

Memories of a Celtic-Minded Par

Alan Bairner

In 2001, I wrote, ‘My hometown soccer team was Dunfermline Athletic and, in a sense, the Old Firm rivalry need not have concerned me at all. Yet I was conscious from an early age that this was about more than soccer...it seemed as if everyone in Scotland had to take a side even if they usually supported another, smaller club. In this regard, I chose, not for the last time in my life it has to be said, to be perverse’.ⁱ How was it that a young Pars fan, brought up in the Church of Scotland, was attracted to Celtic rather than to what was at the time still the pride and joy of the Scottish Protestant establishment, the club once known as Rangers? What follows is my attempt to answer that question, at least to my own satisfaction if not to anyone else’s.

Part of the explanation is that Celtic were not Rangers.ⁱⁱ My maternal grandfather was a long-serving elder in the Church of Scotland. He took me regularly to watch Raith Rovers in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. Rangers, he left me in no doubt, was not the team for us. My father had won the King’s Medal in the Boys’ Brigade, served in the submarine service in World War Two and became a Freemason shortly after he was demobbed. As far as he too was concerned, however, we were Dunfermline Athletic supporters and should have no truck with the Gers, regardless of our religion. What did the Battle of the Boyne really matter to those of us brought up in the kirk? During the eighteenth century, notable Presbyterian clerics, such as Francis Hutcheson who had left behind the narrow ground of Ulster politics to study and teach at the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, helped to fuel the Scottish Enlightenment. Meanwhile their co-religionists back home, such as Henry Joy McCracken, had joined the United Irishmen and fought alongside Catholics in the quest for social justice in Ireland in opposition to the landed, Episcopalian ruling class. This was our

Presbyterianism – fighting oppression, in accord with the prevailing ethos of the New Testament, rather than demonising Catholics.

Parades were another factor in my reasoning that Catholics were not the bad people that some in our community would have had us believe. ⁱⁱⁱ When I was growing up, from our second floor High Street window, we had a perfect view of radically contrasting processions. Along came the bishops, then the monsignors, after them the parish priests and nuns. Following on were the non-religious, the Catholic pilgrims from all over Scotland on their way from St Margaret's grave to East End Park, home of Dunfermline Athletic, where Mass would be said. The procession was quiet and dignified and my father, mother and I once followed the pilgrims until we reached the town cemetery from where we could watch the service taking place inside the football ground. Around the same time, from that same High Street window, we also saw a parade of the Royal Black Preceptory, accompanied by Protestant flute and accordion bands. It was loud, aggressive and not at all dignified. Who were the real Christians, I wondered.

In the 1950s, in addition to that of Andrew Carnegie, St Margaret was the other name that most Dunfermline children knew from an early age. Taking visitors to Dunfermline to see St Margaret's grave and also the cave where she went for private prayer was a regular family ritual when I was a child. Of English and Hungarian descent, Queen Margaret of Scotland (later St Margaret) married Malcolm III (Malcolm Canmore) in 1069 and quickly set about bringing refinement and piety to the Scottish court. Nagy tells us that she is remembered in the chapel of Edinburgh Castle, in the empty sarcophagus at Dunfermline, and by the holy relics kept in the Ursuline convent of St Margaret in Edinburgh. ^{iv} Sir Noel Paton, a local man, was responsible for the painting of 'Queen Margaret and King Malcolm Canmore' which hangs in Dunfermline Town Hall. Margaret died in 1093 at Edinburgh Castle and her body was taken to the Church of the Holy Trinity at Dunfermline (subsequently replaced by

Dunfermline Abbey) and buried opposite the Altar and the Cross.^v Her grave is now located outside the Abbey. Subsequently, according to one historian, ‘Dunfermline played a key part in raising the status of the kingship of the Scots during the mid thirteenth century, first, by negotiating Margaret’s canonization and, second, by appearing to be the venue for the kings of Scots to receive the rites of coronation and unction’.^{vi}

Despite this theological digression, I do not want to give the impression here that I am making a simplistic equation between Celtic Football Club and Scottish Catholicism. I am well aware that many non-Catholics support the club and indeed many other fans, who were born and brought up as Catholics, have long since given lie to the claim almost certainly mistakenly, perhaps mischievously, attributed to the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), St Ignatius Loyola, ‘Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man’. The only point I wish to make here is simply that when I was growing up, the Catholic Church was frequently represented as a mysterious, authoritarian and powerful institution as purportedly evidenced by the well-established belief that priests got into Celtic Park free and were given the best grandstand seats. My observation of the St Margaret’s pilgrimage led me, as a boy attending Church of Scotland Sunday School where the teacher told us dirty jokes, to take a rather different view of the Catholic Church such that, if hating Catholicism meant having to hate Celtic and vice versa, then I was out.

There was always much more to my Celtic-mindedness than an atavistic dislike of Rangers. In the beginning, perhaps it had something to do with the green and white hoops or, even more so, the white shirts with green sleeves and a large shamrock emblazoned on the chest. The fact that the shorts were unnumbered was idiosyncratically attractive. Such superficialities can perhaps best be categorised under the heading of banal Celtic-mindedness. Now that I am in my mid-sixties, however, I am able to reflect more seriously on the

significant events, people and places that have influenced my attitude towards Celtic over the years.

The story must start with one man – Jock Stein – a Celtic man, of course, but also the man who turned Dunfermline Athletic from a struggling provincial outfit into a club that temporarily graced the European football stage and gave Pars fans‘ such ‘a guid conceit o’ oorselves’ which, I believe, most of us who lived through the sixties still possess. This is one reason why such an effort was made by supporters to save the club from extinction and to accept our recent financial troubles with considerably more grace and humility than Rangers supporters have been able to muster.

Stein had captained Celtic to victory in the Coronation Cup in 1953 and to a league and cup double the following year. When he arrived at East End Park on 14th March 1960 as the new Dunfermline manager, however, he was a relatively unknown quantity to most Pars fans. Yet, as Bob Crampsey wrote, ‘It is fascinating if ultimately profitless to speculate on the subsequent history of Dunfermline Athletic had the club’s directors not appointed Jock Stein’.^{vii} Stein waited to be told if he had got the job in the Carousel Restaurant, adjoining the Regal Cinema and two doors away from the tenement where I grew up.

When Stein took up his new position, Dunfermline lay third from bottom of the First Division with only six matches to play and the first match under his leadership was to be against his old club. On 19th March, Dunfermline beat Celtic 3-2 at East End Park and went on to win all of their remaining five games, finishing 6th bottom, only four places behind Celtic. The Stein revolution had begun and for me it was to become personal.

At the beginning of the following season, Mr Stein visited my cub pack, the 2nd Fife YMCA, to talk to us about the previous season’s European Cup Final at Hampden Park in which Real Madrid had beaten Eintracht Frankfurt by seven goals to three. A flickering cine film showed

highlights of the game which Stein described as the greatest he had ever seen. But there was more to come. For half an hour he spoke to this group of boys as if we were grown-ups about football strategies and tactics. We knew then, if we did not know it already, that our team was in safe hands. After we had been given the chance to ask the manager some questions, we ate bags of chips which had been lathered with so much salt and vinegar that they had turned into a congealed mess but were they good! And so were our young lives and they were about to get even better.

On 22nd April 1961, Dunfermline met Celtic in the Scottish Cup Final watched by 113,328 spectators and, as Welsh troubadour Max Boyce used to say, I know ‘cos I was there. Stein had prepared for the game by taking his team to the Seamill Hydro Hotel, using his Celtic connections to outwit his former club which had often used the hotel as a base in the past. ^{viii}

My father and I sat high up in the stand surrounded by Celtic supporters who gave me sweets and my dad regular swigs from their bottles. At the end of the game, which ended in a 0-0 draw, they shook our hands and wished us good luck in the replay. Did they mean it?

Probably not but it was kind of them to say it and good fortune was certainly with us when on 26th April, in a game which kicked off at 6.15 pm because Hampden had no floodlights, the Pars won the Scottish Cup for the first time in the club’s history, beating Celtic by two goals to nil in front of 87,660 people. Bob Kelly, a Celtic man through and through and then President of the Scottish Football Association, looked on as his wife presented the cup to Dunfermline captain, Ronnie Mailer. His feelings must have been mixed as he absorbed what the man whom he had brought from Llanelly to Celtic Park had just achieved. But, as he told the *Scottish Daily Express*, ‘It’s no loss what a friend gets’. ^{ix} After the game, as Bob Crampsey recalled, ‘All the way back to Fife ribbons of people stood in the rain, most to applaud the triumph of Dunfermline, not a few to celebrate the downfall of Celtic’. ^xAs an idealistic ten-year-old, I did not even consider the latter explanation at the time.

The European games that followed opened up a new world to local schoolchildren sated as they were by a diet of stories about Carnegie, Dunfermline-born capitalist robber baron turned philanthropist. It was a world which was unknown to supporters of most provincial clubs in Scotland and which saw the arrival in the Auld Grey Toon throughout the 1960s of players from Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Sweden, France, Spain, the Basque Country and many others. Arguably the climax came on the night of 19th December, 1962 while Jock Stein was still manager. Having lost 0-4 away to Valencia in the first leg of an Inter-Cities Fairs Cup tie, the Pars won the return leg 6-2 on an icy pitch with two teenage wingers in the side. Away goals did not count in those days so a third game was played in Portugal which Valencia won. Nevertheless, that second leg, together with the Scottish Cup triumph of 1961, must go down as one of Jock Stein's miracles surpassed, of course, a few years later, by the European Cup triumph by the Lisbon Lions, more of which in due course.

Stein left Dunfermline in April 1964, disappointingly initially to Hibernian and not Celtic, a move that most Dunfermline fans would have found easier to accept. As Crampsey observed, 'he left a remarkable inheritance'.^{xi}

The club he had taken over in 1960, of small achievement, of minimal ambition, would remain in the forefront of Scottish football for five years after his departure, a long time in football terms.

After Stein's departure, notable games have helped to keep the competitive relationship between Celtic and Dunfermline alive – a Scottish Cup Final win for Celtic on 24th April 1965, followed by a 5-1 home win for the Pars four days later, a 5-4 victory for Celtic in a league match at East End Park on 19th November 1966 and a 2-0 away win for Dunfermline on 27th January 1968 in the first round of the Scottish Cup. There was also the remarkable encounter a few months later on 30th April 1968 between league champions Celtic and cup winners Dunfermline played in front of the biggest crowd ever seen at East End Park,

officially recorded as 27,816, although my impression was that there were many more than that inside the ground (and on the floodlight pylons and the roofs of the covered enclosures).

A game, in which according to some, there was nothing at stake, although those of us who were there knew differently, was won 2-1 by Celtic. Of more recent memory, the Scottish Cup Final of 2004 ended with Celtic winning 3-1 with goals from Henrik Larsson (2) and Stilian Petrov. However, a half time lead courtesy of a goal scored by Andrius Skerla allowed the Pars supporters to celebrate during the interval as though it was 1961 all over again.

The European Cup Final of 1967 was another important landmark in my personal relationship with Celtic. The unexpected victory over Inter Milan was celebrated by my father and me, in large part, I suspect, because it had been achieved under the astute leadership of Jock Stein who had been so instrumental in the recent history of our own small club. We were also enthused, however, by the fact that a Scottish team had taken on the best in Europe and won (and I stress the Scottishness of Celtic at that time to make the point that this aspect of the club was, in my opinion, considerably more marked in the 1960s than it has sometimes been in more recent years). I must still have been rather naive in thinking that football fans all over Scotland would have been feeling the same way. My naivety would be shattered, however, when I watched the 1970 European Cup Final on a television in Edinburgh University's Men's (yes, Men's!) Union and realised that many fellow Scottish students were 'supporting' Feyenoord. Fights broke out at the final whistle and I was left to ponder on how twenty-two year old, George Connelly, a fellow Fifer, educated at St Margaret's School in Dunfermline, must have been feeling. ^{xii} Little did I know at the time that one of the greatest prodigies in Scottish football was already almost half way through his professional career, a tragedy arguably only surpassed in the annals of Celtic's history by the early death of another Fifer, John Thomson, who passed away after suffering a fatal injury at the age of 22 in an Old Firm game played on 5th September 1931 and is buried in Bowhill, a small West Fife village

through which I travelled every weekday morning in the first half of 1974 to teach at Auchterderran Junior High School. ^{xiii}

Finally as far as significant games between the two clubs are concerned, on 7th May 1988, already relegated Dunfermline went to Celtic Park to play against a Celtic team celebrating the club's centenary. The large travelling support unfurled a banner informing their manager Jim Leishman that they would be back, adding in a postscript, 'Happy Birthday Celtic'.

^{xiv}Perhaps I was not alone in my Celtic-mindedness. The Pars fans' gesture was acknowledged in the Celtic Fanzine, *Not The View*, at the start of the following season.

Their sporting attitude on the day the Celts were presented with the League trophy, the banner which read 'JIM WE'LL BE BACK, PS HAPPY BIRTHDAY CELTIC', and the way they supported their team despite the fact that they had already, sadly, been relegated, won them a lot of friends that day, and made the match a real pleasure to be at.

NTV added, 'Well done the Pars fans, and you'll be back!' ^{xv}

The fact that I lived for twenty five years in Belfast, from 1978-2013, could perhaps have turned my Celtic-mindedness into something more full blown. Certainly I got to know many Celtic supporters as good friends, and watching Cliftonville regularly with some of them meant that, by the time I left for England in 2003, my local team was the one member of the Irish League that could most easily be compared with Celtic. However, my feelings for Celtic actually became more strained in those years. Most of the Celtic fans I met in north and west Belfast were not supporting the Scottish side with which I had grown up. For them, Celtic was an Irish, Catholic club and the sectarian divide that prevailed in the six counties inevitably meant more to them than the rivalry between Scotland and England which had led me and people like me to relish the fact that one of our teams had managed to win the European Cup before any of theirs had.

I was not, of course, oblivious to the inter-communal conflict of those years. When a game to be played on 14 August 1984 was first arranged, it was to be an occasion for celebration. Cliftonville would play host to Celtic Football Club with most people in the ground being supporters of both teams. But a few days before the game was scheduled to take place, a young Catholic man, Sean Downes, who had been attending a republican rally in west Belfast, had been killed by a plastic bullet fired by a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) reservist who was later charged with manslaughter although subsequently acquitted. Tensions were running high and yet there was no immediate cause for alarm about a game to be played in front of a sizeable crowd of like-minded people. Nevertheless, a large RUC contingent was present and when missiles were returned from a section of the crowd in the direction of loyalist youths who had been throwing bricks and bottles over the perimeter walls, RUC officers in full riot gear seized the opportunity to charge, firing plastic bullets as they advanced. No one was killed on this occasion but the sense of fear was palpable. ^{xvi}

A very different experience came when I went to Ibrox with my friend John Rooney for a Sunday evening Old Firm game on 3rd January 1999 which ended in a 2-2 draw thanks to an equaliser from Larsson. The highlight of the day, for me at least, came within minutes of boarding a Celtic supporters bus in west Belfast when the older men on board told some teenage girls to turn off the republican songs on their ghetto blaster and ‘gie our heads peace’. I doubt that this was to spare the feelings of the Celtic-minded Par in their midst but almost certainly because they were nursing Sunday morning hangovers.

The real nadir as regards the previously harmonious relationship between Dunfermline Athletic and Celtic came shortly before I left Belfast when Chris Sutton accused the Dunfermline players of lying down to Rangers who had beaten them by six goals to one, thereby condemning Celtic to miss out on the 2003 Premier League title. Sutton later apologised for his remarks, with Celtic manager Martin O’Neill adding, ‘In the cold light of

day, Chris accepts that the motivation of those working and playing for Dunfermline should not be called into question'.^{xvii} Those of us who had supported the Pars all our lives were well aware that our team was capable of losing heavily to both Rangers and Celtic even while playing to the best of its ability. It was primarily for that reason that Sutton's comments were particularly hurtful. *NTV*, sided with Sutton, to some degree, questioning the approach to the Rangers game taken by Dunfermline manager, Jimmy Calderwood (he of the orange face and reputedly the Orange persuasion). The fanzine's overall assessment, however, was close to the truth.

Now some Celtic fans are suggesting that the reason we lost the league is because Dunfermline lay down to Rangers that fateful afternoon at Ibrox. But let's face it, leagues are not won or lost on one afternoon. Basically Dunfermline lost because they are shite.^{xviii}

Preserve us in the future, however, from English players seeking to demonstrate their commitment to the cause whether by impugning the honesty of fellow professionals or, worse still, by mimicking the actions of a 'kick the Pope' bandsman. As *NTV* later asked about Sutton, 'is he just paranoid like the rest of us?'^{xix}

Both before and after the Sutton affair, there have been times when I have been annoyed hearing Celtic supporters bemoan the lean times, some of which might even have included at least one trophy win. Try supporting teams like Dunfermline or better still one of those clubs that have never won anything at all. But I can let this pass for the simple reason that it is in the DNA of all football fans to moan; indeed, it's possibly what we enjoy most about being fans. As for Chris Sutton, as the well-known dirge tells us, these days are past now and, in the past, they must remain and so my Celtic-mindedness survives, watched over, I like to think, by the twin spirits of St Margaret and Mr Stein and kept alive by memories of Tommy Callaghan and Jackie McNamara who went in one direction and Bent Martin, John Cushley (who

starred in Dunfermline's *Quizball* triumph on BBC television in season 1971-2), David Moyes and, in particular, Joe McBride, who went in the other. I look forward to seeing the Pars back in the Premiership and having a team capable of beating Celtic but, in the meantime, I'll also be hoping for ten-in-a row.

ⁱ Bairner, A. (2001). *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization. European and North American Perspectives*. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, p. xiii.

ⁱⁱ Bairner, A. (2012). "The Sash We Never Sang", *Rangers Standard: Debating Our Club*, July (<http://www.therangersstandard.co.uk/index.php/articles/rfc-politics/139-the-sash-we-never-sang>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Bairner, A. (2011). "Urban walking and the pedagogies of the street", *Sport, Education and Society*, 16 (3), pp. 371-384.

^{iv} Nagy, K. (1973). *Saint Margaret of Scotland and Hungary*, Glasgow, John S. Burns.

^v Ratcliffe Barnett, T. (1926). *Margaret of Scotland. Queen and Saint*. Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd. See also Turgot. Bishop of St Andrews (1980). *The Life of St Margaret. Queen of Scotland*. Dunfermline. St Margaret's Catholic Church.

^{vi} Taylor, A. (2009). "Historical writing in twelfth- and thirteenth- century Scotland: the Dunfermline compilation", *Historical Research*, 83 (220), pp 228-252, p. 251.

^{vii} Crampsey, B. (1986). *Mr Stein. A Biography of Jock Stein C.B.E. 1922-1985*. Edinburgh, Mainstream, p. 47.

^{viii} See Macpherson, A. (2007). *Jock Stein. A Definitive Biography*. Newbury, Berkshire, Highdown, p. 84.

^{ix} Quoted in Macpherson, *Jock Stein*, p. 87.

^x Crampsey, *Mr Stein*, p. 53.

^{xi} Crampsey, *Mr Stein*, p. 62.

^{xii} See Connelly G. with Cooney, B. (2008). *Celtic's Lost Legend. The George Connelly Story*. Edinburgh, Black and White Publishing.

^{xiii} See Greig, T. (2003). *My Search for Celtic's John*. Glasgow, Ogilvie Writings.

^{xiv} I am grateful to John Kelly for reminding me of this particular episode in the history of relations between our two clubs. I am also gratified by the fact that John has seen fit to grace the East End Park main stand with his presence on two occasions in the past three seasons.

^{xv} *Not The View* (1988). No. 7, p. 5.

^{xvi} See also Bairner, A. (2014). “Emotional grounds: Stories of football, memories, and emotions”, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 12, pp. 18-23.

^{xvii} *The Scotsman* (2003). “Sutton’s apology comes too late” (<http://www.scotsman.com/sport/football/competitions/premiership/sutton-s-apology-comes-too-late-1-649266>) Accessed 23rd June 2017.

^{xviii} *Not The View* (2003). No. 112, 2nd August, p. 9.

^{xix} *Not The View* (2003). No. 113, 27th August, p. 17.