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Flawed Heroes: exploring biographies of Scottish footballers

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1 This paper focuses on the lives of two Scottish footballers – Jim Baxter and George Connelly – using the biography of the former and the ghost written autobiography of the latter in an attempt to understand the two men in relation to their social and spatial contexts.

2 The flawed heroes of Scottish sport (Slim Jim, p. 5)

2 Why celebrity sport biographies as opposed the stories of less gifted physically active people which are certainly increasingly addressed by qualitative researchers? Populist, sensational even, and ultimately unreliable, as sources for the sociological analysis of sport?

3 According to de Certeau (1988: xxi), the reader of a novel (and here let us substitute the words ‘celebrity biography’) may be likened to someone who rents a house insofar as s/he makes texts ‘habitable’ and, in so doing, ‘transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient’.

4 Sport, Celebrity and Place. What makes a sports star a sports celebrity? Why is place so significant in relation to the experiences of people who play and watch sport?
5 Baxter 1939-2001 Retired from football in 1970 although arguably his career was in decline from 1965 when he left Rangers Football Club for Sunderland despite an outstanding performance in 1967 when Scotland beat the reigning world champions England at Wembley. 359 senior professional appearances, 34 caps for Scotland.

6 Connelly Born 1949 Retired from football in 1977 although arguably his career ended the year before when he walked away from Celtic Football Club. 144 senior professional appearances.

7 They played against each other only once 13th August, 1969. Apart from careers cut relatively short to a large extent because of their struggles with alcohol, what else did they have in common?

First, even in a country blessed at one time with talented footballers, most fans of a certain age agree would argue that these were two of the best. Second, they came from West Fife as do I – hence, my particular rental of their life stories.

8 (Lost Legend, p. 21, p. 156) (Slim Jim, p. 13) Baxter the coalminer, Connelly the son of a coalminer. But just as the county (or ‘Kingdom’) itself suffers from a split personality so the Fife coalfields had a tendency to produce two very types (albeit both self-destructive) personality types. (Slim Jim, p. 46, p. 90; Lost Legend, p. 209)

9 Baxter revelled in being in the limelight and in being surrounded by fellow drinkers and gamblers. To use a Scottish word, he was ‘gallus’. Connelly found it hard to cope with the
constant attention and adoration, regularly leaving training with Celtic to go home or at least to his local pub. (Slim Jim, p. 33; Lost Legend, p. 53, p. 104, p. 127, p. 198)

10 Alex Ferguson when connecting on Baxter seeks to generalise about Fifers and their relationship with alcohol. What he fails to recognise, however, (and here’s where the rental of these men’s lives is important) is that this relationship manifests itself in different ways.

11 As far as this reader is concerned, Connelly is the more typical product of the Fife coalfield who would answer the question ‘How are you?’ with the reply, ‘You see it’.

12 Conclusion: It would be easy to turn both of these life stories into cautionary morality tales but my personal rental of the biographies lead me to believe that they tell us a great deal about a certain place at a certain stage in its social and economic development as well as about two exceptional footballers. Baxter always a Fifer (Slim Jim, ‘He remained a Fifer in accent and attitude for the whole of his life’) but more than that (Slim Jim, p. 13, p. 259). Connelly also a legend but arguably more than that i.e. the real Fifer? (Lost Legend, p. 209).