



Sporting life

This biography on Sir Stanley Rous and sport in the twentieth century is scholarly, balanced and well-written, says Lincoln Allison

BOOKS
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By Lincoln Allison

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One of the most iconic photographs in the history of English sport is of the Queen presenting the Jules Rimet Cup to the England captain Bobby Moore in 1966. From the angle most often shown there stands between them a larger figure (6ft 2 or 3in depending whom you believe). A septuagenarian in a smart grey suit with a red face and well-groomed white hair, Sir Stanley Rous, English president of football's world governing body Fifa 1961-74, looks both distinguished and benign. In many respects this moment was the apogee of his career.

It was also, like so many apogees in the lives of famous men, an event that sowed the seeds of an eventual demise. While we remember Geoff Hurst's hat-trick and Bobby Moore's defending, the 1966 World Cup is remembered less favourably in other parts of the world. The African nations had already boycotted it, united and incensed not only by Rous's favouring the (white) Football Association of South Africa over the (non-white) South African Soccer Federation, but by his refusal to guarantee even one place for an African team in the tournament.

And by the time Moore was lifting the trophy the principal South Americans had returned home mightily aggrieved. The Brazilians believed they had been kicked off the park and the Argentines that they had been refereed off it. In each case they blamed the selection of referees controlled by Rous. The conspiracy they suspected did not exist, but there was, surely, as there is now, a contrast in football cultures and Rous was one of us, not one of them.

Rous was an extraordinarily successful man. A grocer's son from an obscure Suffolk village he rose to the administrative pinnacle of the world's most popular sport and became the companion of monarchs and presidents. In the first 40 years of his life he was variously goalkeeper, soldier, teacher and football referee, who took charge of the 1934 Cup Final.

In the next 40 years he was a football administrator, first as secretary of the Football Association and then as president of Fifa. This was a rise that demonstrated serious social skills: he was at home with and admired by football figures like Sir Matt Busby and Jimmy Greaves, but also got on well with the likes of the queen's equerry (and Daphne Du Maurier's husband) General "Boy" Browning.

Alan Tomlinson is surely right to insist that, although he will always be associated mainly with football, there was a great deal to Rous's career beyond the game. His CBE was awarded (in 1943) for his services to civil defence, and his knighthood (in 1949) for his part in organising the London Olympics the previous year. The post he held for the longest time was chairman of the Central Council for Physical Recreation and he played a part, along with like-minded spirits including Sir John Wolfenden, in moving government towards a more positive role in fostering sport.

All of this was moved by a rather simple faith in sport as an instrument of good — of self-development, self-control, peace and friendship. This faith was often simplistic and could lead to silliness on occasion, but simple faith generally achieves more than cynicism. Rous's achievements in football included a six-region confederal structure for Fifa, which his predecessor Jules Rimet had bitterly opposed but which has helped the organisation survive. Less celebrated are his clear rewriting of the laws of football (in 1938) and, for those of a certain generation, there was the *FA Book for Boys* (1948-73) which he founded and initially edited.

Rous was a man of his times. His high degree of social mobility is typical of a time when an illegitimate boy from Lossiemouth (Ramsay MacDonald) became prime minister and the son of a Lincolnshire farm labourer (Sir William Robertson) became Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The conduits of that mobility for Rous were all Victorian creations: the pupil-teacher system and, after the war, St Luke's teacher training college in Exeter, sport and organised games. It was a time when a decent chap who worked hard and did not rock too many boats could climb the ladder to unknown heights.

Rous's personal circumstances also helped: he was married for 30 years, but his wife had different interests and they had no children; he was widowed for longer than he was married, leaving him free for a life of work, travel and networking.

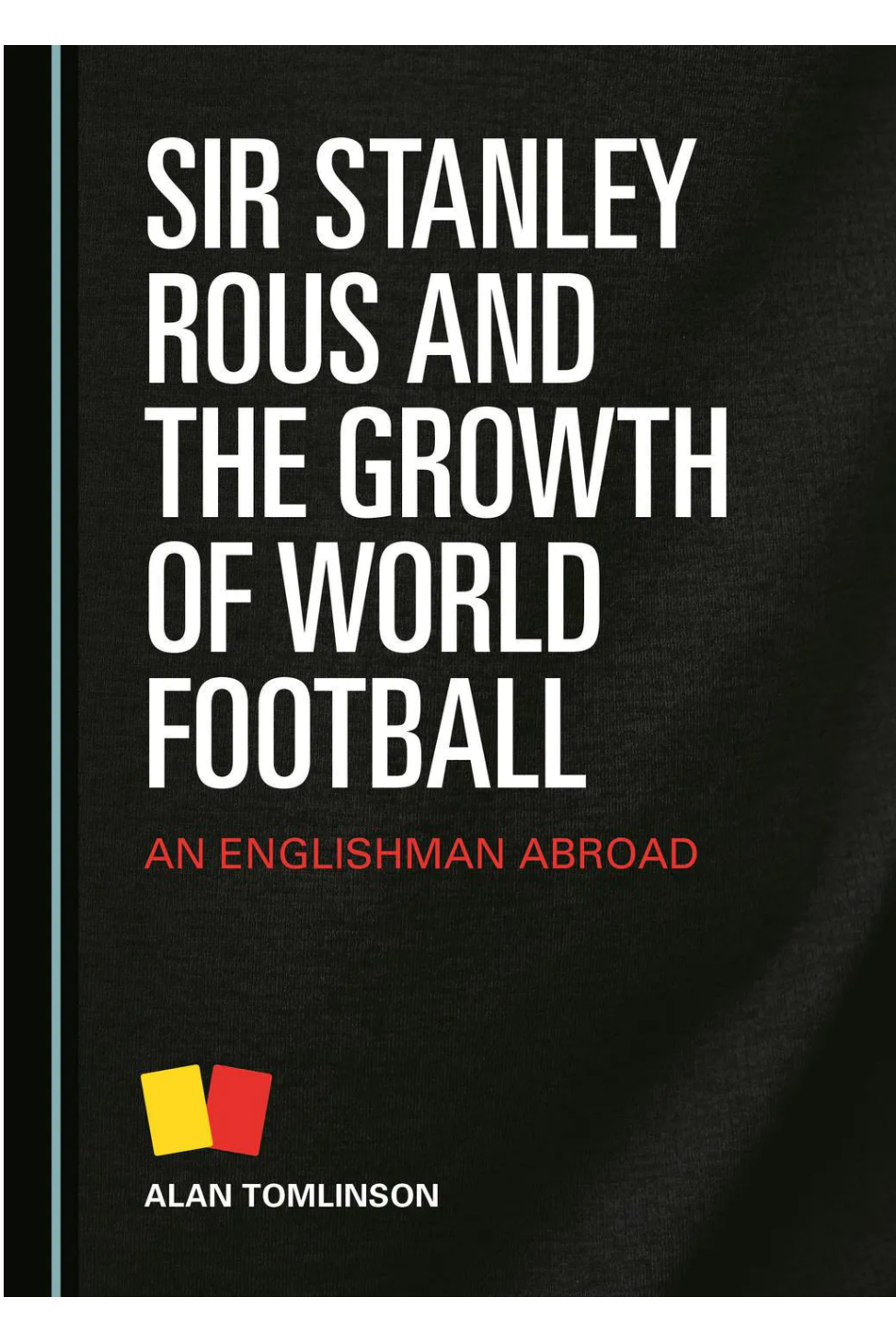
In the end came failure in the form of defeat by Brazil's João Havelange in the 1974 election for the Fifa presidency. It was avoidable in the sense that he was 79 and could easily have retired, but he thought he had two years' worth of business to conduct. In some respects it was payback for his support of the wrong South Africans; it was a political mistake, certainly, and to most people a moral one, but a man of Rous's outlook and temperament was always going to prefer the apolitical and law-abiding FASA to the overtly radical SASE, determined as they were to use football as an instrument of political change.

Thus Rous went, as he came, because times changed and Havelange was much more attuned to an age of globalisation, power politics — and corruption — than Rous. Fifa has since portrayed Rous as a reactionary colonial figure, but in his day he was a reformer, an internationalist and even, on occasion, a radical.

It could be argued that his achievements were greater than those of his successors and he certainly did not bring the organisation to its knees as Sepp Blatter did by 2015. Unlike Blatter he was generally well liked even by those who disagreed with him.

Alan Tomlinson's biography is scholarly, balanced and well-written and could usefully be read by anyone who seeks to understand the development of sport in the twentieth century. The author uses a wide variety of sources: I was rather taken, for instance, by the implicit connections between the young Rous's essays on medieval history at St Luke's and his later political outlook.

There are also anecdotal nuggets to cherish. Who knew, for instance, that Denmark and Sweden held regular international football matches throughout the war and that Rous attended the 1943 game, not in neutral Sweden, but in Nazi-occupied Denmark? That is surely an extreme version of the autonomy of sport from politics.



Sir Stanley Rous and the Growth of World Football: An Englishman Abroad by Alan Tomlinson Cambridge Scholars Publishing, £64



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