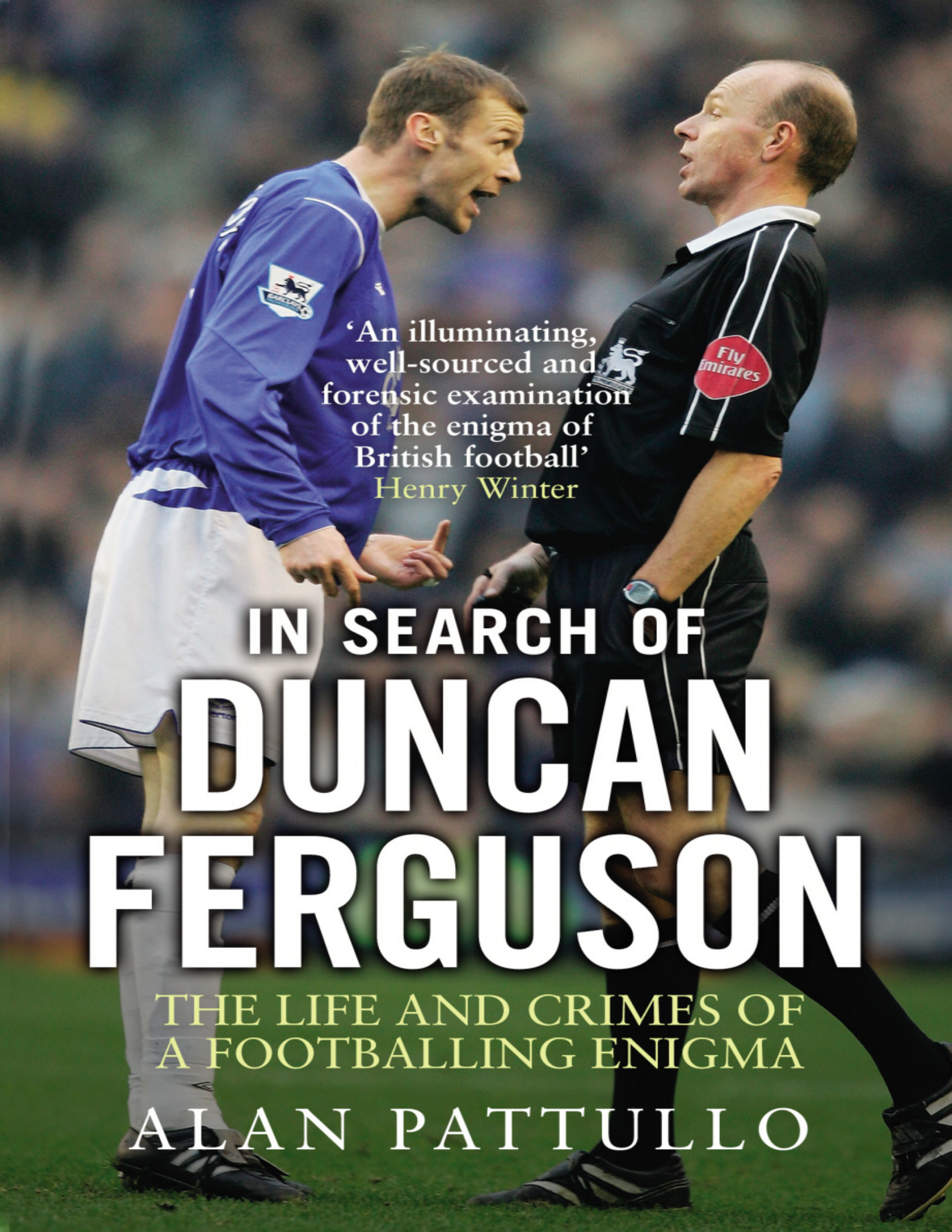

IN SEARCH OF DUNCAN FERGUSON

THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF A FOOTBALLING ENIGMA

ALAN PATTULLO

About the Book

He was one of the hardest, most controversial footballers of his generation: the £20m man who became the first professional player to go to jail for an offence committed on the field of play. He was the fans' hero who disappeared.

Duncan Ferguson was an old-fashioned Scottish centre-forward who went from a boarding house in Dundee to the marble staircase of Rangers in a record-breaking transfer.

His £4m move from Dundee United to Ibrox made him British football's most expensive native player. But he would also become one of the most notorious footballers in the land. Sent to prison after head-butting an opponent during a Scottish Premier Division match between Rangers and Raith Rovers, Ferguson made history all over again.

He served half of a three-month sentence in Glasgow's infamous Barlinnie Prison. A twelve-match ban from the Scottish Football Association was later overturned following a long appeal process. Bruised by the experience, he turned his back on Scotland's national team and the media.

Ferguson reaped the riches of the Sky era. He was a folk hero at Everton, where he spent ten years either side of an injury-hit spell at Newcastle United. Although the game made him a millionaire, he rejected its new culture of celebrity and remained a fiery figure, racking up a Premiership record of eight red cards. And then, after scoring in the final minute of the last game of his career, he turned his back on football completely – or so it seemed.

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The Life and Crimes of a Footballing Enigma

Alan Pattullo

To my mum and dad, for unstinting support and belief,
and, above all else, their love.

And to Nathalie, who arrived to save the day.

Acknowledgements

The entry in my notebook confirms that work on this book began as long ago as 12 June 2008, when the search for Duncan Ferguson led me first to Jim McLean's house in Broughty Ferry, a suburb in Dundee. It hardly requires saying that in what has been a lengthy process there are a lot of people I need to thank for their help, guidance and support. Many, I suspect, might well have forgotten in what way they contributed, while in some cases these thanks have come too late.

It is very poignant to listen back to some old interview tapes and hear voices from beyond the grave. Without George Skelton and Dick Taylor's recollections, the chapters on Duncan Ferguson's early years would have been greatly diminished, while Jim Farry, the former chief executive of the Scottish Football Association, also passed away shortly after I spoke with him, at a much-too-young age of 56.

With regards to the many others who have helped, it is perhaps easier to break them down into phases of Duncan's life, but even then the list is by no means exhaustive.

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A.L. Kennedy has described the process of writing a book as being ‘a tiny bit like having a long-term illness: people enquire after it and your relation to it for the first few months, and then they don’t – not unless they’re rather peculiar and/or enjoy the discomfort of others’. Thank you

to those who stopped enquiring about my progress, probably out of sympathy.

Special appreciation:

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David McCue, whose hospitality at his lovely home in Fife was so appreciated, particularly since he also proved such a credible source of information about Barlinnie prison, a place I knew little about before researching this book.

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And of course Duncan Ferguson, an often misunderstood footballer who I felt deserved another hearing.

‘The one who stands here proven after all.’

– From the poem *Dundee* by John Burnside

PROLOGUE

Liberated at Dawn

Glasgow, 24 November 1995

The corrugated steel gate slides open; a city is beginning to stir. It is just before 6.40 on a brisk winter's morning. People are already milling around below street lamps, telltale notebooks peeking out from the top of jacket pockets. In the near distance, a sinister stone-brick building looms: one that, in the half-light, looks especially grim and unyielding.

Barlinnie.

Joining the reporters are fans, four of whom have travelled from Liverpool just to get a glimpse of their hero. And a glimpse is all they get. As the Daimler draws away, the driver negotiates the speed bumps and tries to ignore the camera flashes. There is a 6 ft 4 in. frame folded into the back seat. Those peering through the tinted glass can just about make out the figure of a £4 million footballer.

At least that is what Duncan Ferguson had been when he was confronted by the sight of Barlinnie's imposing, time-blackened edifice from the back of a blue prison van 44 days earlier.

Willie McGurk, the long-serving physical-education supervisor at the prison, sounded a warning to his staff: 'Listen, this is a £4 million footballer coming in – if he goes

out anything less than a £4 million footballer, we could be in bloody trouble.'

The comment cuts to the truth of the matter. Ferguson wasn't going to be treated like any other prisoner. How could he have been? He was a professional footballer with Everton Football Club, one who could lay claim at the time to a record British transfer fee, having previously played for Dundee United and Rangers.

McGurk was alert to the danger. The most recently published Scottish Office report on Barlinnie had spelled it out: 41 assaults on prisoners by prisoners in the previous 12 months; 34 suicide attempts.

As well as Ferguson being one of the highest-profile footballers in the country, something else marked him out: his sister, Audrey, was on the Scottish Prison Service staff at Glenochil, in central Scotland.

Ferguson wasn't inside for only a night or two. He served exactly half of a three-month sentence. There is a saying in Scotland, sometimes used to describe lower league players wheezing up the wing: 'slow as a week in Barlinnie'. Ferguson endured six of these.

Just a few months earlier, ahead of the FA Cup final between Everton and Manchester United at Wembley Stadium, Ferguson had shaken the hand of Prince Charles. Now he was being detained at his mother's pleasure. And, to think: he used to get changed beneath the portrait of the Queen that hangs in the home dressing-room at Ibrox.

McGurk, a Celtic supporter, was one of the good guys during Ferguson's stay in Barlinnie. In the gym – 'McGurk's Gymnasium' is what McGurk barked down the phone when calls were put through – Ferguson had been able to briefly forget about the cell in D Hall that he had had to clean out himself. McGurk had devised a game called skittle-ball, where Ferguson and five others would split into two teams of three and aim to score a goal by flattening one of two skittles at each end of the hall. Unsurprisingly, Ferguson

impressed with his shooting. ‘Like “Hot Shot Hamish”,’ according to one of the wardens.

They were all right, the wardens.

David McCue, his gallery officer, looked out for him a bit, too; McCue’s wife’s family are fierce Evertonians. Strangely, McCue is another Celtic fan, a rarity at the time among prison officers in Barlinnie, where the majority favoured Rangers. He asked Ferguson to sign his copy of *Fever Pitch*, which he did, dedicating it to Cameron, McCue’s newborn son, in black ink and capital letters. Ferguson would later name his own son Cameron. Published three years earlier, *Fever Pitch* had proved an eloquent account of one man’s obsession with football – or, more specifically, Arsenal Football Club. It is associated with the gentrification of the game. An irony, then, that a copy had made its way inside the less-than-gentrified Barlinnie, where it was clutched by a footballer who, in many people’s eyes, was an unreconstructed thug, an embodiment of all that was holding back progress in the game.

And yet, conversely, Ferguson was also a symbol of football’s new era of wealth and prosperity. During his stay in Barlinnie, it is estimated that he was paid £60,000 in total by Everton, who ignored the public clamour to suspend his wages.

Was this yet another snapshot of football’s skewed morals?

Of the other 34 prisoners who had, in prison parlance, been ‘libbed’ along with Ferguson that same morning, a few – if they had jobs at all – might have found their bosses relishing the excuse to get rid of them. And yet here was a convicted criminal preparing to be whisked away in a limousine, back to England, where adoration awaited.

Prisoner No. 12718 completed his final chores in the hospital wing. He searched out McGurk, shook his hand and promised to send up some Everton strips for the prison

football team. ‘That’s kind, son, but we cannae accept gifts from prisoners,’ McGurk explained. He then handed back his red-and-white striped prison shirt. Next, it was his regulation blue jeans – a different pair to the ones he had originally been given, which had proved so humiliatingly short in the leg. It was time to go home.

Just a few years earlier, home would have meant Stirling, the ancient capital of Scotland. It is where he had gone to school. Bannockburn High School is a building shaped like a jack-knifed juggernaut, where the windows are so small and so numerous people often said it looked just like a prison. It made Ferguson shudder. Perhaps this is why he became so fond of pigeons and the sensation of letting them go from cupped hands. And here he now was, about to be set free. Liberated at dawn, like pigeons are on race day.

So this is what it feels like: freedom.

Home was now Liverpool, a town he’d grown to love – the blue half, at least. He could even admit to a sneaky fondness for the other lot, the red half.

The red shite. They bring out the best in me.

Just before he left, one of the wardens made a joke about the colour of the limousine waiting outside. ‘Burgundy? I thought you played for Everton?’ It reminded Ferguson of the time, just over a year earlier, when, oblivious to the connotations, he had worn a scarlet jacket for the press conference when he signed for Everton on loan from Rangers. He hadn’t thought too deeply about it. He remembered getting a bit of a ribbing from the press boys. ‘Like turning up in a green suit to sign for Rangers,’ one sneered.

Fucking idiots. No wonder I don’t talk to them.

Scrawling his signature on a three-month contract, he thought he wasn’t going to be at Everton long. Just enough time to find his scoring touch again, then back to Rangers,

back to the club who had made him what he once was: the most expensive football player in the land.

At least that had been his plan. Goodison Park, the Old Lady, was meant to have been a temporary shelter from the storm, the means to an end. Instead, Everton became his everything.

Dundee United, Rangers, Newcastle United?

You forget the rest.

Everton got under his skin. He would never ever forget how it felt to soar into the air, to head that first goal against Liverpool, before sinking to his knees with joy and relief in front of the Gwladys Street End; the legend before the player, the rise before the fall. On the same date 12 months later, he was languishing in jail.

He had stressed how he wanted no one but members of his own family to visit him in prison. However, Joe Royle, his Everton manager, and the chairman, Peter Johnson, had been insistent, even coming up to Glasgow to sit in the public gallery for the trial in the bleak-looking, stone-built Sheriff Court, alternatively known as ‘the Kremlin on the Clyde’. ‘Best bacon sandwiches I ever tasted,’ according to the colourful Johnson.

And now they have sent a car for me.

This was his new family. He hadn’t even been playing for the club at the time of the incident. ‘The first professional footballer to be jailed for an on-field offence’: that was his new tag, now clipped to him like the leg band on a pigeon. The only thing that had kept him going were the letters, hundreds of them, day after day. There had been nothing, though, from Jim Farry, chief executive at the Scottish Football Association.

And even now, knowing Ferguson had faced the degradation of having to slop out his own shite every morning, Farry was still seeking to impose an additional 12-match ban on the footballer. No word of support, either, from Rangers, or from Jim McLean, Ferguson’s manager at

Dundee United. McLean had been his first prison warden, patrolling the corridors at Tannadice Park, ruling with an iron fist, phoning up his digs to make sure he had not absconded to the pub the night before a match.

My own personal fucking night-watchman.

And then there was McLean's accusation – the main one, anyway – flung at him again and again and again: 'The game means far too much to me, I know that. But it means fuck all to you.' It was roared at him, over and over, accusingly, spittle forming in the corners of McLean's mouth, strands of hair from an artful comb-over – something that the players used to dare each other to laugh at – hanging free in front of his red face. 'You just don't love it enough!' he would scream. 'You can't prove to me that you want it, can you?'

Well, try fucking loving a game that puts you where I've just been.

*

WAITING FOR DUNCAN
Liverpool, March 2009

'Here for the big interview, then?' smiles David Prentice of the *Liverpool Echo*. He is one of the few people I know in the French-themed restaurant-turned-VIP suite of Liverpool's iconic Adelphi Hotel, although many other faces are familiar.

There's Howard Kendall, who enjoyed three stints as Everton manager and, between 1985 and 1987, led the side to two English league titles. Over in the corner is David Unsworth, the broad-chested former Everton defender known in these parts as 'Rhino'. Another recognisable face is Graham Stuart, a Londoner still loved by the Goodison Park fans after scoring twice on the afternoon in 1994 when Everton managed to stage a last-day recovery from

two goals down against Wimbledon to preserve their long-standing top-flight status.

Yet everyone, even the other VIPs present, those who have played hundreds of games for Everton and other clubs between them, await the entrance of one man. Duncan Ferguson is the figure that has dominated the countdown to this Hall of Fame dinner. He has made the occasion an essential one to be seen at for any self-respecting Evertonian. Attendance, too, is obligatory for any serious-minded biographer of the man known to everyone here as 'Big Dunc'.

Prentice, a friendly bear of a man, is one of those with tales from the Ferguson frontline. Ferguson had asked Prentice about the possibility of obtaining tickets for a title fight at Liverpool's St George's Hall featuring the Scottish flyweight boxer Paul Weir. Prentice spoke with the promoter. 'He was buzzing. He was like: "Duncan Ferguson? Of course you can have two tickets." I gave them to Duncan. "How much do you want for them?" he asked, and took out a big wad of cash. I said: "No, he doesn't want paid, Duncan." He took them, seemed thrilled about it, and then never turned up.'

This, of course, is the fear tonight. Ferguson has made a habit of being conspicuous by his absence – from the Everton first team, from Newcastle United, from Scotland and, lately, from Merseyside. While waiting, I take the opportunity to speak with another trusty eyewitness source.

Alan Myers flitted in and out of Ferguson's life, initially as communications officer for Everton and then as a reporter on the Merseyside beat for Sky Sports – or, as his business card described him: 'North West Bureau Chief'. However, not even such an impressive title, combined with the fact that he and Ferguson were once colleagues at the same football club, was enough to convince Big Dunc to

grant the journalist what he most wanted: the Big Interview.

Myers tells me about once being offered money by Ferguson *not* to interview him. The tale reflects well on Ferguson. It offers a glimpse of the softer side of his character, something about which I was hoping to find out more during the course of my research. But the episode also illustrates the lengths to which he is prepared to go to remain unknowable.

Myers is now back working at Everton as director of communications, but explains: 'When I started working for Sky as a freelancer, I asked Ferguson for an interview. While he was more than happy to make sure I didn't lose out, he didn't want to do it. We were on a plane. Everton were going on tour and I went with them. "Listen, I'll give you the day's pay," he said. "How much would you earn for it?" I think I said about £150. And he said: "I'll give you the money, I just won't do the interview."'

Welcome, then, to the 11th Gwladys Street Hall of Fame dinner. Ferguson is the 100th, and also the last, inductee – or so it was claimed at the time. It is an honour that has drawn him back to Merseyside for a rare visit. Although four others, including Unsworth and Stuart, will also be inducted on the same night, it is abundantly clear that Ferguson is the star of the show. More than 700 tickets have been sold on the back of the promise that Ferguson will be present. However, even now, an hour or so before kick-off, there is still the worry that the nearest we will get to his presence is the huge banner that is hanging in the banquet hall bearing the inscription: 'Duncan Ferguson – Braveheart'.

The tension is palpable. Much of it emanates from me. I haven't even got my own ticket yet, having been invited down by one of the organisers, former amateur boxing champion Brian Snagg, who, on the phone before I made the journey south from Edinburgh, told me: 'Come along an

hour or so before the do is supposed to begin and I'll make sure you get to sit down with Duncan. You can ask him whatever you want. That'll be no problem. I'll set it up.'

Snagg is helping to maintain the Liverpudlian reputation for kindness and hospitality. He is also upholding that endearing Scouser trait for hopeless optimism. I politely inform him how grateful I am for such an opportunity, all the time realising he has more chance of persuading either of the two stone birds perched on top of the city's Liver Building to speak to me than he does Ferguson.

Bouncers guard the door of the VIP lounge and won't budge for anyone lacking the required accreditation. Snagg, who is running the event on behalf of Bluenose Promotions, is still in a room upstairs, no doubt frantically trying to figure out how 720 people are going to fit into a banqueting suite designed to hold around 200 fewer diners. Snagg knows his reputation in the city hinges on Ferguson showing up.

He has assured me that the footballer is already in town. Yet he probably won't believe it until he sees Ferguson for himself.

None of us will.

CHAPTER 1

Sky Born

Duncan Ferguson clocked off from life as a professional footballer in appropriately dramatic fashion, scoring a last-minute equaliser for Everton in a 2–2 draw with West Bromwich Albion on the last day of the 2005–06 season. His 68th Premier League goal – no Scottish player has scored more to date – came with the last kick of a career that saw him become arguably the most controversial British footballer of the modern era.

He then turned his back on the game, to the surprise of no one. Having been sold between clubs for combined transfer fees of over £18 million, he could afford to. Thousands of footballers have left the game behind without provoking the slightest curiosity. But this was not the fate of Duncan Ferguson.

One of the highest-profile players of the 'Premiership era', he is also among the least known. Unusually for someone with a story to sell, he has consistently refused to tell it. He shelved plans for an autobiography at the moment when his life appeared to have reached its most interesting.

His problem was that the publishers of the tome, provisionally titled *A Blue by Blue Account*, had some firm ideas about what they wanted the main thrust of the book to be. They expected him to revisit places he was desperate

to forget. He would have to acknowledge his status as the first professional British footballer to be jailed for an offence committed while on the field of play.

He would have to go back to Barlinnie.

Ferguson, unsurprisingly, had no intention of doing that.

Almost from the day he'd walked out of the prison gates, others had been trying to put him back in there, wanting to hear how it felt to be a £4 million footballer reduced to slopping out. To this day, *A Blue by Blue Account* has an online presence, a ghost book haunting the cyber shelves.

For a year – before Chris Sutton moved from Norwich City to Blackburn Rovers for £5 million in July 1994 – Ferguson struggled to live up to the billing of 'Britain's most expensive native footballer'. His £4 million move from Dundee United to Rangers in July 1993 broke the then record transfer fee between two British clubs, which had been set when Blackburn Rovers paid £3.3 million to Southampton for England striker Alan Shearer at the start of the previous season.

When Roy Keane moved from Nottingham Forest to Manchester United just five days after Ferguson's arrival at Ibrox, he cost £3.75 million. That deal exceeded the then English record, but not quite the British one. Ferguson was the story. ITV's News at Ten programme even sent a camera crew to Ibrox to film the 21-year-old footballer climbing a flight of stairs to meet his destiny – and his fate.

The Ferguson I had become intrigued by pre-dates even this headline-stealing episode. I watched him score the third goal of his career in a Dundee derby in the Scottish Cup in 1991. It was a trademark header – or at least of the sort that would later become his trademark.

On the night I saw him play for the first time, many others did too. Sky had chosen to show the Scottish Cup quarter-final meeting between Dundee United and city rivals Dundee on what was then called the Sports Channel. 'It's England's turn to enjoy some Scottish hospitality,'

announced the presenter Richard Keys, as the fledgling station thrilled at this novel advance north of the border. The fixture was among the first games Sky televised in Scotland, as they prepared to change football in Britain forever.

Ferguson himself would become one of many beneficiaries, as the money poured into the game by television stations found its way into the pockets of players. Then there was Bosman: Jean-Marc Bosman, who won the landmark case that ruled clubs could no longer hold on to a player's registration after their contract had expired, a development that would further enrich the sport.

This was news that several of those who had lined up for Dundee United against Dundee on 4 March 1991 were waiting to hear. Many of the younger players in the team felt that the club had control of their lives to an extreme extent, though this feeling also owed rather a lot to Dundee United's autocratic manager, Jim McLean.

For the Tannadice club, the early 1990s were a period of transition and evolution – though this did not appear to extend to the treatment of players. The likes of David Narey, Dave Bowman and Jim McInally remained following the club's run to the UEFA Cup final in 1987, while an exceptionally talented group had graduated from the Youth ranks and were creating some elbow room for themselves in the first team. Ferguson was among them, alongside the likes of Ray McKinnon, an elegant midfielder bursting with potential, and Christian Dailly, a fast-as-lightning striker.

An old guard, who had helped establish the club as a force in Europe, were approaching the end of their careers. Stalwarts such as Narey and Paul Sturrock were conscious of the new wave of talent in the youth and reserve teams – and these teenagers often had the attitude to go with the skill.

While Ferguson was foremost among them, few would have picked him out as the one who would go on to become

the club's most saleable asset, as he persistently failed to yield to McLean's strong will.

The manager would argue that his methods got results. McLean had managed to take a club with average crowds of around 10,000 to the brink of European success in both the European and UEFA cups, after all; an unthinkable achievement today.

One of the reasons for this success was that players were rewarded for a good performance and nearly always for a good result – although there was one instance when McLean held back what he described as 'an entertainment bonus': this followed a 6–1 *win* over Motherwell in the Scottish Cup, when the team were deemed by McLean to have played inexusably poorly at the start of the game. While a player's basic salary was low in comparison to that of the likes of Rangers and Celtic, the United way was to ensure that the players gave their best when performing in front of the paying fan. The trouble was, football was changing and so was society; the young guns were not prepared to put up with what their elders had endured under McLean. His methods had become unsound. They belonged to a different era. Younger players glimpsed what was happening elsewhere; they were restless.

Ferguson was one of two teenagers picked to line up that evening in March 1991 against Dundee – midfielder John O'Neil was the other. McKinnon, meanwhile, had just turned 20. Others, such as the 17-year-old Christian Dailly, had already done their bit that season and were being rested.

It was an intriguing fixture, if not an uncommon one. The clubs had been drawn together in the same competition in the previous four seasons, but it was still an attractive meeting for the fans. Over 16,000 made their way to Tannadice. It was Ferguson's first taste of the Dundee derby; his biggest match to date.

Up in the gantry was Andy Gray, making his way as a pundit and clearly excited at this opportunity to return to Tannadice in his new role. Gray had begun his career at United, where the fans would croon, to the tune of 'Camptown Races', 'Who's the boy with the golden hair? Andy, Andy!'

Gray had scored 47 goals in 95 appearances for United and, when he was just 18 years old, had led the line in a Scottish Cup final against Celtic. In *The Tannadice Encyclopedia*, Mike Watson notes the 'tremendous sense of loss' felt among fans in 1975 when Gray left to join Aston Villa. Jim McLean later said that the first result he looked for after finishing his commitments with United in the afternoon was the Aston Villa one. If they had won and – better still – Gray had managed to score, then 'everyone at Dundee United is a little happier', MacLean said.

If Ferguson represented the absolute nadir in McLean–player relations, then Gray was the pinnacle. He and McLean still exchange Christmas cards to this day. 'The start is most important in a young guy's career,' Gray tells me. 'And at Dundee United, under Jim, I had the perfect start.'

'I have very vivid memories of being told to stay behind after training, and it's Jim and me, just the two of us. He's banging balls at me to control, showing me how to make runs and how to turn defenders. And then he's going out onto the wing and banging over crosses, and I was coming in and heading them into an empty net.'

McLean has since spoken about his regret at devoting so much time to United at the expense of his family, but Gray, whose own father had walked out of the family home in Drumchapel, Glasgow, when he was just two years old, clearly benefited from the arrangement. In 1977, he was voted the PFA Player of the Year and the PFA Young Player of the Year, a then unique double.

And then, in 1979, at the age of just 23, he became Britain's most expensive footballer when he moved from Aston Villa to Wolves in a £1.5 million deal. It is not overstating it to say that, in McLean, the teenage Gray had found the father he'd never had. 'We still talk when we need to talk,' Gray says.

This clearly marks a huge contrast in how Ferguson regards McLean. The similarities between Gray and Ferguson are obvious – not least because Ferguson would later inherit Gray's title of 'most expensive British player'. As well as playing for Everton, both Gray and Ferguson had spells at Rangers, though at different stages in their careers. Neither would claim they showed the Ibrox support the best of themselves. Intriguingly, Gray might have ended up managing Ferguson following Joe Royle's departure as Everton manager in 1997; however, he made an eleventh-hour decision to stay with Sky and it wasn't to be.

Back at Tannadice, near the start of his broadcasting career, Gray catches his first glimpse of Ferguson, emerging from the tunnel wearing bicycle shorts that are just peeking out from under his black Dundee United shorts. To top off the look, Big Dunc has taken to the pitch, in front of the watching nation, chewing a chunk of gum.

United are given a shock when Dundee take the lead, but they recover to score three times. Sitting up in the gantry, Gray would have recognised something of himself in Ferguson – a fearless striker with a prodigious heading ability, who was partial to a night out – and surely he liked what he saw.

The goal that settled the tie came from Ferguson, who proved an unsettling presence for the Dundee defence throughout. 'He has an excellent temperament for the game,' noted commentator Jock Brown at one point.

Ferguson's strike came in the second half, a header at the far post after a cross from John O'Neil, the other teenager

in the side. Ferguson wheeled away at the end of the ground, then known as the Arklay Street End – where a stand funded by his sale would, in time, block out the view of garden allotments and tenement flats – before kissing the United badge on his jersey. Teammate Dave Bowman hoisted him aloft before Ferguson strolled back to the halfway line, floppy hair and still-furiously-chomping jaws forming what might be described as a perfect picture of teenage nonchalance. He had recently turned 19.

The game has all the hallmarks of a coming-of-age occasion for Ferguson, who emerged the victor in a rugged battle with Dundee defender Willie Jamieson.

The performance didn't overly impress McLean, however. It wasn't the best showcase of Scottish football, he fumed. A long way from it, in fact.

'It's not my type of football,' McLean complained in a post-match interview. 'If there had been aeroplanes around, they would have needed to ground them.' It was typical McLean: a pithy comment on the frequency of the long, hopeful airborne pass. The Scots word 'dour' might have been invented for the United manager. Even though his side had won, he appeared miserable.

After McLean's interview, the camera switches back to the pitch, where the players are going through their warm-down exercises. This is deemed novel enough for a discussion to ensue between Gray and Keys on the merits of such 'newfangled' techniques. All the while the camera remains fixed on the gaggle of United players, their breath still visible in the chill of a Tayside night. There, standing lanky and lofty, like a lighthouse, is Ferguson, his long legs stretched out, his hands resting on his hips. He is gazing into the distance, bored already of such chores.

And, as Gray points out, he is still chewing gum.

CHAPTER 2

Duncan Disorderly

When I was asked who I would most like to write a book about, I didn't have to think twice: Duncan Ferguson. My firmness surprised me. But this was something that I had few doubts about. A publishing contact wanted to know more. What was it about Ferguson that fascinated me?

I told him my story and it intrigued him further, because my background isn't Dundee United and Everton, as he had presumed. Indeed, it is the precise opposite: Liverpool and Dundee FC – United's great rivals. While Ferguson was a hero to Everton fans, Liverpool were my team growing up, as was the case with many Scottish youngsters in the late 1970s and '80s, when the Anfield club's success was built upon a backbone of Scots – the holy triumvirate of Kenny Dalglish, Graeme Souness and Alan Hansen.

Although I grew up near Dundee, the first professional goal I saw with my own eyes was on Merseyside. It was April 1982. I had just turned nine years old and Dalglish gifted me a late birthday present when he scored the winner in a 1–0 victory over West Bromwich Albion at Anfield.

While it often seemed Dalglish had just stepped out of a comic book story – match-winning goals to clinch the League Championship in his first season as player-manager being one good example – Ferguson's tale seemed a lot less

Boy's Own. When Dalglish scored, joy radiated from him; he raised both arms in the air in giddy abandonment. By contrast, when Ferguson scored a goal, the celebration tended to be either comically exaggerated or shot through with aggression. If he wasn't taking his shirt off and swinging it around above his head, he was clenching a fist as though preparing to swing at someone. There was something else going on there – it was as if every goal was a response, a riposte, to someone or something.

Ferguson had started to make his name at Dundee United during a spell when I was following Dundee most fiercely, having concluded that the satisfaction that came from celebrating Liverpool's glories mostly from afar didn't match the thrill of watching live football. With Dundee United just beginning to establish themselves as a force in Europe, opting to support their then down-at-heel neighbours across the single street that divides the two football clubs might have seemed like a perverse choice, but they had the history: a run to the European Cup semi-finals in 1963, as they sought to become British football's first champions of Europe. United were perceived by Dundee fans to be the upstarts, the second team in the city. However, United were bidding to establish themselves in Scottish football's firmament following their own run to the last four of the European Cup in 1984 by bleeding in new stars at the end of the decade and the start of the new one. They had McLean, a man who couldn't rest without knowing he had done as much as possible to make Dundee United as good as they could be. And they had Ferguson.

As a tall, skinny centre-forward for the University of Dundee football team, I was compared to 'that lanky streak' who was just breaking into the first-team up the road at Tannadice, to my outward chagrin and inward delight. For all that I adored Dundee, I was aware that we didn't have anyone remotely like Duncan Ferguson, who I saw around

the pubs and nightclubs in the west end of the city, where footballers and students alike did their carousing.

Fortunately, I didn't have to be conscious of the bouncers clocking my whereabouts and relaying the information back to someone once described as a 'master snoop' in Dundee. Fortunately, I did not have to explain myself to Jim McLean – a looming presence in Ferguson's young life, and a bogey man in mine, having inspired United to assume the position of top dogs in the city. Intensifying Dundee fans' discontent was the knowledge that McLean had left his position as coach with Dundee to join United, piqued at having been overlooked for the Dens Park manager's job.

After graduating from Dundee, still unsure about what to do next, I headed to Newcastle, enrolling on a Masters course at the university there. Duncan wasn't long behind me, signing for Newcastle in what was an unproductive, if lucrative move. He remained there for only a season and a half – but it was still far longer than my own stay on Tyneside.

By the time he joined the St James's Park club, I had joined *The Scotsman* as a sports writer, one of my first assignments being to cover Ferguson's press conference at Newcastle. After it had finished, I went to the only place I knew in the town: an old building housing an English department I had entered only once (to tell my course tutor that I was leaving after barely a fortnight in order to pursue a career in journalism). I sat down and wrote the first paragraph in my first ever story about Duncan Ferguson: 'The Tay, the Clyde, the Mersey and now the Tyne. Duncan Ferguson has spent much of his footballing career on the riverbank, never quite having made the splash he should have.'

It was used on the the *Scotsman*'s back page. In a way, I felt like I was up and running. In the piece, I noted that the last time I had been in the same room as Ferguson he had been standing half-naked on top of a table at the Tally Ho