



Sport and 'Local Knowledge': the Cup Final and Multiple Identity in Northern England, c. 1880-1960

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Resumen: En Inglaterra, durante más de un siglo el fútbol ha sido un importante punto de encuentro para las lealtades locales. En particular, el torneo de la Final de Copa, ha hecho crecer el sentimiento de rivalidad, al mismo tiempo que reúne varias dimensiones de identidad local, regional y nacional. Hasta los años 60, ser representado por su club de fútbol en la Final era uno de los principales recursos por los cuales las ciudades de provincia disfrutaban por un momento de la atención nacional. Tales ocasiones daban lugar al traslado de un gran número de seguidores que viajaban hasta Wembley, en tren o por carretera, para experimentar en vivo ese momento. Pero este evento se transmitía también por otros medios de comunicación. En la era de la pretelevisión, los periódicos locales jugaban un papel fundamental al narrar, para la población de su ciudad, la historia de la Final de Copa. En esta historia se inscribía una compleja interacción de temas que servían ideológicamente para representar una ideal del "Ser Inglés".

Palabras clave: Historia del Deporte. Fútbol. Final de Copa de Inglaterra. Identidad local.

Abstract: For over a century association football has been an important site of local allegiance in England. In particular, the Cup Final competition has thrived on a sense of rivalry, bringing together various dimensions of identity-local, regional and national. Until the 1960s, being represented by their football club in the Final was one of the principal means by which provincial towns enjoyed a moment of national attention. Such occasions involved a large-scale physical movement of supporters, who travelled by train and road to Wembley to experience the moment directly. But the event was also mediated to others by various channels of communication. In the pre-television age the local newspaper press played the main role in narrating the Cup Final story to the population of the town. In this story was inscribed a complex interaction of local, regional and national themes which served ideologically to represent an idea of 'Englishness'.

Key Words: Sport's History. Football. Cup Final (England), Local Identity.



In the early summer of 1938 some 30,000 inhabitants of the northern English industrial town of Preston assembled in the main square to celebrate their football club's return from Wembley after winning the FA Cup¹. Preston was a textile and engineering centre of some importance in the regional economy but, with a population of around 100,000, its profile nationally was not high. To many it seemed a 'small town'. Football, however, gave substance to the town's motto: 'Proud Preston'. The local club, Preston North End, had been the first winners of the Football League in 1888-89, sweeping all before them during the first two seasons in a manner that earned them the title 'The Invincibles'². This achievement, though not sustained, nonetheless gave the town a renown in football circles and created expectations of success among local people that the Cup Final victory of 1938 went some way to satisfying. The occasion was an emotional one, amply reported and savoured by the town's two newspapers. In recording the scenes in the centre of Preston when the team returned with the Cup on that May evening, the press entered into more than a simple reporting of events. Inscribed in the columns of the newspapers was a narrative that contained complex layers of meaning. Stories were told about the team, the town, its inhabitants and their relationships with others. The ritual of the Cup celebrations can be read, in fact, as an articulation of identity in which Preston and Prestonians took their place within the greater nation of England, if not Britain.

Preston was not unique in this respect. Since its inauguration in 1871 the Cup Final had become an event of especial significance to many other towns similar in size, stature and location to Preston. Following an early phase of some dozen years when the Cup Final was dominated by amateur metropolitan clubs of former public school pupils and army officers, the social character and geographical focus of the Cup competition shifted decisively. Commercial clubs, staffed by paid working-class players and run by provincial middle-class business and professional people, maintained a monopoly on the Cup

¹ See *Preston Guardian*, 7 May 1938

² See Bryon BUTLER, *The Official Illustrated History of the Football League*, Leicester, Blitz Editions, 1993, p.17.



after the mid-1880s³. Many of them were incorporated into the Football League, an organisation whose network of clubs extended initially across the north and midlands of England. Success in the Cup, and in particular appearance in the Final itself, drew the national gaze to a collection of places not otherwise considered worthy of close attention: Huddersfield, Bradford, Burnley, Barnsley, Bury, Blackburn, Bolton, Sunderland, West Bromwich, Nottingham and Derby as well as Preston were all represented in the Cup Final in the years between the 1880s and the mid-twentieth century. They appeared alongside clubs from the bigger regional centres such as Newcastle, Manchester and Liverpool, Bristol and Southampton, Cardiff and Sheffield, and those such as Tottenham and Arsenal based in the metropolis. The preponderance of northern clubs in the FA Cup competition of this period was striking: there were only nine Finals before the outbreak of the Second World War when a team from the North did not participate. When it is considered that northern clubs also featured prominently in the Football League, whose headquarters from 1902 until 1959 were in Preston, and whose officials bore a characteristically 'northern' stamp⁴, the football importance of the North, and the importance of football to images of 'the North', becomes clear. Win or lose, appearance in the Final became the occasion in all these places for celebration, and a celebration that contained important symbolic meanings.

I

By the 1920s a common pattern had become evident in the performing of what were by this time well-established urban rituals

³ See Tony PAWSON, *100 years of the FA Cup*, London, Heinemann, 1971; FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION, *The History of the Football Association*, London, Naldrett Press, 1953. Jeffrey HILL, 'Cocks, Cats, Caps and Cups: a Semiotic Approach to Sport and National Identity', *Culture, Sport, Society*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1999, pp.1-21. Also useful for the social and economic background is Donald READ, *The English Provinces c. 1760-1960: a Study in Influence*, London, Edward Arnold, 1964.

⁴ See Alan TOMLINSON, 'North and south: the rivalry of the Football League and the Football Association', in John WILLIAMS and Stephen WAGG eds, *British Football and Social Change: Getting into Europe*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1991, pp. 25-47.



surrounding the celebrations⁵. It was customary for the local press to devote considerable space to the reporting of these rituals. It is this extensive and often multi-layered press coverage -constituting what is described here as the Cup Final 'narrative'- that is the subject of the following discussion. Three main strands were woven into the Cup Final narrative, and these related to the main activities involved in the participation of a club and its supporters in the Cup Final. They were: first, the journeying of supporters to London to attend the Final; second, the time spent in London before and after the match, and the activities supporters engaged in during this time; and, third, the welcoming of the club's players and officials on their return to the town, usually a day or two after the Final. Each provided an occasion for celebration that contained rituals through which were expressed various forms of identity.

To begin with, there was the journey of spectators to London. This produced a story whose dominant theme was masses on the move. In the days when a visit to London from northern towns involved a lengthy journey, usually by train, the press reports dwelt in detail of the arrangements made and the volume of the traffic. Every town involved in the Final had its counterpart to the story of the 14 special trains that left Bolton in 1923, or the 17 departing for London from Newcastle in 1952, or the 40 that took supporters from Blackpool to Wembley in 1953, when some 2,000 people congregated at the railway station to see their team off; 'a great wave of men and women in tangerine and white scarves and rosettes swept on to the platform'⁶.

INVASION OF LONDON
Great Trek to Wembley from the North
By Rail Road and Air
Big Bolton Crowds to Cheer the
Wanderers

⁵ For a fuller discussion of this see Jeff HILL, 'Rite of Spring: Cup Finals and Community in the North of England' in Jeff HILL and Jack WILLIAMS ed, *Sport and Identity in the North of England*, Keele, Keele University Press, 1996, pp. 85-111.

⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 1 May 1953. See also *Bolton Evening News*, 27 April 1923; *Newcastle Journal*, 3 May 1952.



Thus the first Cup Final to be held in the new stadium at Wembley was proclaimed by the *Bolton Evening News*. 'Contingents of the Northern Army, armed with megaphones, bells, rattles and bedecked with favours arrived by crowded trains, more travelled in motor coaches and others descended from aeroplanes today'⁷.

In 1923 the image of a military manoeuvre resonated with memories of the recent war, but the idea of a 'northern invasion' of London went farther back. Gibson and Pickford, in their early history of association football in England, noted with obvious delight the 'cup fever' that seized provincial towns when their teams were doing well in the Cup. They described at length the 'clubbing principle', a form of mutualism which appears to have originated with the appearance in the Cup Final of Blackburn Olympic in 1883, the first of the northern clubs to win the Cup. Groups of supporters organised into 'outing clubs' seem to have been especially prevalent in the north of England. Supporters pooled their savings to finance what would be, for many of them, a unique visit to the capital to watch their team play in the Cup Final. It was the occasion for a brief but memorable holiday. 'Next to the annual holiday at Blackpool', observed Gibson and Pickford, 'there is no objective dearer to the provincial's heart than the "Coop" Final'⁸. As with all holidays, there was a departure from the daily routine. The visit to London became the opportunity for indulgence and excess. An atmosphere of carnival prevailed. One outing club -from Sheffield- made arrangements to transport to London a barrel of beer so large that it could not be got through the door of the railway carriage. Excursionists from Bury in 1903 provisioned themselves with a food store that took up two large parcel vans at Euston Station, and this was just for their return journey⁹. Local tradespeople did good business through the sale of prepared meals for 'saloon parties' on the train, and their counterparts in London rubbed their hands at the prospect of the arrival of northern supporters¹⁰. Their stay was brief, but it was enjoyable and they spent good money; unlike the southern

⁷ 23 April 1923

⁸ Alfred GIBSON and William Pickford PICKFORD, *Association Football and the Men Who Made It*, Caxton Publishing Co., London, 1905, 4 vols, iv pp. 41-2

⁹ *Bury Times*, 22 April 1903.

¹⁰ See, for example, *Burnley Express*, 22, 29 April 1914.



supporter who, according to football's early historians, 'only comes to see the football, and not to spend his money'¹¹.

This holiday mood was particularly evident at the Crystal Palace sports ground in south London, where the Final was held from 1895 until 1914. The football stadium was situated in a commercial leisure complex which, among other things, possessed strong musical associations (choral festivals and brass band competitions were held there). Its centrepiece was the Crystal Palace itself, Paxton's graceful glass structure which had housed the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851 and later been moved to a permanent site at Sydenham, south London. Unlike later Finals at Wembley, where a rather more formal stage management developed with singing, bands and presentations in a stadium whose physical shape produced a crowd structure of hierarchical proportions, the Crystal Palace possessed an air of unbuttoned ease¹². It was fondly remembered in later years by older supporters. Looking back in the late 1930s, William Pickford, historian of football and long-serving member of the Council of the Football Association, recalled with much nostalgia the 'old days' at the Crystal Palace:

Those who remember the series of Finals there always speak of them happily. There was ample room for crowds to move about the charming grounds, watch the entertainment under the famous glass roof, listen to the great organ and lunch in comfort. On a fine day -and they generally were so- attendance of anything from 70,000 to 123,000 spectators, standing on the slopes, or sitting in the covered stand and ring seats, was a great picture of enthusiasm. I can see the branches of the tall trees opposite the pavilion black with eager climbers, like flocks of crows, and hear the band playing the National Anthem as the Prince of Wales took his seat... the Crystal Palace era was more than a venue of a football match; it took on the character of a pic-nic¹³.

¹¹ GIBSON and PICKFORD, *Association Football*, iv, pp. 41-2.

¹² See GIBSON and PICKFORD, *Association Football*, iv, p. 4. On the musical activities of the Crystal Palace see Michael MUSGRAVE, *The Musical Life of the Crystal Palace*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

¹³ W. PICKFORD, *A Few Recollections of Sport*, Bournemouth, n.d., p. 65 (copy at Football Association Library, Lancaster gate, London). Also looking back in 1927, *The Times* regretted that Wembley's new 'all ticket'



The atmosphere owed something to the usually strong presence there of northern supporters, and it was during this time that the Cup Final became the subject of a North-South discourse. The most flagrant representation of this had come before the Crystal Palace staged the Final, when the London-based *Pall Mall Gazette* described supporters arriving for the 1883 Final at Kennington Oval as a 'northern horde'. The term had connotations of barbarism and disorder, and called to mind past conflicts of an economic and political kind. It was, after all, only some 40 years earlier that the kingdom's unity had been threatened by political movements -Chartism in particular- which had been keenly supported in northern counties¹⁴. For years after 1883 northerners kept the image of the 'horde' alive. But the implications of discord in the original usage were usually countered by the northern provincial press with a different inflection on the North-South contrast. Their conventional representation of the 'invasion' of London by football supporters was tempered by a sense of essential national unity: the 'invasion', and indeed the 'taking', of the capital by the provinces was ultimately an act of friendship, if perhaps of a disruptive nature. 'Interesting things are going to happen down Lunnon when the Capital gets in to the hands of the Northern horde', promised the *Bolton Evening News* in 1923¹⁵.

II

The theme of 'friendly invasion' was elaborated in the second strand of the Cup Final narrative, which dealt with the presence of northerners in London. Here the narrative employed numerous oppositions -of behaviour, lifestyle, and mentality. Through these contrasts, with London cast as 'the other', the idea of the locality -both the particular town and the North generally- was constructed. But it was done so as part of a set of activities that took place within a dominant context of 'nation'. This became clear in the descriptions of the activities of northern visitors when they arrived in London. There was a cus-

arrangements had taken some of the 'old geniality, something of the old holiday atmosphere' from the event. (*The Times*, 23 April 1927).

¹⁴ See Tony MASON, 'Football, sport of the North?', in HILL and WILLIAMS, *Sport and Identity*, pp. 41-52.

¹⁵ HILL, 'Rite of Spring', in HILL and WILLIAMS, *Sport and Identity*, pp. 85-111. *Bolton Evening News*, 27 April 1923.



tomary programme of events to be followed. Arriving usually overnight or early in the morning, the first half of the supporter's day was taken up with sightseeing. The itinerary was significant. It took in public buildings, monuments and venues of *national* importance: the Houses of Parliament (to be welcomed in many cases by the local Member of Parliament), Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London. After the Great War the Cenotaph -Lutyens's memorial in Whitehall to the 'fallen'- was added to the list. It became almost obligatory for players and officials of clubs appearing in the Final to pay homage here, as Dewsbury did before the first Rugby League Final to be played at Wembley in 1929: 'it was at this period of the day that the fun and shouts of the partisans subsided, hats were removed, and except for the noise of the passing traffic, there were periods of impressive silence'¹⁶. Through this programme of visits northern supporters were, figuratively speaking, genuflecting before accepted symbols of the nation. As indeed they were, in some senses, by attending the Final itself.

This became more the case after 1923, when Wembley -the stadium built to commemorate the *British Empire* (and until the late 1950s known as the *Empire Stadium*)- developed into something of a national institution. The very first Final played there had much to do with this. Poor organisation resulted in gross overcrowding of the stadium, and the occasion was popularly remembered for years afterwards as the 'white horse Final' because of the efforts of mounted policemen -one in particular astride a white horse- to clear the pitch and enable the game itself to proceed. The event became part of national mythology, signifying a nation of decent, orderly people who responded to law and order and who refused to allow an organisational crisis to stand in the way of a good football match. This was a nation capable of getting its priorities right, one which could regard with equanimity large crowds, and look with some distaste on the use of fences, moats and armed police as means of controlling them. Bad behaviour at football grounds was something 'foreigners' (possibly even Scottish ones) got up to. The 'white horse' myth provided an image of themselves that the English cherished for at least two

¹⁶ *Dewsbury Reporter*, 4 May 1929. See also *Burnley Express*, 29 April 1914.



generations¹⁷. It enabled T.S. Eliot, scarcely a writer attuned to plebeian pastimes, to include the Cup Final in his litany of rituals that defined the national culture¹⁸.

Alongside the myth of Wembley there were other features of its development that ensured the stadium's national significance. The presence of royalty at Cup Finals (hardly known before the First World War), the broadcasting of the Cup Final by the BBC, and the singing from 1927 of the hymn 'Abide With Me' - a ritual with a powerful emotional impact on the consciousness of a nation still in collective mourning for the dead of the Great War- all served to fix Wembley as a place where events of national importance were taking place¹⁹. In reporting the Final *The Times* newspaper habitually reinforced this idea. In 1927, for example, while bemoaning the fact that the Final illustrated the growth of behaviour that made Britain 'a nation, not of ball-game players, but of ball-game spectators', nonetheless placed the Cup Final 'next to Derby Day and Boat Race Day... as the most important [day] in British sport'. By 1962 this idea was taken further:

This is the national stage of football at home... here is an occasion that lives on in the hearts of those who follow the game in these islands. Beyond the company compressed within the rim of Wembley itself will be another army. Countless and unseen, they will have the setting brought to front parlours north, south, east and west by the eye of television. This is more than a football match. This is a festive day in the sporting calendar; a day out, a day for celebration, no matter how good or how poor the game itself²⁰.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 27, 30 April; *Bolton Evening News*, 30 April 1923. On the 'White Horse Final' see also: Frederick WALL, *Fifty Years of Football*, London, Cassells, 1935; Alan BROWN, 'Didn't We Have a Lovely Time the Day We Went to Wembley?', *Guardian*, 1 April 1995; HANSARD (163 HC Deb. 5s), pp. 971, 1381-2; (170 HC Deb. 5s), p. 2526.

¹⁸ *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, London, Faber and Faber, 1948, p. 31.

¹⁹ See HILL, 'Cocks, Cats, Caps and Cups', *Culture, Sport, Society*, 1999.

²⁰ *The Times*, 23 April 1927; 5 May 1962.



With the sense of nation so deeply inscribed in the discourse of the Cup Final and Wembley it was difficult to evade the dominant message.

Nonetheless, meaning was contested. The North preserved its identity in this discourse through the particular emphasis given in the local press to the idea of the nation. The conspicuous presence of northern supporters in London on Cup Final day was used figuratively to produce an image of the nation in which the North was prominent. Club colours, favours, mascots, costumes and songs were much in evidence, both in the streets of the capital and in the press reports of the occasion. Supporters of Huddersfield Town in 1922 took their mascot, a donkey, on the train to London, and paraded it up and down the Strand, stopping the traffic²¹; in 1947 Burnley's fans swaggered four-abreast through the West End, ostentatiously exhibiting their club colours and outlandish garb to proclaim their arrival²²; in 1923 a young supporter of Bolton Wanderers 'paraded the Strand on Saturday morning, draped in the Wanderers' blue and white colours, with a string of [pig's] trotters dangling round the front and back of him' [Bolton Wanderers were known as 'the Trotters'], pursued by a group of 'cockney sportsmen' who seemingly found such exhibitionism hard to bear²³. Possibly the most sublime example of this 'claiming' of territory was the delivery by Blackpool's bizarre fan club, Atomic Boys, of a gigantic stick of seaside rock to 10 Downing Street, the residence of the Prime Minister, in 1953. 'Lancashire takes over as London is invaded' was the headline in the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*²⁴.

In weaving its reports of these incidents into narrative accounts the press drew heavily upon an existing literary form. It was that of dialect literature, which in the nineteenth century had employed the linguistic conventions of northern dialect speech, making it a literature virtually unintelligible to outsiders. By the twentieth century, however, it existed in an attenuated form; the archaic language had been

²¹ *Huddersfield Examiner*, 6 May 1922.

²² *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1947.

²³ *Bolton Evening News*, 30 April 1923.

²⁴ 2 May 1953.



largely eliminated but a traditional and central motif was retained. This was an ironic humour which combined a play on the uniqueness of northern culture with a distinctive capacity for self-mockery. The 'invasion' of London, and symbolically the temporary 'taking' of the national territory, was represented as the injection of a charge of northern energy into a city that was invariably dull, rootless, and too concerned with making money to have any sense of true community. 'The city that is too busy living to take much notice of life' was how the *Bolton Evening News* rather poetically described London²⁵. The capital was, moreover, seen from the perspective of ordinary northern life. Its pretensions and sophistication were not to be allowed to seduce the visitor from the realities of life. In 1914, for example, when Burnley played in the Final, the local press used the Crystal Palace as a metaphor for ostentation, counterposing to it the qualities possessed by the travelling supporters. One story in particular summed this up. Spectators at the Final had to pay an additional entrance fee if they wanted to see the famous building. This offended the northern sense of thrift, dissuading some from visiting, though those who made the financial sacrifice grudgingly acknowledged the experience to have been worth the money. The spectacular was then brought down to earth. All that glass provoked one wit to remark: 'By gum, ah wouldn't like to go and mend a brokken pane up theer'²⁶. [I would not like to have to mend a broken pane of glass up there]. Every pane was a potential repair. What is more, the remark was most likely never made. It was in all probability a literary confection created by the press reporter. But the fact that the remark might never have been uttered was less important than that it *should* have been said, and that readers would have expected a comment of this kind. It was consistent with northern morality. It was how northerners liked to see themselves, and had become accustomed to seeing themselves portrayed. The portrayal also slid into the self-mocking. A favourite image here was the 'gormless' [stupid] northern visitor abroad in the big city, a theme made popular in holiday postcards, and developed for the variety stage before the First World War by the performer George Formby, whose son further developed the act in a series of very successful films of the 1930s. In the senior Formby's stage routine his character, the enfeebled, wife-dominated 'John Willie', essays a night

²⁵ 27 April 1923.

²⁶ *Burnley Express*, 27 April 1914.



'on the town' in London, 'playing the game in the West [End]' as he daringly expresses it.

Playing the game in the West, playing the
game in the city,
Leading the life that tells, flirting with
Maude and Kitty.
Strolling along the Strand, knocking
p'licemen about,

But his bravura in this alien high life is shatteringly revealed in the last line of his song to be an evanescent provincialism: 'And I'm not going home til a quarter to ten, 'cause it's my night out'²⁷. In a similar sense the 'invasion' of London was being conducted by an army of John Willies: disorientated at the railway stations, though bristling with maps and directories; seeking the pub called the 'Old Lady' in Threadneedle Street; and declining a visit to the theatre in favour of the circus at Piccadilly²⁸. London, and the unity of the nation, was safe in the possession of such a friendly horde. In asserting a northern presence in the nation the Cup Final narrative held back from suggesting conflict; although it challenged conceptions of the nation which gave London a prominent place, it confined itself to being a reminder that life existed outside the metropolis, and life with a keener perception of 'reality' perhaps. But it was not a call for a new social order.

III

The 'imaginary constitution of the social order'²⁹ was yet more clearly in evidence when the Cup Final narrative developed its third theme. This dealt with the reception of the team, usually on the Mon-

²⁷ See Colin MACINNES, *Sweet Saturday Night*, Panther, London, 1969, pp. 81-2.

²⁸ *Bolton Evening News*, 27 April 1923.

²⁹ The phrase is from Patrick JOYCE, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, a book which has many interesting points related to the themes discussed in the present essay, though it does not directly touch on sport; see, especially, pp. 159, 213, and 336ff.



day after the Final, when they returned to their town. It was an occasion for at least a half-day holiday and for the congregating of thousands of townspeople in the central areas to welcome their players. The fact that many, or even all, were not local men was not permitted to detract from a celebration of localism. Nor was the result of the Final; whether the team had won or lost the reception was equally rapturous. When Preston North End returned after losing in the 1937 Final there was a crowd of some 10,000 to greet them. 'The reception could not have been more spontaneous if the club had brought the Cup with them', claimed the *Preston Guardian*³⁰. Nine years later, in nearby Burnley, a heroic welcome was given to the team that had narrowly lost in the Final to Charlton Athletic. Under a headline that declared 'ALL BURNLEY OUT TO GREET CUP LOSERS' the reporter of the *Northern Daily Telegraph* noted that all along the road from the town of Bury, some 12 miles away, the team's coach was cheered by bystanders, and that as it entered the town of Burnley itself the crowds were so dense that the final mile of the journey lasted twenty minutes. In the speechmaking that followed the chairman of the football club, Tom Clegg, announced: 'I have lived in Burnley for 75 years and I have never felt as proud of the town and its people as I do tonight'. The captain, Alan Brown, a renowned tough defender (and later 'hard' manager) was greatly moved by the display of affection shown to his players, and emotionally told the thousands of people assembled outside the Town Hall: 'we lost the Cup, but you have given us something Charlton cannot win from us'³¹.

Such celebrations became a common feature throughout the north of England during this period. In Huddersfield, for example, in 1922, when the football club emerged from obscurity to win the Cup and enter a remarkable period of success in the next few years under the leadership of Herbert Chapman, there was an ecstatic welcome for the team. The local newspaper described the scenes in the town as 'probably the biggest demonstration ever known in Huddersfield... which could have been secured only by a monarch, or by the more famous kinema artists'³². Gatherings of these proportions were not only an indication of the popularity enjoyed by football players but

³⁰ 8 May 1937.

³¹ *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1947.

³² *Huddersfield Examiner*, 6 May 1922.



could be construed into a physical manifestation of the essential unity of the town itself. In this sense they provided an opportunity for *representing* the town that was not to be missed by those concerned with civic 'boosterism'. Thus, there was a discernable shift in the organisation of such celebrations over the years: from, in the late-nineteenth century, the celebrations being a spontaneous celebration of *club*, to their becoming by the inter-war years an official glorification of *town*. Spontaneity was the rule in the festivities that accompanied Blackburn Olympic's defeat of Old Etonians in the Cup Final of 1883. The result provoked a response that was beyond anything imagined: a display of enthusiasm and affection for Olympic that took the authorities by surprise. So large were the crowds that had gathered to cheer the arrival of the club's train and escort the wagonettes carrying the players, that the fifty policemen assigned to maintain order in the town were completely unable to do so. The procession heading for the club's headquarters, a public house, was several times dispersed and had to re-form before reaching its destination, where speeches were made and music played. There was no attempt to orchestrate the proceedings into an official event. But there were signs here that ideological capital might be made out of the occasion. Such a sign appeared in the form of an editorial in the *Blackburn Times*:

It is the meeting and vanquishing, in a most severe trial of athletic skill, of a club composed of the sons of some of the best families of the upper class of the Kingdom -of born and bred gentlemen who may be justly described as 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form'- as the Old Etonians club is, by a provincial Club composed entirely, we believe, of Lancashire Lads of the manual working class, sons of small tradesmen, artizans and operatives³³.

The consciousness of class and the feelings of local pride that were strongly present in this eulogy might help to explain why Cup Final celebrations were soon taken out of the hands of the club itself and appropriated into a grander purpose.

³³ *Blackburn Times*, 7 April 1883. See also reports in the same newspaper of 5 April 1884 and 11 April 1885 when the town's other club, Blackburn Rovers, had been involved in the Cup Final.



By the turn of the century the official urban body -the Corporation- was turning its attention to the event in a number of towns. When Bury appeared in two Finals in 1900 and 1903, and won both by record margins, there was a clear involvement in the celebrations by the authorities. For the return of the team to Bury careful preparations had been made to impose a civic stamp on the proceedings with the Mayor and his entourage given the prominent place. '[A]rrangements were made for keeping the railway platforms clear of persons who had no business there, and a few minutes before the train arrived there was no one on the platform *but a few privileged persons*' [author's italics]. In spite of these arrangements interlopers did break through in 1900, so that three years later more careful precautions ensured that the 'privileged' were set apart and the masses kept in their place. The by now traditional procession in wagonettes from the railway station to the club's favourite pub still took place, but was accompanied by the mayoral party³⁴. It was not long, however, before this popular destination changed and the town hall became the focal point of celebrations. At Huddersfield in 1922 the players were met at the station by the Mayor's party, conveyed through the streets in two large Corporation buses, and finally de-bussed at the town hall where a series of rituals including a civic reception, speeches and the displaying of the Cup from the town hall balcony engaged them³⁵. At Newcastle in 1952 the entire event was carefully staged in order to articulate football culture with civic authority. The Lord Mayor of Newcastle, together with the Town Clerk (who had both been at Wembley) travelled back with the players but left them at Durham so as to arrive in Newcastle ahead of the rest of the party. They were therefore present, adorned in official robes, with sword and mace as symbols of their authority, to receive the team 'home' as the train drew into the station³⁶.

Such an occasion provided the press with an idealised image of the unified community. The image, it might be suggested, contrasted with the reality of life in many a northern town in the first half of the twentieth century. As in so many industrial communities right across

³⁴ *Bury Times*, 25 April 1900; 22 April 1903.

³⁵ *Huddersfield Examiner*, 6 May 1922.

³⁶ *Newcastle Journal*, 6 May 1952. At Preston in 1938 the Mayor, attired in his civic robes, also wore a large rosette in the club's colour, white. (*Preston Guardian*, 8 May 1937).



Europe discord of various kinds - industrial, political, religious, ethnic - was the warp and weft of the fabric of urban existence. The Cup Final narrative offered instead the ideal of the seamless community, a unified social hierarchy that existed not only within the locality, but which extended through linked stages from the local, through the regional, to the national. It attempted to bring all together in a magical resolution of conflict through the inclusive interest in football, the abiding symbol of which was Wembley on the day of the Cup Final. The story contained a major element of wish-fulfilment, an idealized version of community similar to that found in the cinema, where film narratives have conventionally resolved social contradictions through happy endings, and in this way served to assuage fears of discord in society³⁷. The Cup Final narrative, however, was not completely divorced from reality. As a report of what happened it was accurate: thousands of people did turn out to welcome their teams home, and still do. But the wish to amplify this occasional event in the life of a town and offer it as the 'authentic' vision of the community reveals, perhaps, an all-too-keen awareness of the actual disharmonies present in the social structure. Such imagined communities were well illustrated in 'Townsmen's' report of the return of Preston North End after the Cup Final of 1938, the occasion that provided the point of departure for this essay.

In seeking to give the crowd - 'the greatest crowd ever to assemble' in Preston - a human face, 'Townsmen' focused his report on an incident that involved a woman and her small child. On the point of fainting from the crush, the woman passed the child to a policeman for safe-keeping. The incident was commonplace, trivial even, scarcely worthy of report. But for 'Townsmen' it conveyed immense symbolic meaning. At a time of worsening international relations and the possibility of impending war with brutal continental dictatorships the small human incident in the Preston crowd summed up the essential decencies of English life. The multitude was a collection of ordinary individuals; it was not like the 'large disciplined gatherings' of many European countries, and the policeman was the people's friend

³⁷ See, for example, Tony BENNETT and James DONALD, 'The Historical Development of Popular Culture in Britain', in *Popular Culture*, Milton Keynes, Open University, 1981, block 2, pp. 79-85.



(a 'good tempered' one as George Orwell once said), not their oppressor. 'Townsmen' drew comfort from all this, seeing it as a microcosm of the way the nation worked: 'for all our bickerings we are all one big family on these great occasions'³⁸.

IV

Preston provides both the starting and finishing point of this discussion. Though few would have foreseen it at the time, it fell to Preston North End, in 1964, to be the last club from the small northern industrial towns to appear in the Cup Final. Since then the event has been dominated by clubs from the big conurbations -London, Liverpool, Manchester, Tyneside- and the occasion has ceased to be the celebration of provincialism that it was for much of the seventy years up to the middle of the twentieth century. Many changes in both society and football explain this shift. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to explore the reasons why clubs like Preston's have lost, in the closing years of the twentieth century, the leadership they claimed at the end of the nineteenth. The changes have resulted, though, in contemporary football's polyglot labour market, which means that the Cup Final has come to signify something more than a sporting world whose boundaries are those of the nation. It now has powerful overtones of internationalism and even globalism. Whilst, in this expanded cosmos, local identities and allegiances are still important (perhaps more important) their nature has changed, and the national now takes on more of a 'local' focus than it once did. Thus the symbolic 'taking' of the capital as a way of asserting presence within the nation seems, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a less meaningful articulation of identity than it did a hundred, or even fifty, years ago.

For a long time, however, it was one of the many ways in which people were able to think about themselves and their place. The importance of the Cup Final for the social and cultural historian lies in its capacity for yielding meanings about identity. It was one form of what the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz has described as 'local knowledge' -forms of 'significant action' that are given expression in indigenous symbol and ritual. Through his writings Geertz

³⁸ *Preston Guardian*, 7 May 1938.



has succeeded in drawing many from related disciplines to this field of cultural interpretation. It has produced, to use Geertz's own term, a 'blurring of genres', with practitioners of the new cultural history especially prominent in applying the Geertzian method. It is a method that directs attention away from the historian's conventional concern with *cause* towards the deciphering of *meaning*. 'Guessing at meanings' -the meanings inscribed by contemporaries in cultural texts and practices- is Geertz's description of his enterprise. Calling upon the inspiration of the great Max Weber, Geertz states that 'man (*sic*) is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning'³⁹.

This statement is made in Geertz's classic and influential essay in which his methodology of 'thick description' is explained and executed. Separating out the surface appearance of an action from its perceived meaning to a contemporary is the fundamental quest. Borrowing from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Geertz illustrates his technique by distinguishing between the blink as an involuntary eye movement, and the wink as a means of conveying a message. It is the anthropologist's job (and so too the cultural historian's) to read such actions for their meaning, to distinguish between the blinks and the winks, and to decode the message of the latter. Thus the job comes to share many of the features of that of the literary critic, teasing out meaning from the text. And it is from literary studies that much of the epistemological provenance of this method derives.

³⁹ The quotation is taken from Clifford GEERTZ's most influential essay 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, NY, Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3-32, (quotation p. 5). But see also, especially for 'significant action', his essay on 'Cultures' in *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 42-63. For other comments on Geertz see: Aletta Biersack, 'Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond', in Lynn Hunt ed., *The New Cultural History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 72-96; and Ronald G Walters, 'Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians', *Social Research*, 47, 1980, pp. 537-56.



The Cup Final narrative provides an instance of such Geertzian symbols. It is a story which includes various strands, essentially the three outlined in the foregoing discussion. The strands relate to cultural rituals that were themselves once independent of the narrative, existing in 'reality' as spectacles and crowd gatherings. But for the historian they now exist only as part of the narrative. Their autonomy has been subsumed within the story told, and what they meant to contemporaries can only be teased out from the text. The text is principally the local press, a vital element in the understanding of identity. Not only is it a vast reservoir for the historian intent of finding out what happened in the past, but of course its own assumptions about what is and what is not significant to report frames the historian's vision of the past. Moreover, like all cultural processes involved in conveying meaning, the local press operated according to conventions of its own making. The Cup Final narrative provides a clear example of this. *How* the story is told is as important as *what* constitutes the story. The fact that the local press reported the Cup Final rituals for over half a century in essentially the same form, reproducing a narrative structure and modes of expressions that had characterised the telling of the story in the past, underlines the point that there was a way of telling the story, a *structure* in which the story existed. It was not a story that could be known outside this structure, any more than thoughts can exist outside a language with which to think them.

By concentrating on this aspect of how the historical 'source' exists, we see that the local press does not simply *reflect* a reality of life that is lived beyond its pages. In its choice of stories and the way it positions its readers to them, and through the very language used, there is an aspect of creativity about the process of reporting the community. In this sense the press *constructs* notions of community as much as it reflects them. In the Cup Final narrative a multiplicity of images of community interrelate, bringing into play ideas of locality, region and nation. The process might be one in which, to use a much-quoted Geertzism, people are telling themselves stories about themselves, but the meaning of the stories has to do with the asserting of a presence and, finally, the making of a statement about the nature of society and how its power relations work.