A History of the British Sporting Journalist, c.1850-1939

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James Catton, Sports Reporter

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To the memory of my parents
Kathleen and Arthur Tate

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This book has been several years in the writing and so, naturally, the debts have accrued. Primarily, I would like to thank the staffs, both customer-facing and backroom, at the myriad libraries and archives I have consulted over the years in search of evidence of the nineteenth and twentieth century reporter. The sheer number visited precludes a full listing here, but the following have played a significant part in helping this research reach fruition–the British Newspaper Library; the British Library; Manchester Central Library; Burnley Library; Blackburn and Darwen Libraries; the Arsenal Football Club Museum; the Modern Records Centre, Warwick University; Guildhall Library, London; Nottingham Central Library; the Cox Library, Surrey; the National Football Museum; and Bolton Archives and Local Studies Service. I am indebted to Professors Dave Russell and John Walton, my PhD supervisors, who helped a formative version of this study come together several years ago, along with their colleagues at the University of Central Lancashire who made undergraduate History such an agreeable experience for a mature student. Thanks, too, to Roger Frost who, many years ago, confirmed a dawning realisation by the author at a young age that studying History could be enjoyable and who helped set in motion a lifelong passion for the past. I have enjoyed and benefitted from being a member of the British Society of Sports History and the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals. Attendance at their conferences has been stimulating and productive. On that point, I would like to thank the University Centre at Blackburn College for providing support to attend a number of academic conferences in recent years, together with the opportunity to prepare papers for those conferences and precious time from teaching duties to aid in the writing of this book. Dr Andrew Hobbs, a fellow traveller on the byways of the Victorian press, Dr Alex Jackson, of the National Football Museum, Manchester, and Peter Park, all members of the ad hoc Black Horse History Society, have provided many opportunities for stimulating and enlightening discussion around the topic of this book. To use a sporting metaphor, I feel like I have put in the hard yards on the way to completing this study–30 years as a journalist on daily newspapers in the regional press across the north of England, 10 years teaching in Higher Education and, straddling the two, a deep and lengthy engagement with the archival sources and the texts relevant to the topic. All three strands have, I hope, contributed to a deeper understanding and informed interpretation on my part of the history of the sports reporter.

INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of the British sports reporter from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The period covers the emergence of a vibrant, commercially-driven sporting industry alongside the inexorable rise of the behemoth that became the popular newspaper business. The two massive cultural entities developed parallel to each other in a symbiotic relationship that was rarely without friction, resistance and compromise. The book is an account of lives previously lost to the historical record; lives hinted at between the densely stacked lines of print that made up the press in the decades spanning 1900; careers subsumed within the unceasing stories of triumph and loss, grief and solace, the humdrum and the shocking that came to represent the reporting of sport. Incredibly, the reporter is all-but missing from the historiography surrounding the newspaper industry.

There has been little attempt to ask the question, let alone seek the answer as to who wrote the word deluge that represents the type-heavy sports columns of local, regional, national and specialist periodicals. The role played by the sporting journalist in helping establish sport within the very fabric of British life over the last century and a half has largely been ignored. Generations of reporters have been written out of both the history of sport and the history of British newspapers. They are absent from the record. This, in part, is understandable. They often wrote anonymously or under some catch-all byline of "Sportsman" or "Watchman" or "Olympian". Their lives can be hard to recover, their identities smudged and indistinct, their working days lost within the sporting record and newspaper circulation wars. The sportsmen and sportswomen, the administrators and officials come before the reporter in sport's historical reckoning. So too in the world of print history where the domineering proprietor, the reforming editor, the political columnist and the literary journalist take centre stage. Sporting news has for most of its history been looked upon as a hybrid, an oddity, despite it being a staple of the popular press agenda. There has been a reluctance, too, among many scholars of the periodical industry to acknowledge sport's centrality to the growth of a popular press.

The favoured approach of the book is that of both a micro-history of one man's career–James Catton–as a case study, which in turn is used to examine and contextualise the much bigger and wider story of British

sporting journalism. Before the role of the sports reporter on the press can be fully understood and positioned within the growing body of work attached to popular newspaper research, the reporter has to be rescued from a pit of anonymity, from the darker recesses of the editorial panorama of the period and the condescension of the contemporary sporting world. To understand the working practices, career paths, opportunities and restrictions surrounding the trade of reporting sport, enough practitioners need to be identified and their working lives traced, so as to provide a body of evidence that stands scrutiny and provides a narrative for discussion and study.

James Catton began his career as an apprentice reporter in 1875 and he stood down as editor of the influential Manchester-based specialist sports weekly the *Athletic News and Cyclists' Journal* in 1924, later spending the final 12 years of his life as a London-based sports columnist and reporter. He was less than five feet tall and, in his early career, worked in an environment where those who wrote on sport were often expected to be expert players themselves, a feat that was beyond him. His working life all but spans the period of this study and his career covers the full spectrum of sports journalism. His working environment, from provincial weekly and then daily titles, Saturday evening football and cricket editions, to a specialist sports paper and then a Fleet Street Sunday paper, metropolitan evening and assorted sports periodicals, makes him the ideal exemplar in a review of sports journalism history. His 60-year career at such a formative period in an expanding and maturing newspaper industry provides a valuable guide to the variety of journalistic roles associated with sport, and their changing nature over time. His is the contemporary voice to help illuminate, illustrate and interpret the human aspect as two dynamic and controversial forces, the newly-professionalised and codified world of late-Victorian sport, and the newspaper industry, converged to create a growing opportunity and demand for the work of the sports journalist.

Catton's dual role–as sports reporter and sports columnist–for the majority of his career, has made the book a practical proposition. The ability and opportunity to develop, at some length, his own thoughts on the sporting issues of the day, especially relating to football and cricket, through a variety of opinion columns raises his profile beyond that of a more anonymous reporter hemmed in by considerations of a more restrictive writing style, brevity (of sorts), and objectivity.

But Catton's is not the only voice in this study. He is joined by a colourful and disparate roll call of sporting journalists who made a living writing about games. Some of them were central to the stories they wrote, adopting the roles of promoter, referee, stake-holder, reformer, legislator

and player when necessity and opportunity dictated. This book is their story, too.

The quest for the ordinary in historical research very often starts with the extraordinary and the exceptional. It starts with those members of a craft who excelled to the extent of being recognised, written about in their lifetimes or at the very least considered upon their death. Then comes the task of retrieval, to extrapolate in reverse, seeking beginnings, following the paper trail to an apprenticeship, a first job, a chance engagement, a sacking, a considered career move–the evidence of a marriage certificate, a street directory, a Census return–and to the ranks of the ordinary and the workaday, the majority. This narrative history makes use of, among other materials, memoirs, training manuals, anecdotes, recruitment advertisements, pay rates, numbers, trade gossip, union files, correspondence, competition, associational company and controversy, to stand alongside the news columns themselves. It is, for the most part, a narrative about men and boys, because research has so far failed to turn up examples of female sports reporters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sports journalism was a specialism within newspaper editorial departments and an examination of that specialism is the central theme of the book. But the development of the genre was intimately tied up with wider trends within the press. As a consequence, some of the issues and evidence considered within this work will relate, to varying degrees, to the wider occupational field of journalism and to the more numerous news reporters, from the ranks of which the sports journalist emerged.

The period chosen is guided by developments in both sport and the newspaper industry. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the gradual lowering and then abandonment of punitive newspaper taxes, heralding a publishing free-for-all. The wider period saw a steady improvement in living standards, increasing educational opportunities and a growth in disposable incomes. These factors, combined with urban expansion, led to the emergence of a reading public of commercial proportions. Advances in rail transport together with technological innovations in printing and the telegraph system eased the way for a rapid expansion in newspaper production and the adoption of the newspaper reading habit by significant sections of the population. Allied to these developments, the focus of the industry itself shifted. A new, cheaper product was offered to potential readers. Sport, too, underwent significant changes in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the establishment and development of clubs, ruling bodies and a sporting calendar for spectator and player alike. These two immensely important cultural phenomena became fused and melded in the sports column, and then the sports page. Extending the study to include the

inter-war years makes the examination of long-term trends of continuity and change within sports reporting possible.

This book attempts to lift the sports reporter from anonymity. It is an anonymity that seems particularly ironic at a time when historians increasingly mine the stories the reporters wrote in an attempt to garner the insight and detail they seemingly offer up about sport's development and consumption, together with the changing nature of press style and coverage. In addition, it is difficult to think of any other historical sources used as extensively as press reports that have prompted as little research in terms of the motives, aspirations, practicalities, lifestyles and identity of the workers who produced them. It is a blind-spot in the historiography, and one that this work in its own limited fashion seeks to address.

James Alfred Henry Catton has become a hero of a thousand footnotes through his journalism on the *Athletic News*, although often going unnamed. He is a go-to reference point in academic studies of sport, but it is time he and his colleagues commanded a more central position in the historiography of both sport and media studies. To use a literary trope, a standard image favoured by a number of sporting journalists in the late nineteenth century when launching some of Britain's first sporting papers,

> "The Captain has given the word, the uniforms are donned, the leather is flying, and we bound over the ropes aspiring and anxious for the approval of our patrons. We are not unheralded. Our *debut* is made after careful preparation, and we come to the line fit and ready for the fray . . . The weather is fair, crowd the stands, and let the game begin!".
> —William Fairhurst, "Olympian" of the *Football Field*, writing in the first edition, September, 1884.

How to use this book

Parts of the book focus on James Catton, his life and career (Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 15, 16, 20, 21 and 22) and others on the wider development of sports reporting as a trade between the mid-nineteenth century and 1939 (Chapters 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18 and 19). But Catton is rarely absent from the overall narrative and the development of sports reporting is always central to Catton's story.

Chapter 1 introduces Catton to the reader in exceptional circumstances as he reports the 1902 Ibrox Park stadium disaster in Glasgow. The theme of crowd safety is central to the chapter as the reporter's career develops within a sporting environment beset by dangerously inadequate facilities and poor planning. The early nature of sports reporting in the mid-Victorian period is then examined in Chapter 2 as journalists took on many roles

associated with the staging of games-playing, including promotion, refereeing and stake-holding. Catton's story is revisited in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 as his early life in the south of England in the 1860s and 1870s and employment as an apprentice reporter in Lancashire in 1875 are considered, followed by life as a senior journalist in Preston and then Nottingham. His exposure to a rapidly-developing sporting sub-culture in both centres is examined. Chapters 6 and 7 foreground the ad hoc nature of newspaper recruitment, training and pay in the later 1800s together with the threadbare status and image of the reporter, including a charge of hard drinking.

James Catton's move to the Hulton group of newspapers in Manchester in 1891 is examined in Chapter 8, where the opportunity to advance his career with a series of promotions was seized upon. Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 develop the book's wider theme of sporting journalism. The launch of the first specialist Saturday evening football and cricket special editions and more general sporting titles in the 1870s and 1880s is studied (Chapter 9), alongside the rise of sports periodical entrepreneur Edward Hulton in Manchester (Chapter 10). The careers of lesser known sporting journalists who dabbled in sports periodical proprietorship are examined in Chapters 11 and 12, before the narrative turns to the practicalities of sports reporting in the Victorian press (Chapter 13) and the style of reporting (Chapter 14). Catton's promotion to the editorship of the weekly *Athletic News* in Manchester in 1900 and the development of a network of contacts in the sporting world that helped keep the writer abreast of the latest news and gossip, legislation and sporting action feature in Chapters 15 and 16.

Chapter 17 examines the evolution of press reporting facilities across the full time span of the book, from the illegal and fugitive pugilistic prize rings staked out one step ahead of the police, to press benches in purpose-built stadia, and from news reports sent with homing pigeons to the adoption of the telephone. The fascinating and controversial figure of the sportsman-journalist, the player-turned-reporter is featured in Chapter 18, before the reporter's role in the creation of sporting celebrity is turned to in Chapter 19, from Channel Swim sensation Captain Matthew Webb and London Bridge rescue hero J. B. Johnson, to the febrile environment of championship boxing in the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapters 20, 21 and 22 again put Catton at the centre of the narrative. His writing style is revisited and his contemporary reputation as a journalistic innovator is put to the test and so too is his standing as a man "in the know", capable of influencing the decisions of administrators and legislators and the way fellow journalists wrote. His final years spent on Fleet Street trading on his career profile as the grand old man of British sports reporting are reviewed before the Conclusion sums up James A. H.

Catton's posthumous reputation and his place in the history of the sports reporter, and also touches briefly upon the use made of his sports stories and feature-writing by historians in the twenty-first century utilising his journalism as a means of researching the nation's sporting past.

CHAPTER ONE

STADIUM MAYHEM

When Tityrus in cup-tie crush is, hopeless, thrown,
'Tis strange to see next day how much he's grown

If we look up now through a grotesque skeleton of splintered timbers and mangled crush barriers the slight figure of a tiny bowler-hatted man is silhouetted against the darkening sky. He teeters on the brink of a gaping hole in a grandstand terrace that has collapsed under the weight of hundreds of football supporters. He grips one of the remaining rails to steady his nerve and maintain his balance as he stares down to the concrete 40 feet below. Less than two hours earlier, "with appalling suddenness" the wooden boards beneath the feet of 300 spectators had given way pitching them into the void beneath the stand. The dead and maimed have already been carried from the wreckage, draped on shoulders, on makeshift stretchers, supported by police and first-aiders, club officials and even a retired referee. The scene that had confronted those who first dared to venture under the fractured planks was hellish. Thousands had still stamped and shuffled and cheered and yelled above their heads in time with the ebb and flow of the game, unaware of the scale of the disaster along the packed terracing and of the threat posed to their own safety. The injured and dead had laid strewn among the lattice work of fractured struts and beams–some are even said to have been hanging from the debris in mid-air. Above them echoed the passionate tumult of a football crowd enjoying a Scotland versus England international only minutes old. Basic first aid had been administered but there had been an urgent need to move the victims amid fears of a further collapse and to avoid a risk of suffocation under the press of bodies.

All is silent now. The crowd have departed. James Catton is alone with his thoughts, the boards under his feet creaking only slightly as he adjusts his weight, taking a further glance into the abyss, making one more observation in the pocket notebook that is never far from his fingers. Catton is a journalist with a roving brief to report the nation's most popular sporting occasions for the country's top-selling sporting newspaper. The eagerly awaited football international has drawn him from his Manchester base to

Glasgow's Ibrox Park on this Saturday in early April 1902. Travelling north the day before, he had not been in the best of moods, a morning dental appointment and the removal of several teeth dampening spirits considerably. He has witnessed triumph and heartbreak on the sports fields of Britain for the past 27 years, and he has gloried in telling the tale in print, adding insight and comment to the high drama of top-class sport. But this sight leaves him "sick in mind and heart".

The football match Catton came to report has been played to a conclusion, the players forced to negotiate a harrowing tableau of dead and dying on their way to and from the dressing-rooms at half-time. Most in the crowd of 68,000 wending their way back to the city centre are unaware of the scale of the disaster. From his seat in the press box at the rear of the eastern grandstand, gazing in awe before kick-off on the terracing opposite, Catton had mused,

> ". . . half as tall as the factory chimneys in the distance . . . a surging, swaying, mass of humanity. I have seen a few football crowds since 1875, but I never beheld such serried ranks rising to a giddy height. Like a field of corn bent to the breeze this huge horde moved to and fro . . .".

A pall of smoke or dust rising from a section of terracing on the popular western end of the stadium had caused no more than brief curiosity among many who saw it from the crush of the adjacent stands. But there had been a surge of spectators on to the cycling track around the pitch as those at the top of the terracing had fought their way from danger, a huge crowd, unthinking, dangerous, on the move. Play had been interrupted for 20 minutes as the supporters who had massed by the touchlines were forced back by mounted police to allow a corner kick to be taken. The potential for crowd disorder has become part and parcel of professional football. Once informed of the incident senior figures in the Scottish and English Football Associations, seated 150 yards from the scene of the collapse, had held a hurried discussion and resisted any urge to end the game early. To have abandoned the match when so many in the stadium were unaware of the tragedy unfolding would have risked a riot. There had been no way of telling them what was going on.

At the final whistle, with the game ending 1-1, Catton had been anxious to get to the Pavilion–the administrative heart of the stadium–to begin piecing together what he knew was a tragedy of grim proportions. But first he had forced himself to be patient, to bide his time and wait for the thousands of fans who had swarmed on to the pitch–some carrying Scottish goalkeeper Ned Doig aloft on their shoulders–to begin dispersing.

Catton is no stranger to the crush of sports stadiums. He has seen the association game explode in popularity from his days as a boy reporter in Lancashire when the county first "went frantic on football", as he later put it, and clubs like Preston North End, the Olympic and Rovers of Blackburn, and the Wanderers of Bolton, had built the foundations of the modern game. His personal journey had begun pacing the touchlines of unenclosed sports fields and pressing reluctant senior colleagues to find space for the few lines of news on the new soccer craze, composed on the horse-drawn tram journeys back to the office. Now, there are days like this, at Ibrox Park, sitting grandly at the press tables, some sited loftily in the purpose-built grandstands of new stadiums, expectant telegraph boys at his shoulder, the printing presses two hundred miles away in Withy Grove, Manchester, waiting for column upon column of football action. Catton has grown up with the game and with newspapers. He has suffered injury in the past performing his reporting duties in the midst of reckless football crowds. He is just 4ft 10.5ins tall and tomorrow he will celebrate his 42nd birthday. With age and experience has come caution.

In due course he had left the press seats in the stand opposite the collapse and made his way into the Pavilion, bracing himself for the awful sights he knew he would face, for as the game was played out to an end his eyes had been drawn again and again to a dreadful, irregular procession of the injured carried to the building he approached.

> "The magnitude of the disaster could not be grasped in the Press box at the time," he wrote, "although I shall never forget seeing unconscious people borne on the shoulders of strong men across the ground to the pavilion where the players had their accommodation. The heads of these helpless people rolled as if their necks had been broken. It was a gruesome experience–but the game was played out to the very end."

The Pavilion resembled a military field hospital as police, doctors and volunteers attended to those among the wounded who had not yet been taken to the city's infirmaries and GPs' surgeries. Police station cells had been commandeered as emergency wards for those hurt in the fall and the subsequent crowd stampede. Those with minor injuries were being sent home to recover as best they might. The senior police officer at the scene had told Catton there had been three fatalities with a further 70 spectators hurt. Over the coming hours and days a clearer picture will emerge, the death toll rising to 26, with more than 500 injured, many of them seriously. Even at this moment the figures are high enough to shock all present, including Catton. But he must divorce himself from the emotion and the horror. There is press work to do.

Catton had paced towards the western stand to climb the empty terracing to the top where, "ten tiers had given way for about twenty-five yards, and it made one feel giddy to look down the horrible hole". This is where we find him now. In his own meticulous fashion, he has counted the steps and calculated the dreadful drop to the ground below. Ninety-nine steps, each four inches tall. He has done the mathematics and settled on a height of 33 feet, although he will later adjust this to 50 feet and others will calculate 40 feet. He commits his thoughts to paper, ready to be telegraphed back to Withy Grove.

> "The joists under the tiers had snapped off like matchwood, and the people on them had, of course, fallen into the abyss, which was some thirty-three feet deep, and a mass of woodwork support . . . there appeared little solid metal about the structure . . . the iron stanchions erected to ease the pressure of the crowd, were forced up and twisted into fantastic shapes, but the horror of the hole through which the poor people tumbled will live in one's memory, quite as much as the ghostly-looking unfortunates who were carried across the ground . . . like a trapdoor . . . the gaping abyss . . . I counted sixteen joists which seemed about three inches wide and six inches deep, and they had all snapped right in twain, apparently unable to stand the strain without supports closer together . . . It is only reasonable to suppose that many of them were hurled against the tangle of woodwork in their descent. And there they lay, a maimed, wounded, bleeding mass of suffocating, suffering people . . . catastrophe . . . never to be forgotten . . . pavilion turned into a hospital . . . It was feared that there would be a panic, and to avoid a deadly rush all the gates of the ground were thrown open. But the vast majority did not know what had happened, could not realise the extent and nature of the catastrophe, and there were no means of letting them know . . . When the players came in at half-time they had to pick their way about among the prostrate forms of the wounded . . . In the fear of a riot it was deemed advisable to let the match take its course if the police could keep the ground clear . . . there was a vacant space at the top of the western terrace . . . worst of all a melancholy procession began across the ground to the pavilion, for bearer parties of four and six were seen carrying either the dead, the dying or the wounded . . . astounded by the extent of the gaping void . . . perfectly immobile, with white, waxen faces . . . the pavilion presented a scene that touched the hearts of strong men, and was more like the ward of an infirmary than a home of sport . . . One does not feel disposed to wade in harrowing details, and it must suffice to say that it was a heartrending terrible experience such as brought to mind great national calamities . . . The whole incident vividly brought to mind the fiasco witnessed at Fallowfield in the English Cup Final of 1894."

It is a word deluge and as he composes it in his head and notebook– getting the year of the Fallowfield final wrong in his rush to write without

aid of reference material–he retraces his steps to the press seats in the opposite stand and the temporary telegraph office erected behind it, a team of travelling telegraphists in demand as Britain's leading sports reporters turn their hand to a narrative of tragedy rather than one of goals and tactics. Catton has stories to write and his words will be carried in the late editions of that night's *Evening Chronicle*, a special Saturday evening edition of the *Sunday Chronicle*, and tomorrow's normal Sunday editions, with follow-up reports for Monday's *Sporting Chronicle*, the *Daily Dispatch* and the *Athletic News and Cyclists' Journal*. The Hulton Press print works where he is based, when not on the road or rails chasing football, cricket and all manner of games, sends forth an estimated five million newspapers a week to feed a local, regional and national market, with sport their main selling point.

Sport. Even now, Catton must combine his reports of disaster and death with stories of play. The page he fills for Monday's *Athletic News* will groan under the weight of almost 2,000 words of tragedy and heroism, and a further 2,000 words of football action. The game has been played to an end and he will describe the ebb and flow of the contest, the highs and lows of the action, pass judgement on the form of players . . . it is what is expected and he will meet those expectations.

> "Alec Smith was the first to break the line for Scotland . . . Templeton, the sinuous and speedy, shook off Houlker and dashed ahead at full steam . . . Under severe pressure Compton was valiant and resolute . . . taking in the situation at a glance, he shot with the left, and the ball travelled fast and low, inside the post and into the netting . . . considerably the greater share of the attack . . . Bloomer played one of his poorest games . . . always fast and clever . . ."

Catton's mind is racing. Even as he tries to shut out the noise and pandemonium of the press box and telegraph shed to compose his stories–a skill learned and honed as an apprentice reporter–he knows there will be another story to tell. Professional football has its opponents. The spiralling attendances, the associated rowdyism, drinking and gambling, the pursuit of points and silverware and gate-money, have seen the game become divorced from its amateur roots and, for some powerful voices, the true spirit of sport for sport's sake has been lost–especially in the professional game's heartland of the North and the Midlands. In the case of Ibrox Park, there will be an unsuccessful criminal prosecution of the contractor who built the western terracing, and questions concerning the quality of the fabric, general ground safety and design will persist. But the unfortunate victims are blameless. Time and again it falls to Catton as editor and chief reporter of

the weekly sports paper, *Athletic News*, the champion of the professional sportsman and the defender of the workaday football fan, to rebut the more fanciful claims of the amateur, southern lobby.

Catton is no mere cipher, no spokesperson for the Football League or the professional ranks within the FA. But his grounding in sports journalism in Lancashire and Nottinghamshire–where the professional game has grown up–has impressed upon him the worth and merit of skill and accomplishment, the right of the working man to sell his labour, whether that be at loom or forge or pit or football. Glasgow is no different. London's *Evening Standard* goes to print that night with news of two killed and 50 injured as, "the vast crowd broke through the barriers", with the incident, "not due, as first reported, to a collapse of a stand". With the death toll rising to 20 by Monday afternoon, and the cause of the disaster still under debate, the *Standard* will be bold enough to declare in its editorial column that–

> "North-country football is attaining an evil reputation which threatens to bring the winter sport into utter disrepute. Seldom is an important fixture played without some exhibition of rowdyism or violence. Fortunately, the ebullitions of the crowd do not often go beyond the baiting of an unpopular referee or a hostile demonstration against the visiting team, but these periodical outbursts are sufficient to suggest the dangerous possibilities attending the congregation of so much vigorous and undisciplined human nature at an absorbing and inflammatory function. The disaster at Glasgow shows the contingencies which may arise in their worst aspect. When such a vast throng once gets out of bounds, the authorities are powerless to deal with it. In the event of a panic or disturbance, the lowest instincts of an excited rabble are aroused, and the proceedings become a carnival of brute force. If adequate precautions cannot be taken against such barbarous outbreaks, these monster gatherings should be discouraged in the public interest".

There it is. Another demand to curb the growth of the professional game. Catton will use his regular column in the *Sporting Chronicle* in midweek to reply to these "serious allegations against football folk", declaring,

> "Surely the 'rabble' were the victims on Saturday; not the cause of the calamity . . . There was, considering the dreadful disaster, very little 'panic or disturbance,' and there was no 'barbarous outbreak' at all. The writer clearly knows nothing whatever of the nature of the accident."

Catton will defend the decision to play the game to the end and then call on the football community to raise funds to help the victims and their families.

Even in later life, when reviewing his career in journalism for a fresh generation of readers Catton will combine the grim story of tragedy at Ibrox

with assessments of players' performances on the day–all rather macabre for modern sensibilities but seemingly raising no accusations of poor taste at the time.[1]

What manner of man are we dealing with here? James Alfred Henry Catton's most striking feature was his lack of height. In later life a pen picture conjured up a man, "red in the face, round as a ball, gold spectacles, white moustache, bald head at the front, twinkling eyes". In terms of personality, contemporaries noted his "witty" conversation, "genial disposition", propensity for laughter, an infectious "chuckle", and the fact "he had spent a wild youth but was now reformed". Professionally, he was regarded by many contemporaries as "one of the greatest sporting journalists Britain has produced", or more prosaically "the closest thing to a perambulating encyclopaedia on cricket". His work earned him the nickname, "the Mighty Atom", with a belief in some circles that "he selected the English football teams", and that "the smallest man in sport . . . had the greatest sway". But he could also be seen by some as "a strange little man", "forbidding", "caustic in his criticism", a hard task-master, and the longevity of his career left him open to the charge levied by a younger generation of journalists that he had become old fashioned, a writer hamstrung by sporting cliché. Wasn't it Catton who, searching for novelty and straining to avoid repetition, had first sent "the crimson rambler" speeding to the cricket field boundary ropes?

As a boy and young man reporting football, he had walked "up and down the touch line and round about the goals . . . like a restless spirit". But he was just as likely to have been found at a county cricket ground beneath the gently billowing canvas of the press tent as warm ale was served at the tea interval and the chat turned to record scores and feats of athletic endurance, of summers long gone and conversations with W. G. Grace. More likely still, in mid-career, he would be found in the plain and functional editorial room of the national weekly sports newspaper, the *Athletic News* in Manchester, with the heads of the sub-editors bowed over piles of soccer reports as they crafted the hurried and hackneyed prose–telegraphed from the length and breadth of the country–into column upon column of close-set type recording another Saturday of league success and failure. After the *Athletic News* Catton would spend the last decade of his life on Fleet Street trading on his name and reputation as the "grand old man" of football and cricket journalism, dropping off his match reports and feature-length articles by hand, passing judgement, providing insight, telling tales in equal measure in a vibrant and profitable final flourish of sports writing.

The disaster in Glasgow in 1902 is not Catton's first brush with football stadium mayhem . . . he is at the Manchester Athletic Ground in Fallowfield

awaiting the kick-off for the 1893 FA Cup Final between Everton and Wolverhampton Wanderers, with spectators taking their places on the low earth banking which serves as terracing. In the crush of the crowd one might easily lose sight of the diminutive 32-year-old Catton, the chief feature writer of Manchester's *Sunday Chronicle*, despite his signature bowler hat bobbing chest-high among the boisterous throng. The press facilities are rudimentary but standard for the day, tables and chairs open to the elements and lined in front of the three shilling stand. In the corner of the ground to the right, at some distance, stands the specially assembled telegraph office with a staff of 25 "operators". Their job is to decipher the hurried scrawl of the assembled reporters and to relay the accounts of play to newspaper offices nationwide. A flurry of special editions updating the course of the game will be sent forth from print works to an eager public throughout the afternoon, to be followed by the eighth wonder of the world, the Saturday evening "football specials" complete with scores and comment and drama from the afternoon's play, on sale on street corner, in public house and market square within an hour of the final whistle. To know the score, to sense the occasion one has to be present . . . or to read a newspaper.

In 1893 Catton has been in Manchester for 18 months, working for press entrepreneur Edward Hulton's penny newspaper empire encompassing the *Sunday Chronicle*, the daily *Sporting Chronicle* and the weekly *Athletic News.*

Although he has built for himself a reputation as a sports writer of some standing in the North and Midlands, his appointment as sub-editor on the *Sunday Chronicle* has meant a move away from regular sports reporting. He secured work in Manchester thanks to his all-round journalism skills, copy editing in particular–checking the work of others, rewriting on occasion, making the news fit the page in the rush and clamour of a multi-edition daily newsroom–and he has combined this role with that of editorial organiser, or news editor. But his boss Ned Hulton knows all about economies of scale. Employment on one Hulton title means duties on all. From humble beginnings in Manchester, Hulton has founded a newspaper group meeting and stimulating a growing demand for sports news among the artisan and lower-middle classes of the North and Midlands. Printer, racing tipster, editor and proprietor, Hulton has seen his business expand from a racing sheet, or tissue, printed in a cellar and sold in pubs, to encompass one of the biggest print works in the country.

Meanwhile, the Fallowfield crowd has grown. The northern venue is a switch from the normal home of the final, Surrey's Oval cricket ground, and only the second time the football showpiece has been held outside London since the first final in 1872. Entrance to the standing areas has been set at

1s, with seats priced between 3s to 10s6d in the two stands and the pavilion. One of the stands is sheltered by a canvas roof. The admission charges are reckoned to be "somewhat stiff" according to press commentators, but the northern-based members within the Football Association hierarchy are keen "to smash all records" for cup-tie gate receipts and impress their southern counterparts with the growing influence and commercial weight of the professional clubs outside London and the Home Counties.

With fair weather set for the late-March showpiece, a gathering of unprecedented proportions had been predicted all week, advertised as the "Great Football Match". But the ground can only muster two "main entrances", each with six turnstiles, plus one at the rear of the pavilion. The crowd inside the ground is immense, described by a reporter as "a multitude whom no man could really number", with many more pressing outside to gain admittance.

The first 20,000-plus Cup Final attendance had come in 1889. The official gate for Fallowfield, bigger by far than all before it, will later be put at 45,000. But the athletics stadium is reckoned to be capable of holding 68,000 and some of those present think the latter figure is close to being reached on this occasion. Special Cup Final rail excursions–more than 40 due at Victoria Station alone, with more planned for the Manchester Central and London Road terminals–in addition to regular services have all ferried spectators from across the country to city centre Manchester, where they have walked or caught trams and suburban-bound trains to the gradually-filling athletics stadium.[2]

James Catton is present to add a considered overview of the day as an occasion, to paint word pictures, to add colour and context to stand alongside the normal blow-by-blow account of the football action. It is a role becoming accepted in the trade as one fitting the most able of writers, those with an above-average way with words, possessed of elan and flair. That night as he composes his reports for the following day's paper, he writes, "the sight was one such as had never previously been seen at a football match in any part of the world".[3] There had been just 14,000 at the Oval nine years earlier when he had first reported a Cup Final, Blackburn Rovers' 2-1 victory against Scotland's elite amateurs Queens Park of Glasgow.[4] In those early years the Cup Final had not, as he later described it, developed into the "national event and a public holiday" it later came to resemble.[5]

Catton takes his place today at the press tables alongside at least four colleagues from Hulton's Withy Grove editorial offices. They are known to us now only as "Robin Hood", "Wandering Wolf", "The Tramp" and "Loiterer", their true identities masked by the industry-standard practice of

adopting pen names to stand alongside their journalism. Catton, too, has his pseudonym. He is "Tityrus", a figure from the classics, the name's meaning–a shepherd at ease amid a pastoral idyll–and correct pronunciation lost on the great majority of readers, and one chosen by the writer as, he explains to colleagues, as a reminder of his schooldays. For Catton to be sitting among this alfresco editorial gathering of Hulton's leading sports writers is a plum assignment. One might say that he is part of the most talented and influential reporting team ever gathered in one place to describe a football match, the claimed combined weekly sale of the three Hulton papers reaching a dizzying million copies–each title a powerful voice in the world of professional sport. In the run-up to the Cup Final the papers have made a feature of the forthcoming game. All three claim circulations extending far beyond Manchester and the North West of England, with the *Athletic News* and *Sporting Chronicle* promoting themselves as national sports papers.[6] The Cup Final on their doorstep is an opportunity for the Hulton Press to confirm its standing as the country's premier sports news business.

Senior among the Hulton reporting team on the ground this afternoon is "The Free Critic", and he has taken up an elevated position in one of the grandstands among the Football Association dignitaries and guests. For this particular critic is John James Bentley, editor of the *Athletic News*, a member of the Football League management committee and an FA councillor. He is privy to the internal workings and secrets of football's two leading organisations and editorial chief of Britain's best-selling football paper, but one would have to dig deep within the sources for the period to find any murmurings of criticism over what, to modern eyes, is a shocking conflict of interest. He is not the first of his kind to combine journalism with duties as sports administrator. This afternoon he marries his reporting workload with the social bonhomie of high sporting office, the back-slapping and the networking. After all, he sits on the special FA sub-committee which met to set the admission charges. The reserved seats for the 10s6d grandstand could only be had through application to JJB care of the *Athletic News* offices.[7]

The growing body of newspapermen, drawn from the morning, evening and weekly press, are chatting among themselves, renewing old friendships made on the winter round of Football League matches. Some of the local pressmen attend to the homing pigeons they have brought with them in special carriers, the birds still used to fly updates of the action to those newspaper office lofts within reach, the reports written on special light or "flimsy" oiled paper and attached to the bird's legs. Their release at intervals over the course of the afternoon, often carrying word of a goal just scored,

is part of the sporting spectacle that Saturday afternoon football has become, worthy of a cheer from sections of the crowd as a sense of ritual becomes attached to the game. Others at the press tables are calculating the time it will take the messenger boys to dodge through the gathering crowd with updated match reports on their run to the telegraph office which is already lost to sight.

There is an hour to go before kick-off and above the general hubbub there rises "an ominous creaking" at the corner of the ground near the pavilion. The sound, an incoherent rumour of impending trouble, ripples above the heads of those who hear and recognise it amid the sensory tangle of colour and babble, and the press and confusion of Britain's biggest ever gathering of sports enthusiasts at an enclosed stadium. The wooden palisades surrounding the athletics ground are, at points, under severe pressure from the multitude outside, uncontrolled and unsupervised, impatient to gain entry.

This is the working environment Catton has craved, the reward for the hard slog of a seven-year reporting apprenticeship in Preston followed by nine years perfecting his craft in Nottingham. His early months in Manchester have been spent bringing order to the *Sunday Chronicle's* newsgathering process and ensuring print deadlines are met and the right stories find their way to the right pages. He has witnessed a cull of senior journalists by Hulton in a confrontation over editorial policy and has been given the opportunity to cover the city's vibrant theatrical and music hall scene. A regular at the Palace Theatre of Varieties, he has arranged dressing-room interviews with popular singers, international pantomime artists, a brass band impresario, a ventriloquist, and he has even reviewed opera. The sudden death of one of the *Sunday Chronicle's* most senior journalists has also seen Catton take on some of the duties of the columnist, "The Special Commissioner", with a roving brief to turn an eye on all manner of both serious and light hearted subjects. Only five days earlier he had been at Ewood Park, Blackburn, to report Everton's semi-final defeat of Preston North End, played on neutral ground. Now it is more sport and an opportunity to make a mark among Hulton's senior writers at an event fast becoming *the* occasion of the sporting calendar.

But it is only natural for Catton to be a little circumspect as the crowd closes in around him. At Blackburn at the final whistle he had attempted to make a hasty exit from his seat at the press table on the cinder track by the touchline. But the gate he headed for was still locked and he had been, "pinned there with the pressure of a crowd in my back. As it was not likely that the gate would give I felt that my breast bone would be forced in". The

police had rescued him, but he had arrived at Fallowfield nursing a badly bruised body.

Meanwhile, the "ominous creaking" at the ground's perimeter fence has been ended by a sharp crack. The wooden barriers give way in sections and thousands of ticketless supporters spill through the breaches, unimpeded by the 192 officers and constables of the Manchester City Police on duty at the ground. In fact, their efforts to stem the flood of gate-crashers and restore order will be fiercely condemned as inadequate, despite later sporadic shows of violent intent with truncheon attacks on individuals in the crowd. An earlier call for mounted police to be on hand has been ignored by the authorities. JJB is later moved to brand the police as, "a lot of dummies . . . a more helpless set of men I never came across".[8] Thousands of the freeloaders swarm on to the track surrounding the pitch and onwards to the touchlines. Rails separating the cheapest standing areas from the more expensive and better located enclosures are smashed. But those in the vanguard are wise enough not to encroach on to the pitch–they have come to see the game played, not to see it abandoned because of crowd disorder, and they even earn praise in later press reports for not disrupting play.

In the mad rush to the touchlines some of the press tables are commandeered for use as mini grandstands with the gentlemen of the press squeezed out by force, or retreating in disorderly fashion. The ad hoc viewing platforms are soon reduced to splinters under the weight of the intruders. As the teams arrive on the pitch there is a further surge forward with the remaining press tables destroyed. Catton is caught in the melee, become one with the surge, a body of men and youths out of control. Ewood Park is still fresh in his mind. No time to lose one's footing and risk being trampled. He suffers a frightening few minutes in the crush, winded and hurt, before pushing his way to the relative calm and safety of the reserved space in front of the pavilion. Here the press have reassembled, standing on tiptoe among the crowd, craning to catch occasional sight of the ball lofted skyward, above the heads of the vanguard of the crowd at pitchside and the bodies of others atop railings and barriers. They make the best of a grim situation, using "friends' backs as writing desks", as JJB observes from his seat in the stands.

Later, the *Athletic News*, reporting the "storming of the barriers", notes, "The crowd came down the banked corner of the cycling track like a battering-ram, and soon the rails and some seats in front . . . were made so much match wood". The intruders naturally blocked the view of the more orderly spectators seated in their rear, and there were unsuccessful attempts to dislodge them with volleys of stones and turf. Where once the press had been gathered awaiting kick-off, "was a mass of struggling humanity, and

the crackling of timber . . . People were clambering anywhere and everywhere".[9]

The match is played to a conclusion, with no suggestion of it being abandoned, the fans respecting the sanctity of the pitch. The day's underdogs, Wolverhampton, have won 1-0, the record for Cup Final gate receipts has been smashed. The press make their way back to the city centre and Catton endures the usual friendly ribbing from senior workmates aware of their tiny colleague's uncomfortable moments in the melee. Since his arrival in Manchester, Catton's easy-going nature and his outward acceptance of humour directed at his lack of height has struck a positive note in the Withy Grove offices. There are skits at his expense on the printed page and he has poked fun at himself as the Hulton readers are gradually introduced to "Tityrus the Tiny". Tomorrow will be no exception. He is slowly becoming something of a celebrity in newspaper office and on sports ground. His easy command of Latin and the classics and the poetry of Virgil, courtesy of a private education, and an occasional reference to this higher order of writing within his journalism, has not gone unnoticed. A short verse and explanatory witticism is being set up in type on the *Sunday Chronicle* front page.

> "When Tityrus in cup-tie crush is, hopeless, thrown, 'Tis strange to see next day how much he's grown. It's a'fact. The crowd at the match adjusted its pressure upon the fifth button of the Virgilian hero's waistcoat, and he came out with a diminished paunch and three inches more to his height. He had been squeezed upwards, d'ye see? But I wander . . .".[10]

No amount of celebrity will save Catton, JJB and the sporting press from ejection from their allocated seats at the following Saturday's international encounter between England and Scotland at the Richmond Athletic Club ground in south west London. Once again the press tables are in the open, but the good weather of the Cup Final has continued and so the elements are not a concern. This time it is royalty who force a retreat of the pressmen. At the last moment the designated press area is commandeered as part of a general rearrangement of reserved seating in order to accommodate the Duke and Duchess of Teck, members of the German nobility, who together with their entourage are seated at the expense of the journalists. The royal seat swap together with another large crowd (estimates ranging from 16,000 to 20,000) see the press again straining for sight of the ball as England secure a 5-2 victory.[11]

Catton is becoming a necessary addition to the Hulton Press corps of travelling reporters, a welcome and talented colleague as the business of using sport to sell newspapers begins to gather pace. The press are becoming

readily accepted–expected, even–at the increasingly well-attended events gradually filling Britain's commercial sporting calendar. The pursuit of publicity and popularity, together with the attendant prestige and gate-money profits for administrators and professional athletes make the reporter a required figure on touchline and in grandstand. At Richmond, once again, the job of the reporters in covering the event is compromised, just as it had been at Fallowfield. But it is interesting to note that the seats at Richmond are this time deemed worthy of VIP visitors in a rearranged viewing roster.

The gradual acceptance of the press as recorders of play in all manner of sports as the nineteenth century progressed, together with a growing sense of professionalism attached to their trade, are both reflected in the development of press accommodation at Britain's slowly-developing sports stadiums. Catton was ideally placed to comment on the gradual elevation of the journalist, quite literally, from pitch-side to the grandstand press box, one of only a handful of sports writers to witness first-hand the transformation of reporting facilities from the bare essentials of a standing place on the touchlines in the 1870s to the relative splendour of purpose-built seating at the new Empire Stadium at Wembley in the 1920s. But progress was to be slow. Writing 30 years after the Fallowfield fiasco Catton put the affair into some perspective. "It was said that the arrangements were indefinite and casual, but no forethought could have rendered an enclosure, good enough for an ordinary athletic festival, the rendezvous for an event which was attracting thousands more people as each spring returned."[12]