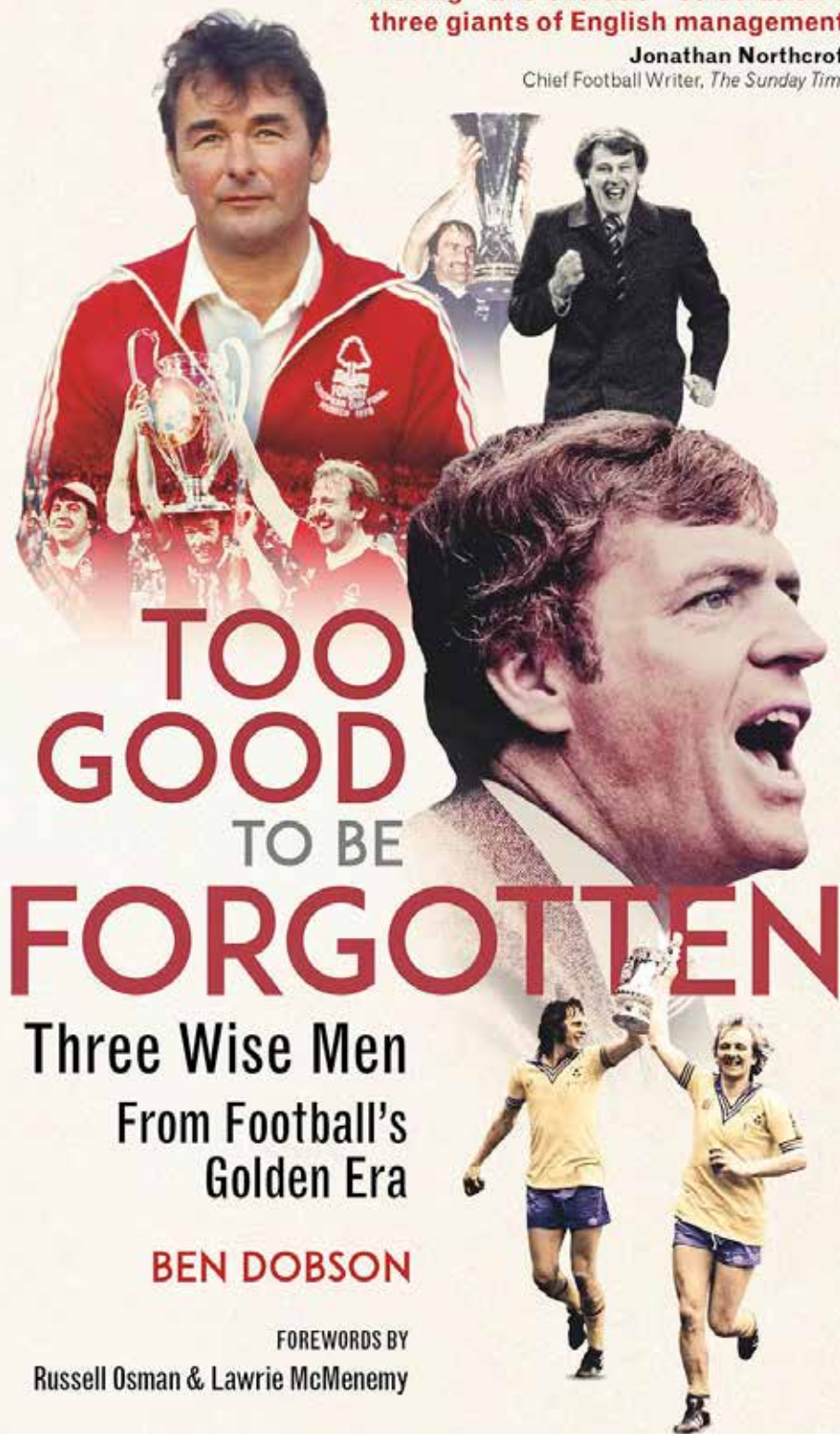


*'A loving – and overdue– celebration of  
three giants of English management,  
whose shared background and  
values brought days of wonder to three  
provincial clubs'*

Jonathan Northcroft *The Sunday Times*

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three giants of English management.'

Jonathan Northcroft,  
Chief Football Writer, *The Sunday Times*



# TOO GOOD TO BE FORGOTTEN

Three Wise Men  
From Football's  
Golden Era

**BEN DOBSON**

FOREWORDS BY

Russell Osman & Lawrie McMenemy

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## In the Blood

*'For those of us born in the north-east it was accepted that football would be a vital part of our lives. Football was in our blood, and we were helpless victims.'*

Lawrie McMenemy

On a good day you can travel from the Teesside town of Middlesbrough, through the village of Sacriston in County Durham, and on to Gateshead, Tyne & Wear in about an hour. Your fuel outlay might be about £1.60 as you covered the 40 miles. Should you choose to take this journey you would be visiting, whether you were aware of it or not, the birthplaces of three remarkable football men – three proud sons of the north-east of England whose characters and beliefs were formed in that place through their humble upbringings, and whose pride in this never left them.

'As soon as you can walk in this area you just *have to* love football.' Alan Shearer, one of its more successful sons, said this of the North East. My own father, born in Cullercoats, told stories of what it meant to him to stand with my grandad on the Gallowgate terraces watching Jackie Milburn and George Robledo. When the area was dominated by the uncompromising, physically draining industries of mining and shipbuilding, the game was the release for the working men who had little access to, or time or inclination for, any other pastime that might act as their beacon through the honest

but piteous toil of their week. It gave a depth to their passion bordering on love for the clubs whose role it was to provide them with that respite. There was an obligation on the clubs to give them entertainment as the oxygen for their sacrificial lungs and the success that would gladden their hearts. To them that success was more of a necessity sought with desperation, rather than an occasional happy dividend for their lifelong investment. Once those industries started to disappear, leaving some of the most depressed post-industrial landscapes and stranded communities of good people anywhere in the country, the importance of the clubs became even more pronounced, now as the only vehicles that could offer those communities a sense of pride and a feeling of belonging to set against the sense of decay.

It's perhaps therefore no great surprise that, while there's no monopoly on or geographical stipulation regarding passion for a football club, many would agree that as you proceed south down the country – certainly into the rural shires – the intensity of that attachment and the critical part it plays in so many lives lessens slightly. If you want to take issue with this, I have a reasonable ally in Brian Clough himself, who wrote: 'When I was growing up in the north-east, football was a religion. It was in the blood. Even today, the game generates more passion amongst the folk of that region than anywhere else in the country.'

There's an obvious parallel here with the industrial Scotland of those three kings, Stein, Shankly and Busby, which fed the toughness, the values, the relationships with communities and ultimately the management styles that were the hallmarks of both groups of three. The experiences and hardships in the upbringings that formed the characters and beliefs of the three Glaswegians were precisely those that also moulded McMenemy, Clough and Robson a quarter of a century on. Small wonder that McMenemy should draw the comparison that he did many years later, or that there was a friendship and

respect between them all based on a shared understanding, which needed no words for its affirmation. There was a kinship between the North East towns and cities and their near neighbours north of Hadrian's Wall and that brotherhood took on a paternal element as the baton of successful football management was handed on. There's more than coincidence to the fact that the high percentage of successful managers from Scotland over several decades has been replicated – particularly in the 70s and 80s – in those hailing from Tyneside, Wearside, Teesside and County Durham.

Of course, the game has changed and become truly globalised, for better or worse depending on one's opinion. At the time of writing, of the teams occupying the top half of the Premier League, seven out of ten have managers hailing from outside Britain, supplemented by two Englishmen (from the West Midlands and the Home Counties) and one Scot. (Since, in the course of writing this book, so far, 12 managers in the Premier League have lost their jobs, this is bound to be inaccurate by the time it sees the light of day, but I doubt the percentages will have moved much in favour of the home nations in the meantime.)

Consider then ... Bob Paisley, Brian Clough, Bobby Robson, John Barnwell, Lawrie McMenemy, John Neal and Jimmy Adamson. At the end of the 1979/80 season, the heart of our timeframe, of those 11 clubs that finished in the top half of the First Division, seven – *SEVEN* – had managers who were natives of England's north-east. To that you can add the name of Stan Anderson at Bolton further down the table. This not only confirms the breeding ground of top-class coaches that existed in this part of the country, but also a certain comradeship and mutual understanding between these managers of the time, which in turn produced a network of contacts and working relationships that were to prove important to each of them in matters ranging from transfers to personal support and advice.

For Clough, Robson and McMenemy the shared background is as significant as it was for the proud Scotsmen who preceded them. Their lifelong passion for their native area and its people and the values instilled in them by both family and community gave them all a conviction never to forget their roots and many shared beliefs that translated into a similar style of man-management, and that were to prove, in each case, the fundamental pillars of their success. When McMenemy was asked, on a scouting trip back to Newcastle in the late 70s, to divert to do a brief piece with local television, he notes in *The Diary of a Season* that he immediately agreed as ‘this is my country, and these are my people’.

In Robson’s case, he recalls:

It was Dad who introduced me to the football addiction which was so rampant in the north-east – he bled black and white – and I became one of the pilgrims who flocked to St James’ Park every other Saturday. Those trips provided the inspiration for me. This was the game I loved, on an immense stage, watched by huge legions of Geordies, all willing Newcastle on. This was the passion that was to animate my life.

Robson was to ensure it animated many other lives too, a legacy of which he would be justifiably proud.

Brian Scovell of the *Daily Mail* wrote back in 1979 that most of the 92 Football League club managers were more famed for being sacked than anything else and that the standouts from the few successful ones were McMenemy, Clough, Robson and Paisley. He noted all were ‘Geordies’ (perhaps not strictly true by the local definition but the point is understood) and people who had a tough upbringing in one of England’s less-wealthy areas: ‘Their breeding and background seem to have given them the mental capacity to withstand the strains of one of the hardest jobs in sport.’ Such inbred



resilience would allow each to overcome significant challenges and to impose their authority where it was sorely needed.

That the three men should also be born within three and a half years of each other, in the depressed pre-war decade of the 1930s, is just the first example of the striking accordance of timing that runs through their stories. The spartan but happy nature of their formative years in such a time of austerity meant they each cherished the social fabric of a community, as well as the value of a pound note, and in the end they took pride and satisfaction when reflecting that what they achieved in football with these homespun clubs made its own extremely positive contribution to a similar sense of social cohesion.

Tony Woodcock, one of the strikers Clough inherited at Forest and was within three years turned into the Young Player of the Year, reveals how this belief was something the manager always wanted his players to understand: ‘Cloughie was big on saying you had to be *generous*. He didn’t mean with money, he meant with your time and your approach to the supporters and the community.’ That philosophy, more than just the results and the trophies, is the thing most valued by its beneficiaries.

By the time they were done, each manager had become attached to these places in a way they may not have anticipated, developing an affection and an affinity for the places and their people, the ultimate demonstration being the fact that all three made their long-term homes there even after they departed the clubs themselves and despite the call of their beloved North East. It was not by chance that Sir Bobby’s forever home in the Suffolk countryside was named ‘Durham House’, but he would later say, ‘I wouldn’t have lived in this town for 33 years if I didn’t know what the people of Suffolk were. It’s my second home.’

Robson, McMenemy and Clough did indeed become adopted by other places, but they were inspired and driven career-long by what the North East had given them, and the influence that it had on them was the driving force behind what was to come.

## Real Life

*'My values stemmed from the family. Anything I have achieved in my life has been rooted in my upbringing. Such an upbringing relied heavily on discipline. What happens in the home affects you for the rest of your life.'*

Brian Clough

He gave you standards – from how you turned up to how he expected you to appear on the pitch. He would tell me every time I left the dressing room to tuck my bloody shirt in. These may seem small things, but they were all part of making us what we were. And I believe Cloughie and Lawrie Mac were the same. If you ever started to slacken off, Bobby would pull you in and say, 'You could be working down the fucking mines ... go to Lowestoft, have a look at the trawlers and see if you fancy being out there.' I heard it was the same with Lawrie at Southampton with all the dockers and so on. Bobby reminded you back then that it was a working-class game – the people coming to support you had worked hard all week and 'if you aren't prepared to put a shift in, you're letting them down'.

Russell Osman's recollections of the values that underpinned the management of the three north-easterners, and how they were formed, are echoed by the then Southampton midfielder Steve Williams. He too references the demographic of a good

proportion of their supporter base and that there was a mutual understanding in his manager's relationship with the local dockers, which fed down to their players: 'These are pretty straightforward people and what they expect to see from their players is people breaking their backs and giving one hundred per cent. That was their own experience in life. If you did that, you might eventually get the reward of a bunch of them chanting your name.'

The industrial heartlands of the north-east of England didn't offer the most beatific of landscapes or many homes stocked with creature comforts. Life was real; it was hard. The people who lived it were hard too, which in this context conveys resilience, plain-speaking and no-nonsense folk who suffered no fools and had little truck with airs and graces. These character traits were passed through families and they became every bit as ingrained in Lawrie McMenemy, Brian Clough and Bobby Robson as they were in their parents. But 'hard' does not imply 'uncaring'. There was much love within their homes and families. All three would consider their upbringings happy ones – they had no frame of reference to which they might compare them negatively – and the value they placed on family for the rest of their lives was born of the happiness and mutual support they enjoyed in those years.

Together-ness is a theme that will reoccur later when their players talk of the greatest gift these managers bestowed – an ability to create an environment from less glamorous beginnings, which would foster a group capable of attaining heights transcending the sum of the players' individual talents. This is surely where that ability was incubated. Such communities as these understood that without a hard-work ethic and an inner strength and determination to survive, however tough the circumstances, you would amount to nothing. There was little sympathy for those who would rather moan about their lot than make the very best of it. All three shared career-long disdain for those they considered 'slackers'

at their football clubs and there were to be visible consequences of such attitudes in the years ahead.

Bobby Robson experienced life down in the hellhole that was the mine at Langley Park, Durham, as a 15-year-old – something beyond comprehension in today’s football world. This chilling baptism and education in real life provided a reference point for him throughout his time in football. He told a story of insisting much later on taking his gentlemen board of directors at Ipswich down a mine in the East Midlands to impress on his employers how fortunate they were. Robson’s roots would be a core part of his approach to management, his abhorrence of any players he felt weren’t giving their all, or were taking their privileged positions for granted, and his insistence that his own belief in discipline, respect and courtesy, both among themselves and with the wider public, should be adopted and reflected by his players. His empathy with the working-class supporter was born of his experience with his father on the Gallowgate and, as Tony Woodcock said of Clough, he wanted his players to understand it, embrace it and demonstrate it. It was the result of everything he experienced in Langley Park. He remained a man of the people throughout his career – the idea of the current incumbent England manager travelling on the tube and chatting to the public is probably far-fetched, but Robson considered it a privilege.

Ah, the haircuts. Apparently insignificant things mattered, and a constant crusade against the long hair of the youth of the day was just another manifestation of a set of values born of the post-war years for three men who remained short-back-and-sides managers in an era of perms and mullets. Osman confirms that Robson was forever telling players to get their hair cut in the manner of a certain type of deputy headmaster familiar to many of us brought up in those years. Appearance mattered because to them it spoke of the discipline and respect they valued so highly – it was a matter of standards. The

former Northern Ireland international, and later manager, Bryan Hamilton, was a key member of Robson's first team that evolved out of the early relegation battles, and he saw at first-hand how his manager's values influenced him and whence they came: 'I think you've touched on something there. I met Bobby's mother and father, and they were the nicest people in the world – solid, high standards, high morals.'

Another rather successful football manager, and another successor to 'the Three Kings' who had also been born and brought up in Glasgow, one Alex Ferguson, reinforces Hamilton's view. Ferguson credits Robson with a huge amount of support and advice during his own climb to the top of the game and got to know the essence of his mentor: 'The foundation he got through his parents, his mining district, and working-class people. Those values never left him.'

Lawrie McMenemy's own character was formed by both his upbringing (and its location in steadfastly working-class Gateshead), and by National Service and his two years spent in the Coldstream Guards. It gave him a strength and a will: 'Gateshead taught me the need to survive, and the Guards taught me how.' This not only had benefits for him as an individual, but ultimately as a manager of men. His army days, he said, taught him discipline but also gave him the confidence to stand in front of a group and coax the best out of them. His former captain Mick Channon remembers the standards upon which he insisted: 'He used to rule by fear with the kids, who were frightened to death of him. It was real army-style discipline. The baths had to be sparkling, the showers immaculately clean and the toilets spotless.'

Clough made famous his 'Mam's' mangle – even giving it its own chapter in his memoirs. The reason this object resided in his own living room for the rest of his life was, he advised, to remind him of whence he came and the sacrifices that had been made on his behalf. For in none of the three households did anything come easy – everything was earned and such

matters as respect and doing things the right way were taken as read. Clough's formative years relied heavily on discipline and routine and his father always commanded his respect. Robson's father was a miner, McMenemy's a caretaker, and Clough's was employed in the local sweet factory. Such humble beginnings left each with an understandable taste for the good things in life when they came along (the lack of sunshine holidays in their childhoods may have been the seed that germinated into so many of those mid-season breaks with their teams in later years – particularly beloved of Clough), and also a lasting appreciation of the value of such fruits of success and ultimately a pride that this allowed each of them, in return, to look after their own in the years that followed.

If the location in which they spent their early years played a significant part in building a set of beliefs, the timing was equally relevant. Born in that depressed decade of the 1930s they were perhaps too young to experience Churchill's 'gathering storm' of the approach of war, but each lived as children through the most chilling and brutal conflict in modern history. In an area of important industrial production, not least shipbuilding, living through it is the right description. At times it would have been at their front doors. Those who experienced the dangers and privations of such a period would understandably have a different perspective to today's adolescents about the precious nature of life, stoicism and the value as well as the costs of everyday life. As the child of a mother whose teenage years were those of post-war austerity and rationing – the relief of victory having given way to the realities of its aftermath – I viewed at first-hand the discipline and insistence on good housekeeping and a lack of waste such an experience instilled. It's not too fanciful to suggest this was something that would in time influence how Robson and McMenemy, in particular, managed their clubs' finances with a sense of personal as well as professional responsibility.

So, the building blocks were cemented by an education in life experience, but to translate this to football success would also require an additional grounding in values relating to coaching and management. In this there was to be another shared experience – this time linking McMenemy and Clough specifically. Even those who become renowned for a management style of complete autonomy, and who develop an aura of utter belief, need mentors. In this case it would be one shared mentor. It should come as no surprise that it was another foundation built in the North East. Both men named one man as more responsible than any other for their early coaching development and their ultimate management philosophy. That man was Alan Brown.

Clough was the first to benefit. Not always one to accept the authority of others readily, particularly those he felt weren't up to the mark, Clough remembered how Brown, as manager of Sunderland, broke a holiday to come and find him personally to sign him for the club (the personal touch another tactic that would be employed by all three men in the future to secure the players they most wanted): 'Aware of my new gaffer's strict, straight, and honest reputation, there was immediate respect. It was Alan Brown who taught me about discipline – the value of decent behaviour which was to become the hallmark of my own teams.' It's not hard to see a direct reflection of Clough in Brown when he said of him, 'There were occasions when I was downright scared of the man. He detested shabby clothing and always insisted his players had a trim. I know that I carried his influence and sprinkled it through the game for a long time. Alan Brown was not simply my manager; he was my mentor.'

McMenemy immediately followed Clough under Brown's wing. He and Brown had first connected while the latter was still at Sunderland and McMenemy manager at Bishop Auckland. When Brown departed the North East for Sheffield Wednesday in 1964 his first move was to offer McMenemy a

coaching role. The mentorship this was to provide McMenemy was hugely significant to his future story. Alan Brown would change his life. That Brown was from Northumberland was a touchpoint between them that, as with Clough, sparked instant trust and respect. McMenemy remembers him as the strongest personality he had ever known.

What specifically, other than an ahead-of-his-time approach to coaching referenced by McMenemy, did Brown pass on to his charges? A belief that there's no success without discipline was high on the list. 'Discipline is crucial and paramount in working with a large football squad. Alan was very big on discipline – it was part of everything he did. He had the unmistakable air of a leader about him,' said McMenemy. This characteristic would make a huge impression on both him and Clough and build an understanding of the essential component that strong leadership would be in their own personalities and management of men. By contrast, in Bob Harris's view, Robson didn't have a mentor in quite the same way and instead he built his own style, although he was very close to and learned much from Don Howe from their days at West Brom through to their partnership with England many years later.

All these elements – family background, upbringing, their respective early experiences of real life, whether it be down a mine shaft or on the parade grounds of National Service, then their first years in management and their sackings – cultivated a pride, a drive and determination, and a power of personality. The aura each subsequently carried with them was a huge part of their ability to manage. US Army General Norman Schwarzkopf once said, 'Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character, but if you must be without one, be without the strategy.' Character was something Robson, McMenemy and Clough would display in abundance and develop in their players in due course as one of the most important elements in their effective team building.



In time their power of personality was to become so instantly recognisable and associated with them that they became almost caricatures. But if ever that strength of character was to be tested to its limits, it was on their arrivals at Southampton, Ipswich and Nottingham Forest respectively and what they found waiting for them in the dark days before the dawn.

What their upbringings taught them never left them: a belief in the value of family and support and the importance of community; a determination to remember their roots and a desire that those in their charge as players should appreciate and act upon this too; that trust and honesty were the cornerstones of respect; that discipline and good manners were non-negotiables that cost nothing; that you get nowhere without strength of character, the utmost conviction, a willingness to fight and an unwavering belief in oneself. If their success had a recipe, then these were the base ingredients. Their essential values were established at the outset, were never neglected and would sustain them through, and allow them to outlast, the early tribulations and go on to greatness.