

When 'Jesus' Came to Hong Kong

*The remarkable story of the first
European football star in Asia*

Derek Currie

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

DEDICATION

To the people of Hong Kong who accepted me as a welcome guest, not an intruder, and made this book possible

When 'Jesus' Came to Hong Kong

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Editors:
John Charlesworth
Paul Christensen

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Foreword

The epitome of Scotland, of Scottish football! That's none other than Derek Currie, the author of this engrossing autobiography. All the trademark Scottish traits are to the fore in the gregarious personality of this popular guy who left Cranhill, not the most salubrious area of his native Glasgow, to forge an illustrious playing career, and extended life, in Hong Kong.

There's an anti-hero syndrome in Derek's native country. You're not allowed to be good at something without the inevitable mistaken notion that "He's too big for his boots, he's making too much money, etc." My experience is that the bigger the star, the more humble he is. Legends like Jackie Stewart, Paul Lawrie, Alan Wells, Stephen Hendry, Andy Murray and football greats like Sir Alex Ferguson, Sir Kenny Dalglish, and Denis Law all have admirable humility. So has Derek Currie.

Having been to Hong Kong on several occasions I've seen the admiration, even adulation, shown to Derek and yet he remains the same level-headed, grounded individual who left Scotland in 1970, aged 21. Back 'home' he was from a sport-minded family as we learn in the book. Oldest brother, Dick, was a Commonwealth flyweight gold medallist and his middle brother John was a professional footballer good enough to be signed for Rangers. Arguably Derek was the star of the family who, as he explains in the text, played for three of the best youth teams in Glasgow, then at junior professional level at the same club as Kenny Dalglish, Cumbernauld Juniors, then Cumnock Juniors. Believe me, he was a much sought-after youngster before he signed for Motherwell FC after excelling in trial matches against Celtic and Rangers.

In the captivating text which follows we learn how Derek responded to an advertisement from Hong Kong to uproot and go abroad. Two super

guys accompanied him, Jackie Trainer and the ebullient Walter Gerrard, soon to be nicknamed 'the Water Buffalo'. I had the privilege of meeting this colossus of a guy much later when he had finished playing and was a rep in the licence trade. Both he and Derek couldn't go anywhere without being recognised, with autographs constantly requested. Had it been in the time of 'selfies' they would never have been able to move.

A coaching colleague of mine, Archie Knox, ex-Aberdeen, Manchester United, Rangers, Scotland Assistant Manager and Manager of Dundee, another with the traditional Scottish sense of humour, when asked about Derek told me, "Aye, when I was in Hong Kong he wrote the horse racing column for the *South China Morning Post*. I asked him for any tips and was given two 'certainties'. Neither finished the race!"

Being a lively character there often was controversy when Derek was around. None more than in his first game in Hong Kong when an attempt from Walter Gerrard was looking like a certain goal when it was deflected into the net from the head of Currie. Who was credited with the goal? If I were Derek I think I'd give the goal to his gargantuan teammate rather than alienate the big fellow who was convinced the ball was going in before the additional head-flick.

The excellent read that is this autobiography makes me regret that, although I had the responsibility of the Scotland national team for nine years, I never had the opportunity to rectify the fact that a player of Derek's ability was not the recipient of a Scotland international cap. He did get selected for Hong Kong but I'm sure a deserved accolade from the country of his birth would have been worthy acknowledgement for a man who was a fine player and a thorough gentleman.

Craig Brown CBE
Scotland Manager (1993-2001)

Preface

“I’m going to sidetrack briefly”, Derek Currie puts it, tongue firmly in cheek, introducing one of the many memorable anecdotes in this fascinating memoir of a late 20th-century working life. His book is a must-read for anyone who remembers the iconic ‘Jesus’ of Hong Kong as a star footballer and, subsequently, sports journalist, racehorse owner, Carlsberg representative and all-round city celebrity. However, it is also highly accessible to the younger reader to whom the household names Currie played with or met, and in some cases befriended – Pelé, Eusébio, George Best, Jack Charlton, Kenny Dalglish, and many more, including pop artists such as Rod Stewart and Stevie Wonder – might be less familiar. His fast-paced narrative digressions are somewhat analogous to the swift jinking runs and mazy dribbles that characterised his footballing career in Hong Kong in the 1970s and early 80s, and earned him hatfuls of goals, as defenders floundered in his wake. Indeed, his book is artfully constructed around these sudden changes of pace and direction in the manner of a Best, or a Pelé, or indeed a Currie!

People, events and places are generously highlighted in this retrospective more than Currie’s personal achievements. The author engages the reader from the very beginning, offering an inside view of a now-vanished era of Hong Kong history. And this is one of the memoir’s major strengths. His recollections evoke a period that I dimly remember with affection from my early years in Hong Kong at the end of the eighties, one without the internet or smartphones.

While he pays tribute to his fellow football players, both Hong Kong Chinese and expatriate Scotsmen, Englishmen, Irishmen and others, Currie also succeeds in painting a kaleidoscopic portrait of a time when East and West most felicitously bonded in the city. Between his

arrival in the summer of 1970 on a bumpy plane ride into a sweltering Kai Tak airport at the tender age of 21 up until the early years of the millennium, a dynamic process of economic development and popular culture transformation occurred. It was a process that turned Hong Kong's fortunes around, and changed it from a colonial relic struggling to recover from the Japanese occupation during WWII into one of the most vibrant cities on the planet.

Blissfully unaware of it at the time of his arrival – as a raw but talented recruit to a Hong Kong Rangers team under martinet manager Ian Petrie – he would become part of that remarkable transformation of the city. Dubbed 'Ye So', meaning 'Jesus' in Cantonese, by Hong Kong football fans on account of his long curly hair and beard, Currie was an instant hit. Their love of him in his many games for local sides, as well as for various Hong Kong international XIs, was keenly reciprocated by the 'flying Scotsman'. To judge by the many affectionate references in his book to Hong Kong people and places, Currie quickly formed a strong affinity with the city generally, and not just its football fans. In many ways, his memoir is a paean to the dynamism of Hong Kong at this time, a city he refers to as "my adopted home".

Naturally, the sociable young Currie was delighted to rub shoulders with football greats such as Pelé – whose visit with Santos in Currie's first season in Hong Kong was the magnet that drew him to the city and ensured his signature on the dotted line – but his memoir gives us insights into aspects of expatriate life of the period that entertainingly complement those of more official Hong Kong histories.

His deep affection for Hong Kong people and places shines through: for example, talking of much-loved Cantopop icon, Anita Mui, who for a time was his neighbour, Currie writes that she was "the 'Madonna' of the East and would go on to become one of Asia's best loved singers, until sadly cervical cancer took her young life away at the tender age of just 40. I should have been the one wishing her well! 'Ah Mui' as she was known to music lovers in Hong Kong ultimately became one of their musical treasures." Typically, he acknowledges that although his face was more

famous to Hong Kongers at the time and she recognised him, he ought to have been the one wishing her well for her stellar career, had he known who she would become. Likewise, his description of meetings with Hong Kong doyens, such as journalist Richard Hughes at the Foreign Correspondents' Club – the person responsible for the memorable Hong Kong epithet “borrowed place, borrowed time” – is a delightful vignette of a man famously fictionalised by John Le Carré as the FCC-based journalist Old Crow in his great novel *The Honourable Schoolboy*.

When 'Jesus' Came to Hong Kong, with its many skilfully handled flashbacks and flash-forwards, employs a chatty style and an impressive memory for detail. This gift derives undoubtedly from his latter-day career in sports journalism, in which a sharp eye for detail, a flair for finding the right words and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the game are enormous assets to the writer. Currie's memoir paints a compelling picture of a freewheeling, exuberant and imaginative city that the author depicts with wit, verve and a hint of nostalgia.

A football tour to Saigon, then only a couple of years away from capitulating to the North Vietnamese, is vividly depicted: what sounded to Currie and his teammates like fireworks turned out to be live ammunition from the nearby front line! He spares his thoughts for the young South Vietnamese soldiers in the opposition team, destined to return to the fighting after their brief respite. His excursions, to the U.S. to play professional football there for a brief period, and subsequently to Mexico City and then Italy and the U.S. to cover the FIFA World Cup competition for the Hong Kong anglophone press, likewise sparkle with observations.

Some robust ‘mistimed’ tackles by Hong Kong rival teams are the subject of some of the football-focused first half of the book, as well as appreciation of the flair players of international guest teams. Reference to a Sporting Lisbon jersey exchanged with one such star player segues into a wonderful anecdote about the time Currie arranged a kick-about game on the Happy Valley sports field for football-mad singer Rod Stewart and guitarist Ronnie Wood.

The book's second half is devoted to the author's Hong Kong experiences after hanging up his boots in his mid-thirties. Accounts of meeting icons such as Stevie Wonder (unexpectedly introduced by boxing legend Marvin Hagler) as well as charity events, including an unusual Star Ferry marathon, are woven throughout. His forays into boxing, rugby and especially horse-racing, the sport not only of kings but particularly of Hong Kongers, are described with the same winning blend of panache and accuracy for names and places.

As fellow working-class Scot and Liverpool manager Bill Shankly famously said in response to a journalist's question of whether a football match was a matter of life and death: "It's more important than that!" For Currie, sport, and especially football, has been his life, and he knows he has been a lucky man to have been transplanted to Hong Kong in his youth to fulfil his sporting dreams. Despite his evident affection for compatriots and pride in his nation's sporting achievements (and even its underachievements), Hong Kong comes across as the place that dominated his life. On his return from a three-month stint playing 'soccer' in Texas, he writes, "My heart was really in Hong Kong, not San Francisco, or any other American city. Texas steak knives were replaced by chopsticks; the Yellow Rose by the Bauhinia. I was home again."

Hong Kong holds a special place in the hearts of many expatriates who made their home here. Few, however, have attained Ye So's iconicity and for many his mere nickname awakes happy memories of an exciting chapter in Hong Kong's not-so-distant past. He prefaces his final chapter with the following reflection: "Over the years I've met some amazing people. With some it was just for a chat; others became great friends. All have contributed to a lifetime of memories." For me, these words read like a dedication of his memoir by the 'Jesus' of Hong Kong to all those friends, whether from East or West, that he met on his life journey.

Mike Ingham

Author, *Hong Kong: A Cultural and Literary History*