avoid the game they know so well?

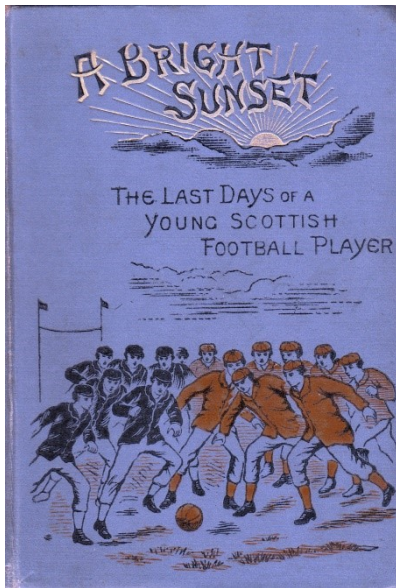
If football is a form of escapism - and for supporters of clubs like Raith Rovers and Hibs you need escapism - is writing fiction their way of escaping from football?

Or are there commercial considerations? Football books are a niche market, and football fiction is a niche within that niche. Perhaps the commercial pressures on publishers make them wary.

THE HISTORY

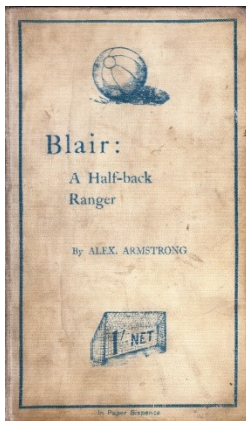
So I think you will gather my basic premise is that Scottish football fiction is a rare beast. But it does exist.

Where do we start? If you look deep enough, you'll find that people have been trying to write a Scottish football novel for a long long time, although much of it is teetering on the verge of juvenile fiction.



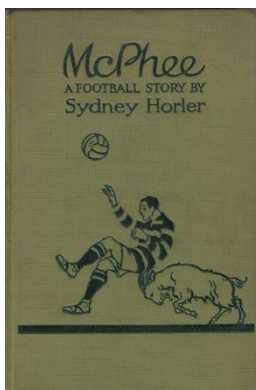
The timeline goes right back to 1884 and *A Bright Sunset*, the *Last Days of a Young Scottish Football Player*. This curious book is basically a religious morality tale which tells of William Easton Riddell, a pupil at Bellahouston Academy, who suffered a football injury which led to his slow but brave decline to an early death – and it was very popular, going to at least 12 editions with the help of religious tract publishers. While not quite fiction, as Riddell was a real person, it is certainly dramatized as the book takes the form of letters from his mother to a sister in Canada. However, apart from the kick on the knee and the very

attractive cover, it has no football content.

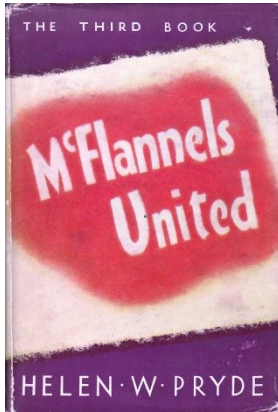


A later religious tract to use football as its theme was *Blair, the Half Back Ranger* – published in 1910, another maudlin tale of a football-loving boy who dies young but finds solace in religion. It is pretty obscure as I can't find a copy in either the National Library of Scotland or the British Library.

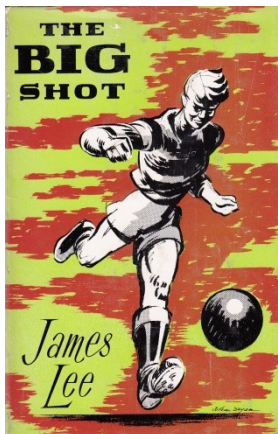
Moving through the years there are very few instances of Scottish football as the theme of works of fiction. So, not to be taken too seriously, here are some examples which can be entertaining in their own way. They are hardly highbrow, generally aimed at a younger audience, and consistently feature an underdog hero who is a stereotypical Scot with a broad accent and brash manners but clever at the game.



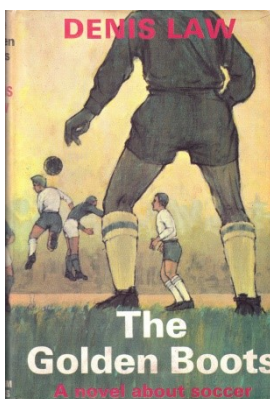
Sydney Horler, a prolific writer of pulp football fiction in the 1920s, introduced Angus McPhee, a wily Scottish manager who outfoxes the opposition and his board of directors. It's amusing enough, and was reissued twenty years later under a different title, still featuring that goat on the cover.



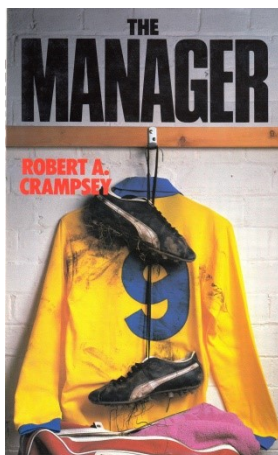
McFlannels United, from 1949, is an offshoot of the radio comedy serial by Helen Pryde, and has a football theme including a chapter on a game at Hampden between Queen's Park and Rangers.



Another decade on, Sandy McSporrán is the daft Scottish centre forward with no brains but a cannonball shot, the Big Shot of the title, who takes little Muggleton United – known as the Mugs – to the FA Cup final. It's actually quite entertaining – or so I thought when I was 12.



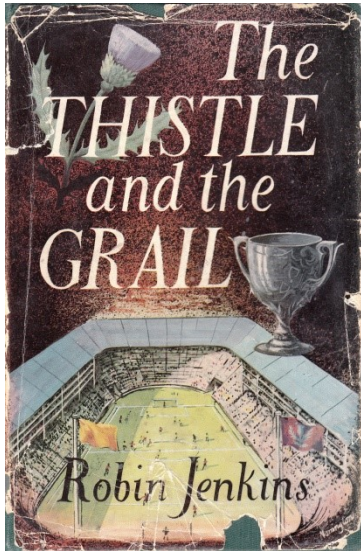
This is a curiosity from the 1960s, as Denis Law put his name to *The Golden Boots*, about a boy who emulates his late father's football prowess. But I fear Denis's epitaph will not refer to his literary genius. The publishers thought so too, as a proposed follow-up never saw the light of day.



And jumping into the 1980s, here's a game attempt at adult fiction from the pen of the late Bob Crampsey, schoolteacher, Brain of Britain and legendary football pundit, a man people in my generation grew up respecting without equivocation, in awe of his seemingly boundless knowledge of football trivia. But even Bob had his limits, and one of them was fiction. This is a reasonably plausible tale about a middle aged Scottish manager with a small struggling English club. Unfortunately, Bob couldn't resist introducing an affair between the manager and his young secretary,

and rather than leave it to the imagination he tried to describe the action in bed. Let's just say that Bob Crampsey and sex don't mix.

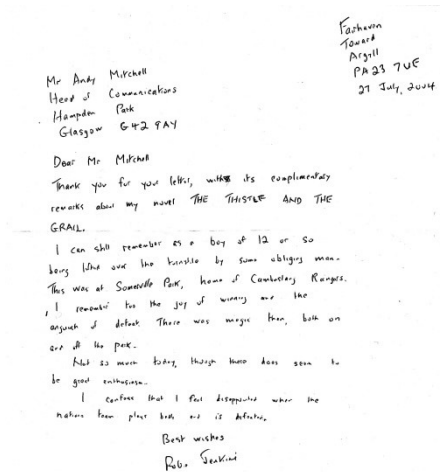
Moving swiftly on...



The one book which I think can be considered a great Scottish football novel is *The Thistle and the Grail*. Robin Jenkins wrote a wealth of books on topics ranging from conscientious objectors (he was one himself) to the disruption of the Scottish church. He had an eye for the human condition, and appreciated that football was as much a part of Scottish life as the church and the daily grind of work.

This was one of his earliest works, published in 1954 when Jenkins was working as a school teacher and living in the shadow of Hampden Park. Although it had a small print run, it attracted good reviews as it is an important socio-political commentary on life in small town Scotland. The book's reputation grew along with that of the author, and it is still in print.

Set in post-war Lanarkshire, it follows the fortunes of Drumsagart Thistle and their road to the Junior Cup Final through the lives of the people in the town who support the club – as well as those who despise the game and its depravities. The cast includes not just the players and club officials but also the evil police sergeant, the misguided young minister, the women folk, the alcoholics and the unemployed. It has a quality of writing and observation that sets it apart.



For a bit of insight, I wrote to Jenkins in 2004 to ask him about the inspiration for the book. It was just in time, as he died about six months later, and this is his response: 'I can still remember as a boy of 12 or so being lifted over the turnstile by some obliging man. This was at Somervell Park, home of Cambuslang Rangers. I remember too the joy of winning and the anguish of defeat. There was magic then, both on and off the park. Not so much today, though there does seem to be great enthusiasm.'

And he added - remember this was during the Berti Vogts era: 'I confess that I feel disappointed when the national team plays badly and is defeated'.

Joy, anguish and magic – what could be more simple? These elements comprise the formula for many a novel, not just in football.

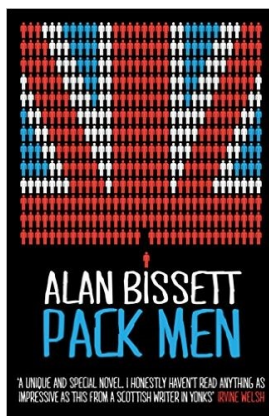


It was a successful approach, but sadly not one that Jenkins repeated. He did bring football into a later novel, *A Would-Be Saint*, but it is not about someone who wants to play for St Johnstone. The central theme is the spiritual development of a proud young man who is also the most talented footballer in his village.

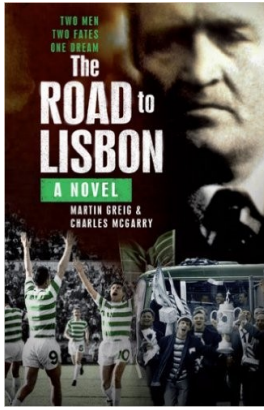
CONTEMPORARY WRITERS

And what of the current generation of writers? Who will take up the mantle of Robin Jenkins and fly the flag for Scottish football?

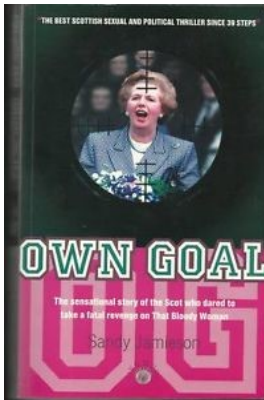
The Scottish Book Trust attempted to find the answer on their website, but they could only list seven titles: the two by Jenkins I have already mentioned and just four contemporary novels, together with the excellent anthology of short stories *The Hope that Kills Us*, which I can strongly recommend as a primer for Scottish football literature.



Yet despite this apparent vacuum, there are signs of life in the genre, and while I have to emphasise I haven't read them all it does seem a number of worthwhile attempts have been made in recent years. Perhaps the best known author, and the best hope for the future, is Alan Bissett, whose novel *the Pack Men* was about Rangers fans at the UEFA Cup final in Manchester. He is currently writing a play about Graeme Souness, so there is obviously further food for thought there.

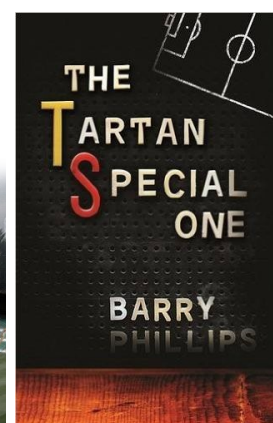
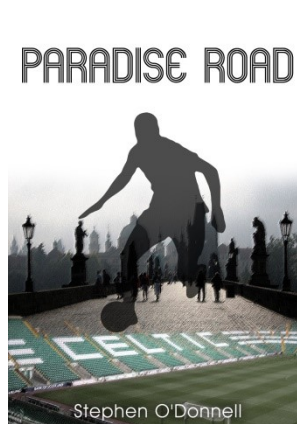
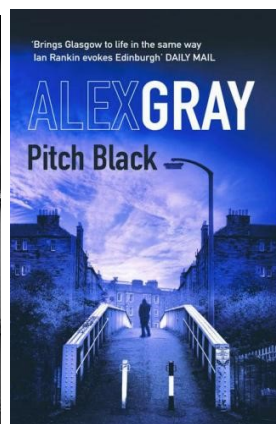
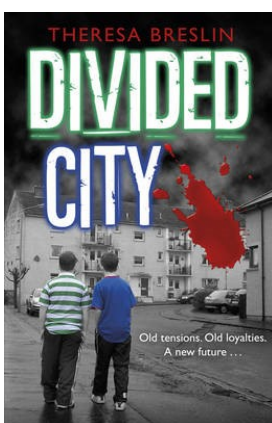


Of course, if there is a Rangers book, there has to be a Celtic book. Martin Greig and Charles McGarry wrote about the adventure of fans following their clubs to a European final in *The Road to Lisbon*, which focussed on Celtic's 1967 European Cup final.



Another Celtic-minded author, of fact as well as fiction, Sandy Jamieson has written two novels: *Own Goal* builds up to an assassination attempt on Margaret Thatcher at Hampden Park, and *The Great Escape* is the story of a former Scotland international who tries to transform a struggling English club and falls in love with the chairman's daughter.

And a few other recent titles:



Theresa Breslin tackles issues of racism and sectarianism in *Divided City*, a book which has been used as teaching material in Scottish schools. *Pitch Black* by Alex Gray is about a series of murders related to a Glasgow football club (although the cover photo is the approach to Easter Road), Stephen O'Donnell writes about dashed hopes in

Paradise Road, and Barry Phillips tackles aspirations in The Tartan Special One. If you have read any of these, I'd be interested to hear your opinions. Are any of them good enough to challenge Robin Jenkins?

Looking to the future, I suspect the biggest challenge may be persuading publishers that there could be a potential niche for this kind of book. After all, maybe the reason crime and romance novels are so successful is that authors can jazz up some fairly dull reality: real life crime is bogged down in paperwork and traffic offences. Real life romance is about doing the dishes and the occasional curry on a Saturday night (in my life anyway!).

Football doesn't have a problem with dullness, but surely it does have potential for fiction. For the big names in Scottish literature who have not yet attempted the football novel, the opportunity is certainly there. You could say it is an open goal.

Thank you.

