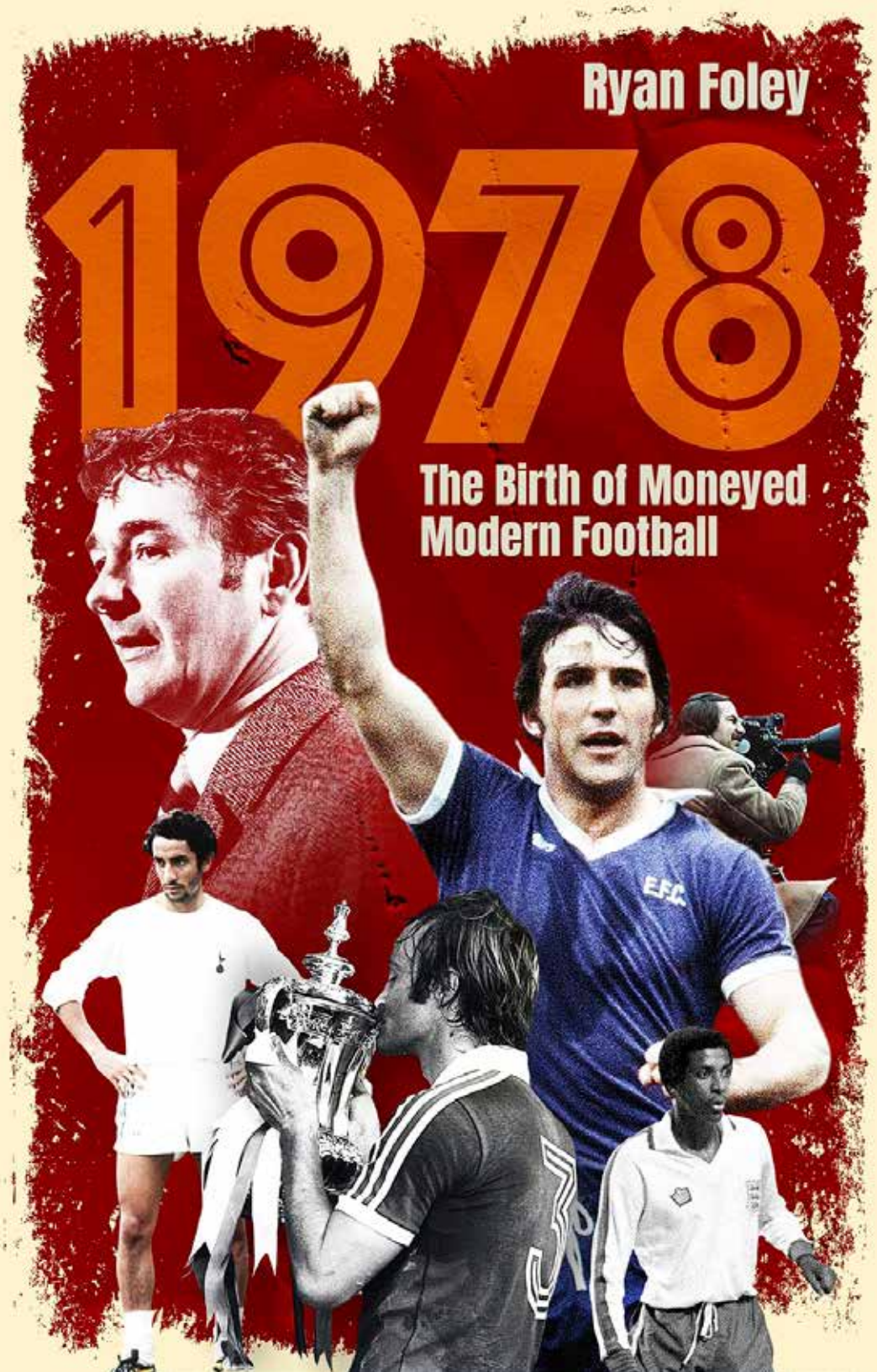
Ryan Foley

1978

The Birth of Moneyed Modern Football



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pitch

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‘Ring Out the Old By All Means’

1978 arrived like all new years: fresh, untouched, flush with promise and opportunity, the preceding months’ ills already buried, a blank page to be emblazoned and blotted with the ink of history. Church bells tolled and voices lifted in song.

In the capital, the New Year’s forecast called for cloudy skies with bright intervals, moderate, westerly winds and temperatures near ten degrees C. Similarly mild weather was expected in East Anglia, the Midlands and the North West. All 22 First Division football clubs, on the final stretch of the always gruelling Christmas programme, kicked off in favourable playing conditions.

On the front pages of major daily newspapers, the daring escape of banned South African journalist and anti-apartheid activist Donald Woods jostled for room above the fold with the announcement of a meeting between US president Jimmy Carter and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat regarding the Middle East peace process. Less news space was dedicated to World Cup organisers stating that fewer than one in five tickets for that summer’s finals in Argentina had been sold and the Sex Pistols’ declaration that they would not modify their rakish behaviour during their upcoming American tour.

Prime minister James Callaghan categorised 1978 as a ‘year of recovery’ and optimistically predicted a treble of economic wins for the English people: extensive tax cuts,

improvements in public services and a continuing decline in inflation. 'Big tasks lie ahead of us,' the prime minister stated in his New Year message, 'but now we can face them with hope and confidence. If there is unremitting effort, we shall be successful.'

Callaghan was conspicuously quiet on the topics of race and immigration, two of the biggest domestic political issues facing his premiership. The first day of England's 'year of recovery' brought headlines of fresh violence against London's black communities. A bookshop in Ealing, west London, was vandalised, the latest in a string of attacks on black left-wing and community relations offices. The previous year, firebombs destroyed dozens of bookshops and offices while employees were regularly assaulted.

'The New Year promises to be one of the most crucial in Britain's history,' opened a piece in the 1 January edition of the *Sunday Telegraph*, succinctly capturing the national mood of apprehension and anticipation. For those who lived through 1977's drift toward chaos, 1978 proved to be the tumultuous payoff. The year was undeniably a crucial one: in matters of employment, inflation, wages and workers' strikes, music and pop culture and – inconsequential to countless many, life or death to countless more – matters related to the game of football.

1978 transpired unlike any other year in the nine-decade-old English Football League. Twelve months equally extraordinary and transformative – one year that burst with the language, emotions and scenes of a grand narrative as tumultuous as it was ambitious. 'Ring out the old by all means,' went the opening to Alan Road's obituary for 1977 in the New Year's Day edition of *The Guardian*. 'The year was scarcely a vintage one for English soccer.' Midnight bells ushered out the past; thunderous fireworks welcomed the future.

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The pair of matches were fitting bookends to 1978: the opener blackened by a nightmare of violence, supporter behaviour once more overshadowing performances on the pitch; the closer a landmark victory, for what it represented and for what it promised, that left spectators in football dreamland. A pair of matches that demonstrated how the sport was being pulled in separate directions, an existential struggle that threatened to fracture the Football League as it lurched and roared towards its centennial anniversary. One match represented normalised violence, male aggression, fear, lost youth. 'Blood and thunder' football – not on the pitch but outside grounds and on the terraces. The other represented progress, modernity, new energy, a football revolution. The beautiful game done even more beautifully.

On 7 January, a third-round FA Cup tie between hosts Leeds United and Manchester City was halted for nearly 15 minutes while mounted police and stewards cleared hundreds of home spectators from the area behind the visiting side's goal. Only a handful of fans broke through the phalanx of security but the massive disturbance was considered by many associated with Leeds to be the worst in their history – no small achievement for a club that had earned a reputation in the 1970s for crowd trouble.

The unchecked passion and intensity exhibited by the two opposing sides was seemingly disregarded by a sizeable contingent of uninterested supporters, who channelled their negative energies into acts of disorder and violence. The events of 7 January were merely the latest evidence that football was a secondary interest to a worryingly large number of matchday spectators.

Eleven months later, on the second-to-last day of the year, West Bromwich Albion's supporter satisfaction levels approached all-time highs following an instant

classic match at Manchester United. The Baggies' 5-3 victory was an exhibition in creative link-up play, sheer pace, clinical finishing and improvised genius. And at the heart of everything West Brom did that grey, frigid day were the club's three black stars: Brendon Batson, Laurie Cunningham and Cyrille Regis – awkwardly nicknamed 'The Three Degrees' after the popular black female vocal group. Years later, Albion manager Ron Atkinson spoke of how only United goalkeeper Gary Bailey's stellar performance kept the scoreline respectable: 'Without him, we might have scored anything between eight and ten.'

The West Brom trio was a great leap forward, an important chapter in the development of black professional footballers in England. Prior to Batson, Cunningham and Regis, a black player was typically an isolated figure in an all-white starting XI. Albion were the first high-profile club to regularly field three black footballers at the same time.

'By the turn of the year memories of the previous 12 months have become fused, in some cases confused,' wrote *The Guardian*'s David Lacey in his end-of-year review the day before the United–Albion match. 'The game seems to move on at an ever-increasing pace … There will not be much time to linger on memories of 1978 but some will never fade.'

Whether extraordinary, shocking or otherwise, some memories have, indeed, never faded.

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Between these bookends was an obscure, short-lived competition in which both systems – the essentially unchangeable established order of things versus the grand yet chaotic march of slow and fitful progress – neither collided nor clashed but quietly and comfortably co-existed.

This was the Debenhams Cup, in only its second iteration during the 1977/78 season. Only Third Division, Fourth Division and non-league sides were eligible to qualify and the mix of tiny clubs from provincial towns and amateur and semi-professional teams gave the competition an antiquated, 19th-century feel.

At the same time, much like its 1970s predecessors the Watney Cup and the Texaco Cup, the competition carried a sponsor – years ahead of the First Division and more than a decade before the FA Cup. The deal negotiated between Debenhams sales director and the FA secretary, Ted Croker, pointed towards an era of ever-present corporate sponsorships and advertising.

The two-leg final of this modern-meets-vintage tournament pitted non-league Blyth Spartans, fresh off their historic FA Cup run, against Third Division champions Wrexham. After Blyth won the first match on the road, more than 5,300 fans crowded into Croft Park for the 18 May return leg. Dave Varty put the home side in front after 20 minutes, the team's 153rd goal of the season. The visitors equalised in the 68th minute but did not threaten again. The 1-1 draw gave the Spartans the newly minted trophy and £7,000 in prize money.

Competitions emblazoned with the names of popular brands, matches halted for crowd disturbances, black players standing up to institutional racism – the tectonic plates of English football were shifting, right underneath the feet of unruly Leeds United supporters, triumphant West Bromwich Albion players, Debenhams executives, FA secretary Croker and anyone else associated with the game. English football had undoubtedly evolved since the Football League's founding on 17 April 1888, but during the 12 momentous months of 1978, the rate of advance increased considerably. Every week, every day, every match,

supporters, players, managers, executives and the media were knowing and unknowing participants in a seismic upheaval that forever changed the sport.

None of this was novel. In years past, events both on the pitch and off it have elevated from mere dates on a calendar to moments of historic transformation. In 1885, 31 clubs from mostly Lancashire and the Midlands threatened to leave the FA and form an independent British Football Association if professionalism was not legalised. The FA relented and passed a code of rules relating to professionals and 'the glorious, effortless superiority of the gentleman amateur', as David Goldblatt wrote in *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Soccer*, 'was crushed by the relentless forces of modernity'.

In 1925, with goalscoring down, attendances lagging and match stoppages on the uptick, the International Board, dominated by the FA and the other three home associations, amended the offside rule. The required number of defending players in between a forward and the goal for the attacker to be considered onside was reduced from three to two. Goals were scored in abundance during the second half of this year – never more evident than on 29 August when Aston Villa thrashed Burnley 10-0.

And in 1961 – one of the most landmark of landmark years – the inaugural final of England's newest competition, the League Cup, was contested between Aston Villa and Rotherham United (the former prevailed), Tottenham Hotspur won the first double of the 20th century and the maximum wage was abolished, dismantling a system in which club owners retained enormous gate receipts and put little into the pockets of the individuals responsible for the game's massive crowds – the players.

1978 was another year of profound transformations, only this time it was louder, thornier, more disruptive, more

chaotic. A wave of powerful change opposed by a deeply entrenched old order – two colliding and conflicting forces that pulled English football in separate directions. One would drag the other kicking and screaming into a new age; the other would yank the sport backwards and into the abyss.

Nearly 50 years later, from the comfortable vantage point of the present, it is evident which side was pressing higher and desperately chasing a goal. In a year of wonders and horrors, the game's participants and observers were moved to ecstasy more regularly than they were divided by acts of extremism. The old order did not prevent a new age from dawning.

A club with a 'bollocks-to-'em' attitude secured an improbable First Division title. On Europe's biggest stage, a beautifully disguised chipped goal from the Scottish forward with the 'big arse' sent the red half of Merseyside into rapture – continuing what would be an eight-year run of dominance for English clubs in the top continental club competition. A non-league side from a downtrodden Northumberland port put a fresh spin on the timeworn tale of 'minnows make good'. The manager in charge for the greatest day in English football history returned to club action, proudly steadied the ship of a struggling West Midlands side and then, as quickly as he arrived, departed the game forever. A Nottingham Forest star described by a team-mate as 'one of the best full-backs there has ever been' broke the English national team's colour barrier. And a Doncaster lad, renowned for his footballing exploits as much as he was for his crown of permed hair and flair for fashion, captured Europe's most prestigious individual award.

Celebrated moments on the pitch were paralleled by revolutionary developments away from it. A pair of

television channels fought to acquire the exclusive rights to football matches and highlights, their confrontation a harbinger of the billion-dollar TV deals familiar to current supporters. Two World Cup-winning Argentinians found a home in north London ('Spurs scoop the world', screamed one headline), injecting the sport's largely British talent pool with a much-needed shot of foreign flair. And the European Economic Community announced that footballers had the freedom to play in whichever of the nine member countries they wished, setting English football on the path to becoming the multi-national sport it is today.

Maverick stars, revered trailblazers, illustrious managers, legendary trophy-winning sides, apocalyptic showdowns on the pitch, developments that changed the very fabric of the game – taken together, they make 1978 the most transformative 12 months of the league's first century. 1978 is the axis, the year in which the sport turned – impressively, inevitably and, for some, regrettably – from the grand old game to Moneyed Modern Football. Among the sport's diehards, there was a growing awareness that the league was becoming an enormous corporate entity, not unlike Debenhams or British Steel, even as they vehemently supported their clubs and lost themselves in the sport's scarcely diminished pleasures.

1978: The Birth of Moneyed Modern Football is the tumultuous yet captivating story of this magical year, when new clashed with old, madness gave way to genius, innovation collided with custom and a tiny Northumberland club achieved improbable cup glory.