

NOTHING BUT A BIT OF NOSTALGIA

‘SIR ANTHONY MUST BE RIGHT, WE THOUGHT, FOR HE KNEW ALL ABOUT THAT OTHER DICTATOR WHOSE NAME ENDED IN ‘ER’ ’

In 1956, Celtic were not a great football team. Remember, this was before the blessed Jock Stein took over as manager, before they won championship after championship, before they won the European Cup in Lisbon. (Sadly, I left Scotland before their glory days began.)

One autumn day in 1956, Celtic played Rangers in the Scottish League Cup final at Hampden Park. Even English corporate treasurers will know that both sets of supporters have been brought up to hate each other. Back in these days, before seats had been invented, the two sets of supporters stood at opposite ends of the ground. Before the match began, we amused ourselves by singing Irish patriotic songs from our end to drown out the offensive songs about the Pope, sung from the other end.

The match began and to our delight Billy McPhail, the Celtic centre-forward, began to win everything in the air. A winger sent over a cross and Billy, with his back to Rangers goal, headed the ball down to the feet of another Celtic forward, whose name escapes me, who threaded it into the back of the Rangers’ net. “Goal!” We jumped up and down. (In later years, Billy sued Celtic for causing him premature brain damage by encouraging him to head a heavy, leather ball. Alas, he lost his action.)

Meanwhile, in another part of Great Britain, Sir Anthony Eden, after years of waiting, had taken over from Sir Winston Churchill. Even though English corporate treasurers may not have heard of the Scottish League Cup final of 1956, they must have heard of Sir Anthony Eden. A handsome man after the style of Douglas Fairbanks Junior, married into the minor aristocracy, but sadly, prone to bouts of bile-induced fevers.

The deputy to the Great One for a ridiculous number of years, suddenly, Sir Anthony suddenly started to appear on the little 14-inch black and white TV set in the corner of our living room, warning us against Colonel Nasser, the new ruler of Egypt, who was trying to seize the Suez Canal. An evil man. Dictators must never be appeased. A threat to the West. A danger to civilised values.

Sir Anthony must be right, we thought, for he knew all about that other dictator who had a small moustache and whose name ended in ‘er’. We knew that Egypt was part of the British Empire, or, even

if it was not, that the Suez Canal was most certainly owned by us. Sir Anthony must be correct to stop dictators doing evil things in our territory.

History tells us that Britain and France had hatched a conspiracy, under which Israel would seize the Suez Canal and then Britain and France would separate the warring parties, under the guise of international policemen, with them taking possession of the canal at the end of the fighting.

At the time, we did not know of the plot, and British troops had landed in Egypt shortly before the date of the Scottish League Cup final. (In case you do not know what happened next, Britain had to withdraw its troops after the US vetoed an IMF loan to Britain, and Nasser – who turned out not to be an evil dictator – died in his bed from a heart attack in 1970. Sir Anthony resigned through ill health shortly after the troops came home.)

Celtic were ahead at half-time and went on to win 7-1, and I was there. The Rangers supporters fell quiet and by half-time I could follow the trajectory of bottles thrown from the West terracing in front of the setting sun. Some balloons blew onto the pitch and a happy wee Celtic supporter ran out from my end to collect them. Two big Glasgow ‘polismen’ ran after the wee man, and frog-marched him off.

In the following week, a letter appeared in the *Glasgow Herald*, comparing the action of the Glasgow police at Hampden to the international police action at Suez. The comparison was convincing and the letter was well written, but it carried my name. My extended family were appalled, none more so than my uncle, the saintly war hero, who shares my first name. I was never altogether clear whether they objected to someone with their surname being revealed as a Celtic supporter, or for me being disrespectful to the Glasgow ‘polis’ and Sir Anthony. Both I would guess.

Do I regret my letter? Not really. After all, Celtic did win and the Glasgow ‘polis’ were heavy-handed. My only regret is that I did not delay my letter until the Suez adventure had been revealed as based on a great conspiracy.

My bigger regret is that I did not delay it until I had spent some time in Treasury and could grasp the full significance of the US veto on the IMF loan to Britain, for in general, I think that there has been insufficient academic attention given to the financial factors behind wars. Stopping an invasion by pulling the plug on an IMF loan makes for pretty effective peace-keeping.

I try to avoid any political or religious comment in this column and, I swear to you, there is nothing in this piece that should be read as criticism of any intended invasion of Iraq. It is just a harmless, nostalgic piece about the invasion of Suez. **JF**