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## Foreword

*The sense of place is one of those things that is supposed to have died in football, its power dissipated by remote fandom.* (Barney Ronay, *The Guardian*, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

In 1997, the photographer Stuart Roy Clarke opened ‘The Homes of Football’, a gallery dedicated to exhibiting his images of football grounds and fan culture in the UK. Surprisingly, Clarke did not choose to locate his gallery in London or Manchester or Liverpool or Birmingham; instead, he opted for Ambleside, right in the middle of the Lake District National Park. The doors of ‘The Homes of Football’ remained open in Ambleside for fourteen years and, throughout that time, visits to the gallery were characterised by a sense of cognitive dissonance – to step out of the rain and into ‘The Homes of Football’ was to be transported to an imaginative elsewhere. Visitors were invited to momentarily block out the Cumbrian landscape of rocks and screes, tarns and becks, and to focus instead on photographic reminders of the places from which they’d travelled and the football grounds that, every other Saturday, they called home.

Looking back, Clarke’s photographs from the 1990s documented a game in flux. His images of top-tier football examined the idiosyncrasies of match-going: burger vans were elevated to the status of street-corner altars, and fans were captured leaving grounds early in order to beat the traffic. In one sense, then, his photographs were concerned with the comforting familiarity of ritual and routine. At the same time, though, Clarke’s wide-angle images of major stadia offered a visual record of elite football’s evolution in the years following the Hillsborough tragedy – a period that also witnessed the Murdoch-fuelled formation of the FA Premier League in England.

Although Clarke recorded the top levels of British football, however, some of his most memorable photographs were warmly attentive to the lower league game: unvarnished worlds in which sheds served as ticket offices in car parks and Portakabins doubled up as licensed bars. In looking away from the increasing sheen of the elite game, Clarke captured the messy materiality of watching football – and especially football in the north of England – on a habitual basis.

In this book, Steve Leach explores similar imaginative – and often geographical – territory to Clarke’s photographs. He presents a world of meat-and-potato pies and difficult-to-describe club mascots, standing room paddocks and hyper-local sponsors. The book opens with a Contents page that reads like Johnny Cash’s *I’ve Been Everywhere* reimagined by Victoria Wood: for Reno, Chicago and Fargo, read Manchester, Barrow and Morecambe. Steve then compiles a personal

footballing map that weaves together autobiographical reflection, topographical description, local history and socio-political commentary. And, in doing so, he opens up thinking about the rich relationships between clubs and the landscapes and communities in which they are rooted.

Along the way, Steve reflects on our sense of place in a number of original and revealing ways. First, he captures the sense of embodied physicality – of both fans and players – that is present in so many of Stuart Roy Clarke’s photographs. Food and drink invariably figure prominently in the match-day experience and journeymen players are watched from close proximity.

Second, he draws upon his professional expertise to look at how local politics – and, more specifically, local authority boundary changes – can intersect with the lives of football clubs in the construction of a sense of place. When visiting the Globe Arena, to give just one example, he reflects on the loss of civic identity suffered when, in 1974, the town of Morecambe ceased to be a local authority in its own right and was absorbed into Lancaster City Council.

Third, he considers how football clubs and communities are affected by events and changes in the wider world. The focus on the near-at-hand does not preclude discussion of national politics and, saliently, the spectre of Thatcher haunts much of this book. Steve is similarly alert to the fact that, in the twenty-first century, the local and the national are invariably and inextricably intertwined with the global. Reflecting on the severing of his lifelong relationship with Manchester City, he asserts that he ‘didn’t want to be part of a world of football dominated by global capitalist institutions’; but, later on in the book, he registers that, just down the road, even Macclesfield Town is now owned by the Iraqi-based Alkadhi brothers.

By moving from club to club, and town to town, Steve offers an intriguing new style of writing about the concepts of self, football and place. Many books about life as a football supporter – some of which have emerged out of the culture of fanzine writing that Steve himself enjoys – understandably concentrate on the articulation of a deep-rooted affinity with the one club. Perhaps the most celebrated example is Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch* (1993), in which the protagonist uses his love of Arsenal as a means of coping with the complexities of life. Another is *A Season with Verona* (2002): a non-fictional text in which Tim Parks documents a year spent following Hellas Verona all over Italy. Both these books interrogate what it means to steadfastly support *a* team that is rooted in *a* particular place. In different ways, therefore, both books are concerned with the assertion of what might be described as authentic insidership. But in *Twenty Football Towns*, Steve reflects on a life of relative footballing promiscuity. Instead of digging deep into a monogamous relationship with just one club, he considers what it means to have had affairs – of differing lengths and intensities – with twenty different teams.

As a result, this book makes a strikingly original contribution to the library of football fan literature. At the same time, and perhaps more surprisingly, the book offers an intervention in the ever-expanding field of contemporary place writing. As the shelves of our bookshops testify, there has been, over the past two decades, a proliferation of creative non-fictional books that take place as their principal preoccupation: from the psychogeographic wanderings of Iain Sinclair to the ‘new nature writing’ of Kathleen Jamie; from the memoirs of Amy Liptrot to the deep mappings of Rachel Lichtenstein. Through the artful braiding of a range of literary genres, many of these books defy conventional categorisation. As a result, the label ‘place writing’ has emerged as a helpfully malleable term to describe a wide range of books for which no existing label readily exists. *Twenty Football Towns*, then, can be framed, I would argue, as a work of place writing. It is a reading that is supported by the blunt directness of the book’s opening two-word sentence: ‘Place matters.’

Steve contends ‘that there is much more about “going to the match” than the match itself’. In a similar way, then, *Twenty Football Towns* is much more than ‘about’ football grounds. Read as an act of place writing, the book opens up thinking about the role that football can play in the shaping of geographical experience. Much place writing is vulnerable to the critique that it makes a virtue of solitariness. The routine of ‘going to the match’, though, is predicated on the sharedness of space, and this sense of communality is most evident on the terraces and in the stands. But it actually begins way outside the ground: as Steve makes clear, the practice of getting to the match – by public transport and/or on foot – involves the individual forming part of the collective. As with much contemporary place writing, walking does feature in *Twenty Football Towns*; but, even when Steve recounts walking alone, he inevitably finds himself being swept along, with hundreds of others, by the gravitational pull of the ground. The process of journeying to the match, therefore, can lead to a momentary transformation of our cities, towns, and even edgelands, into sites of communality. It is probably only football, for instance, that could entice busloads of people out to the ‘industrial wastelands’ of Stoke-on-Trent on a predictably wet November evening. It would be disingenuous, of course, to ignore the fact that football culture is also founded upon crude binary oppositions and even raw tribalism. Steve reminds us, however, that the ritualistic practice of match-going also allows the supporter to break out of bubbles of isolation, if only for the afternoon or evening, and to experience place as part of a collective.

In presenting place in this way, Steve shares some common ground with a fellow Mancunian: the geographer Doreen Massey, who, in spite of spending much of her childhood in Wythenshawe,

was a passionate Liverpool supporter up until her death in 2016. In an influential book chapter published in the 1990s, Massey argued that ‘what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus’. Steve Leach – in writing about Accrington and Kidderminster, Gateshead and Fylde – offers the reader an analogous understanding of place and its meanings. As a result, the autobiographical reflections of *Twenty Football Towns* go some way to explaining why, in the Lake District – a landscape that, for many, is seemingly ‘remote from every taint / Of sordid industry’ – tourists found themselves being drawn into a gallery to look at photographs of the shared, intimate spaces of their footballing homes.

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