

# BILL McCracken

## THE OFFSIDE KING

The Life and  
Times of a

## Football Legend

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## AN IRISH UPBRINGING

BILL MCCRACKEN hailed from Belfast in the north of the Emerald Isle. Situated at the head of Belfast Lough on the River Lagan, like most cities in Britain during the late 1890s, Belfast had been transformed by manufacturing and commercial growth. Through that period the Industrial Revolution took hold and by the start of the 20th century the population was just under 350,000, the largest city in Ireland, ahead of Dublin. Back then, all of Ireland was one nation, part of the United Kingdom, without any political and sectarian divide.

Industries thrived in the city. Belfast was a shipbuilding and engineering centre that constructed the likes of the famed White Star liners, RMS *Oceanic*, *Titanic* and *Olympic*, all launched not far from McCracken's home at the giant Harland & Wolff yard. The *Titanic*, of course, disastrously hit an iceberg on its maiden voyage in 1912.

Apart from building some of the world's largest ships, Belfast was unrivalled at producing textiles, notably linen goods, while the city's tobacco factory was claimed to be the largest in the world. Manufacturing and trading in all sorts of commodities saw Belfast become the third-most-important port in the United Kingdom, behind only London and Liverpool.

The future footballing legend was born on 29 January 1883 in the west end of the burgeoning city of Belfast. The son of William (senior) and Eliza McCracken and from hard-working stock, his father was employed as a power-loom tenter, a factory machinist stretching cloth. He worked at the Damask Works, one of the many linen mills, the city being described at that time as producing more linen than anywhere else in the world. Bill was the eldest of four children and had three sisters, Martha, Elizabeth and Matilda.

Bill grew up in the working-class terraces situated parallel to Broadway in the St Anne's Ward, all of which joined the Falls Road running west from the city centre. The McCrackens lived at 31 Thames Street when he was born, and by the turn of the century the family had moved to Nansen Street, the next terrace but one. Both were close to the large Damask factory.

Belfast's population at the turn of the century was around 75 per cent Protestant, staunchly Unionist and opposed to any split from the United Kingdom. The Falls Road area was, though, largely Catholic, a breeding ground of Nationalist support. But towards Broadway, around the McCracken home, a mix of denominations lived.

His family were Presbyterian, on the Unionist and Protestant side of a growing divide in Ireland. The family's church, Broadway Presbyterian, was on the corner of their home street. As Bill was growing up in the later years of the 1890s and early 1900s, the notion of Home Rule and with it a country split by religion started to intensify. Tensions grew and in June 1903 his local church suffered a sectarian attack with a group throwing stones and other missiles at the congregation's place of worship. It became a worrying time. Perhaps as the discord widened, it was one reason why Bill decided to take up the option to move across the Irish Sea when, as a promising footballer, he became a wanted

talent. By the time he had made the switch and earned fame with Newcastle United, that religious and political division had escalated dramatically and a partitioned Ireland became reality.

Football was very much part of the young McCracken's upbringing. As a teenager he took an interest in the game, with two of the city's clubs, Distillery and Belfast Celtic, situated only a short walk from his home. Distillery were Bill's favourites, being more Protestant-based than Belfast Celtic, supported by the Catholic community. He watched his club in action when he could and like all young lads dreamed of a life as a footballer.

As a youngster McCracken began to play the game too, and first took part in what could be termed organised football with the Boys' Brigade, the traditional set-up of young Protestants. That was likely with the 2nd Belfast Company, which was attached to Broadway Church. He also played briefly with Broadway Thistle, a juvenile club in his neighbourhood. Little is traced of his time in the youth game but, by 1900, Thistle and Broadway Juniors were playing in the Belfast youth leagues.

By the time the fresh-faced Irishman was in his later teens, McCracken was working as an apprentice joiner at one of the many shipyards. His football talent as a defender was being noticed and the Distillery club took an interest. Bill joined his local club in December 1900, initially as an amateur then a part-timer. His parents had misgivings about their son getting involved in the game; they 'did not want me to play soccer', he later recorded. Nevertheless, at 17 years of age, Bill McCracken took his first steps in senior football.

The Distillery club is one of Ireland's oldest, formed during 1880. They are still playing football, now relocated in Lisburn, just outside Belfast. With a strong support base in west Belfast, the club was very much associated with the

Dunville family's Royal Irish Distilleries in McCracken's time, and still are even to the present day.

Their ground, Grosvenor Park, was located next door to the large distillery, which had established a complex during 1869, to become the largest in Ireland. Known as the Whites, Bill's boyhood team were by 1900 one of the leading sides in the country. They rivalled neighbours Celtic, as well as Glentoran, Cliftonville and Linfield, as Ireland's best. Distillery and Linfield dominated the league title race during the late 1890s and early 1900s, the Whites being Irish champions for the first season of the new century, 1900/01. Distillery even played in the FA Cup, more commonly referred to as the English Cup then, in season 1887/88, when they lost to Lancashire club Witton in a second-round tie. They were back for 1889/90 but were beaten again, by all of 10-2 by Bolton Wanderers.

McCracken made his debut for the Whites in a reserve match during early December 1900, a Robinson & Cleaver Shield fixture against Wesley, then quickly faced Belfast Celtic's second string a week later. His footballing career was up and running. Bill would continue playing for another 23 years, until into his 41st year, a remarkable achievement. His opening 90 minutes of football was deeply embedded into McCracken's memory.

Even as a raw footballer there were signs of the McCracken trait that soon filled newspapers at the very top level of the sport in England. Bill had an edge to his game and was extremely competitive even as an inexperienced teenage full-back. The clash with Wesley in Lisburn was eventful. The following week, the *Irish & Belfast News* included reports on Bill being the centre of an altercation with both opposing players and supporters. The incident was the subject of a debate at a meeting of the Irish Football Association and it was noted that McCracken had been 'badly abused by the

members of the Wesley club' and had to be protected from the violence of the home fans.

McCracken recalled that clash with Wesley vividly in his memoirs. He wrote, 'I was playing against two brothers [the Kinghans], one at centre-forward and the other at centre-half. The former was going through when I grassed him. Such things were not done with impunity in Ireland then, and the other came rushing at me with his boots.

'I scrambled to my feet to protect myself. There was little sense in standing motionless in the face of such an attack, so I landed out. Unfortunately, I walloped the wrong brother.' The result was that mayhem broke out.

Bill continued and described his first taste of on-field bedlam. 'Several players came at me. The crowd stormed over the pitch. I was surrounded by a mob completely out of control. I was knocked over. So were others. My white shirt was torn right off my back before I wriggled free. I ran for my life to the dressing room followed by angry spectators.'

The match was cut short with only minutes left, the score at 4-3 in Distillery's favour. But the fights continued. Bill noted that the Wesley lot chased them all the way to the railway station looking for another set-to. 'They bode us an Irishman's farewell with stones,' he remembered. It was something of an eye-opener for the young McCracken. He was shocked and even said to himself, 'That's the last time I play football, so it is.'

Of course, Bill never turned his back on the sport. He got over that early upset and had shown Distillery officials, notably secretary-manager Bob Kyle, that apart from having football talent, he could handle himself and mix it with more experienced opponents. Defenders needed to be tough and never intimidated.

A first-team appearance was quick to arrive, just before his 18th birthday. Still an amateur, during late December



1900, Distillery played a City Cup match against Glentoran and this had been considered to be Bill's debut in the first-class game. But an earlier contest in the same competition has now been traced and is established as when the famous name of McCracken entered the record books. That was a Christmas Day clash with Cliftonville at Grosvenor Park.

There were several changes to the planned line-up, maybe due to festive commitments, and at a late hour Distillery found themselves a man short. Bill filled in at right-back to partner the experienced James Welford in defence. It was a bizarre first outing in senior colours. On Christmas morning he was planning to watch the game from the terraces but when Bill arrived at the ground a short time before kick-off, he was grabbed by a frantic Bob Kyle.

There was little time to get McCracken ready. Bill recalled, 'He hustled me into the dressing room where eager hands tore my clothes off and thrust me into shirt and shorts.' Bill had no boots or kit with him so had to borrow what he could. He added, 'I got on to the field ten minutes after the game started. I must have looked slightly comical for I could only find one football boot!'

His father was in the crowd and to start with never recognised his son playing in the Whites' defence. 'It was not until half-time when he found out that the new right-back was none other than his own son,' Bill remarked.

There was a winning start for the dark-haired, tall and rather bony defender. Distillery claimed a 2-1 victory. McCracken was by no means a regular for the Whites' first XI during his opening season of 1900/01, but had broken through. He was soon offered a deal by Kyle as a professional footballer. Indeed, rival Belfast club Linfield wanted to sign him too but, as Bill recorded, he was always a Distillery lad and had no intention of signing for anyone else. He initially earned 7s 6d [38p] per match, a nice bonus

on top of his apprentice wage as he continued working to become a joiner.

Over the coming months McCracken filled out and became stronger, soon a perfect specimen of a football athlete. He was guided at Grosvenor Park by Jimmy Welford, also a right-back, but who eventually moved to the left flank to accommodate the young McCracken as he played more and more for the seniors. Bill later related, 'He took a particular interest in young players. He kept giving me advice, which has stood me in good stead all my days. He was like a father to me.'

From Barnard Castle in the north of England, Welford was a past star of Aston Villa and Celtic, winning both the FA Cup and Scottish Cup before settling in Belfast for a period. Eager to learn from the experienced defender, McCracken picked up much of the old-style, two-man defending art from Jimmy's know-how.

Included was the offside trap. Bill related, 'It fell to me to do most of the running about. Frequently I found myself in our opponents' half, and at times badly out of position. Usually, however, their forwards obligingly got themselves offside and saved the situation for me.

'This was my first acquaintance with the possibilities of offside. I saw then that it was far from suicidal for a back to play well up the field.' The seeds were well and truly planted of the infamous McCracken offside ploy.

One other piece of advice Welford passed on was a special warning: 'If you have anything against the directors, keep your mouth shut!' Bill never forgot that, yet at times found it hard not to voice an opinion against officialdom, often to end up in trouble.

In his first season with Distillery, McCracken totalled eight senior games. Included was his first cup final, a Belfast Charity Cup meeting against Linfield at the Solitude arena,

home of Cliftonville. It was a losing final as the Whites fell by 4-1. Although Bill never knew at the time, he also came up against his future employers of almost 19 years and where he became one of the game's biggest stars, Newcastle United. During April 1901, the Tynesiders met Distillery over Easter at Grosvenor Park in what was billed as an 'Exhibition Match' against 'The North of England Cracks'.

The Magpies had finished in sixth place in England's First Division and their development as a top club was just beginning to impress many. They were to finish in third spot the following season and very soon to progress even further. Newcastle won 4-1 and certainly made an impact on the 5,000 watching crowd, and no doubt Bill McCracken too.

For the next two seasons, 1901/02 and 1902/03, McCracken became first choice at full-back for Distillery and soon caught the eye of bigger clubs across the Irish Sea. He was just about an ever-present in the Whites' line-up, missing only a handful of fixtures in the league and cup programme.

Bill now had a new partner in defence wearing a Distillery shirt with Jack Ponsonby taking over from Welford for a season. He was another time-served footballer, having been capped by Ireland, and McCracken grasped more of his trade from the practised full-back.

Developing and learning quickly, Bill appeared in two more cup finals during March 1902, but again was on the losing side; firstly, in the Irish Cup against Linfield, then the County Antrim Shield facing Glentoran. On Cliftonville's ground, the Whites had a difficult afternoon as Linfield ran out 5-1 winners, Distillery handicapped when captain Ponsonby was injured and limped around in the second half. The young McCracken did well, and the *Belfast Telegraph* remarked that Bill stood out in the side: 'McCracken was the best, and when playing alone did splendidly.'

Against Glentoran, another defeat was recorded, but in a much closer 90 minutes of football. Distillery missed a twice-taken penalty before Glentoran took a 2-0 lead, and when the Whites pulled a goal back they were unlucky not to grab an equaliser before the end.

The following year of 1903, though, saw McCracken part of a winning team. Indeed, the young Irishman was a treble winner as Distillery secured three trophies: the Irish League championship, the Irish Cup and County Antrim Shield. His side were the top side in Ireland without doubt.

Distillery's title victory was the club's fourth and the Whites clinched the league crown by a point during February 1903 when they defeated Ulster FC by 5-1. McCracken only missed a single game in that campaign as he formed a solid partnership with new signing George McMillan. The pair marshalled the defence impressively all season.

In the prestigious Irish Cup showpiece, Bill faced Bohemians during March at Dalymount Park in Dublin, then long before the separation of the country, and with it the division of Irish football. It was the first cup final to be staged in the south, all previously being held in Belfast. With 10,000 watching, McCracken played his part in a fine 3-1 victory. Distillery's line-up was:

Andrews J; McCracken W, McMillan G; Hunter  
J, Morton W, Burnison J; Mercer J, Hamilton W,  
Aicken H, Kearns A, McDougall D.

The *Belfast News-Letter* reported that Bohemians came up against a resolute defence: 'Time and time again did their front ranks get up only to find such men as McCracken and McMillan, the two Macs, in their best form. These two fine backs excelled themselves.' The Whites went in front through Kearns and, after the Dubliners pressed for the equaliser,

they took control during the second period, netting twice more to be crowned 'champions of Ireland'.

Distillery's fabulous season was capped by lifting the Antrim Shield at the end of the season. In a replay at the Solitude ground in Belfast, they defeated Linfield 4-1 with an excellent display. Rivals Linfield could make little headway in attack and were 'no match for McCracken and McMillan', and the Whites collected another trophy.

McCracken's consistent displays in 1902 and 1903 also brought Bill to the international stage. After being selected for local representative games, skippering the Belfast XI in an annual clash with Derry, and playing for Ulster against Leinster, during February 1902 he was picked for the Irish League XI to face the Scottish League XI at Dens Park in Dundee. That was one step away from a full international cap.

McCracken was joined in the team by three Distillery colleagues, Joe Andrews, Edward Parsons and Billy Kirkwood. But the Scots were too strong and won 3-0. Despite the defeat, Bill performed well, reported as 'playing a capital game'.

Such was his footballing progress that it was no surprise that McCracken made his full international debut a week later on 22 February 1902. Ireland faced Wales at Cardiff Arms Park; he was 19 years of age. Bill and his Irish teammates had a good day in Wales as they recorded a convincing 3-0 victory. The *Belfast Telegraph* correspondent at the game noted that McCracken was prominent: 'It certainly is a feather in his cap to be on the winning side in his first international.' Ireland's team, including two of his colleagues at Grosvenor Park, was:

Nolan-Whelan J (Dublin Freebooters); Gibson W (Cliftonville), McCracken W (Distillery); Darling J (Linfield), Milne R (Linfield), Nicholl H (Belfast

Celtic); Mercer J (Distillery), Maxwell J (Linfield),  
Gara A (Preston North End), Kearns A (Distillery),  
Kirwan J (Tottenham Hotspur).

That international was part of an initiative, as it was described, to 'popularise the association code in South Wales'. In a region dominated by rugby, the contest never caught the public's imagination, mainly as other big games using the oval ball took place on the same day. A poor crowd turned up to see Wales, for the most part, dominated by the Irish, and when they did get forward, Gibson and McCracken, who played on the left rather than at right-back, kept them at bay.

Bill was now elevated to the big time. A month later, during March, he faced his greatest test so far on a rapid climb up the football ladder when Ireland welcomed England to the Balmoral Showground in Belfast. That was a huge examination for the Irish lads with the comparable levels of domestic football competition a gulf apart. The England line-up included the likes of Steve Bloomer up front, at the time Britain's top footballer. McCracken had never faced a striker of his quality before.

It was little surprise that the English won 1-0, yet Ireland played well, and McCracken impressed once more. The *Belfast Telegraph* wrote, 'Some of the English clubs, who had representatives at Saturday's match, are anxious to secure the services of McCracken, Distillery's clever back who played such a fine game.' It was added, 'The opinion of the English players and officials is that there are few better backs in England.' That was quite an accolade as the England line-up included Blackburn's Bob Crompton at right-back, during the decade rated the top defender in the country.

McCracken appeared in two more Irish League representative fixtures during 1902/03, against a strong Football League XI at Solitude (losing 3-2), and then with

the Scottish League as opponents at Grosvenor Park (winning 1-0). During February 1903, Bill had another showcase match when he was again in the full international line-up to face England, this time at Molineux in Wolverhampton.

Bill partnered his Distillery colleague at full-back, George McMillan, but the English side cruised to a 4-0 victory with the talent of Vivian Woodward and Jack Sharp up front being too potent for the Irish. McCracken, however, was never seen to be out of his depth, one report expressing that he had 'proved his capabilities beyond a shadow of doubt'.

His elevation to international football, especially competing against England and the best players in the Football League, saw scouts of several top clubs note the name of McCracken as a rising star. Sunderland were one of the clubs interested, title winners on four occasions up to then, and alongside Aston Villa as England's very best. Speculation in the press considered a move to England for the Irish youngster was on the cards.

Bill though, still only 20 years old, was not ready to jump on a steamer to England. It was reported that he was 'reluctant to leave Belfast just at the moment'. Bill confirmed that he was slow to quit Ireland and focussed on completing his apprenticeship as a joiner at a Belfast shipyard before considering any move away from home. Yet, with his stock on the rise, it was inevitable McCracken would eventually join one of the big clubs.

During season 1903/04, more and more football gossip linked Bill with a move to either England or Scotland, with Rangers and Newcastle United joining Sunderland in the hunt for his signature on a transfer form. By the closing stages of the programme that speculation increased.

Distillery were in the running for the Irish League title once more, but faded in the concluding run to finish equal second with Glentoran as Linfield lifted the silverware. A

play-off took place for the runners-up medals, with the Glens successful after a 2-1 victory. McCracken established himself as something of a penalty expert that season, including scoring the goal for Ireland that defeated Wales. He could strike a ball cleanly with power and accuracy. Over his lengthy career, Bill netted plenty of spot kicks.

His international career progressed during 1903/04, appearing for both the Irish League combination and full Ireland side. One fixture was pivotal to Newcastle United's attempt to sign McCracken. When his country's League XI met the Football League at Valley Parade, Bradford in October 1903, Bill was paired once more with his Distillery team-mate McMillan. Both played well despite a 2-1 defeat, often holding the powerful Football League forwards at bay, players like Steve Bloomer and Billy Hogg, as well as Jack Sharp, who had been a handful the previous season. The Irish took the lead, having the better of the early exchanges, but the class of Bloomer told. He equalised then hit a shot that was parried, only for Charlie Sagar to tap in the winner 15 minutes from the final whistle.

Travelling with the English squad was Newcastle United's Colin Veitch, while club chairman James Telford attended the game as well. Veitch was an emerging star of football, one of the driving forces behind the Geordies as they were to become England's finest side. In the celebrated Newcastle player's memoirs, he recorded an approach to Bill McCracken.

Colin wrote, 'I was on one of my many journeys as reserve for England. Mr Telford had travelled to the match and at half-time he asked me my opinion of McCracken.' Veitch was full of praise and, at that moment, Telford, a wily Scot, became keen to make sure Newcastle United captured the Irishman.

The Magpies' chairman attempted to make contact to open negotiations over a possible deal with Distillery



secretary Bob Kyle. But he received a blunt response. Telford then asked Veitch if he could 'get a word with the player'. That was something of a prohibited approach and rather difficult for Colin, being an opposing footballer in the next changing room. He did not know McCracken at that time. 'Suspicion would have been aroused instantly,' noted Veitch.

But Veitch, and Newcastle United, were in luck. Colin noticed that McCracken had gained possession of the match ball; it was an opportunity. The quick-thinking Veitch made his move. 'I walked boldly up to the dressing room and asked for the player who had the ball, adding the suggestion that he had no right to it. McCracken was soon outside the door, probably to defend his rights, but a quick wink and an explanation of my errand set matters straight.'

Learning of the rather brusque response by Distillery's secretary, Bill noted to Veitch, 'Bob Kyle's not my keeper, and I'll soon show him that, permission or no permission, I'll speak with the Newcastle people if I like.' An evening meeting with Telford was arranged at the Midland Station in Bradford and there began, as Veitch recorded, 'The preliminaries for McCracken's transfer to Newcastle.'

Before the conclusion of that 1903/04 campaign, McCracken appeared in the annual three high-profile international matches during March. His displays in all fixtures were exceptional and watched by a flock of scouts, including Newcastle officials. After the approach at the inter-league game in Bradford, the Magpies were determined to bring the Irish protégé to Tyneside.

Against England at Solitude, Cliftonville's ground in Belfast, while England were victorious again, the *London Evening Standard* picked out Bill McCracken for 'giving a rousing display at right-back'. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* noted, 'McCracken was the best back on the field,' while the *Daily Telegraph* was equally praiseworthy: 'All through

he played a fine, fearless game, kicking strongly and time after time dashing into English forwards, he averted danger.'

Facing Wales, the Irish won 1-0 at Bangor with McCracken scoring the only goal from the penalty spot 12 minutes from the final whistle. Bill 'cannoned the ball against the side of the post, and amidst cheers it entered the net'. Ireland then drew 1-1 against Scotland in Dublin, with the *Northern Whig* reporter present writing, 'McCracken was again the best back on the field.'

Speculation of a transfer reached a high point. At the very end of the season, during April, Distillery played headlining Easter exhibition matches in Belfast against both Newcastle United and Sunderland, two clubs very much on the McCracken trail. First up were the Geordies from St James' Park, by that time a club that had put together a glittering squad including three stars who recently had faced England for the Scots: Andy McCombie, Bobby Templeton and Andy Aitken. Included also were other top names: Bob McColl, Jimmy Howie, Ronald Orr and Bill's new acquaintance at Bradford, Colin Veitch.

The Magpies were on the cusp of a period when they would become the best side in the country for almost a decade. Before the contest at Grosvenor Park, the *Belfast News-Letter* commented that the visitors 'are looked upon as the finest all-round combination at present playing the game'.

The Whites bolstered their line-up by fielding Scottish junior internationals Jimmy Soye and Jock Grieve, both to join Distillery after the match. Soye was later, in 1906, to move to Newcastle to play alongside McCracken. United officials specifically asked the Irish hosts to include in their side another young Scottish player, a goalkeeper, so they could see how he shaped up against top opponents. That turned out to be Jimmy Lawrence of Glasgow Perthshire, who was selected to face England in a junior international

a few days later. Lawrence would join the Black'n'Whites within weeks and become a colleague of McCracken until 1922, and a close friend for many years afterwards.

The friendly encounter was an end-to-end affair, described as a 'splendid game', just perfect for the estimated crowd of between 4,000 and 6,000. Newcastle won 5-4 after the Whites had led 3-2 at the interval. McCracken had an eventful 90 minutes, first giving away a penalty when he tripped the burly United centre-forward Bill Appleyard, then had a spot kick saved by Newcastle custodian Charlie Watts.

It was during that visit to Grosvenor Park that Newcastle officials discussed a possible deal for McCracken. *Athletic News* reported, 'It is an open secret that the Newcastle directors some months ago attempted to secure his transfer,' adding that they 'would readily negotiate for the service of the Irish international'.

A few days after that meeting with the men from Tyneside, it was the turn of their great rivals, Sunderland, to face Distillery. Their line-up for the Easter extravaganza of football was as strong as Newcastle's with plenty of star names on show. Yet, Distillery recorded a noteworthy scalp as McCracken netted two penalties in a 3-1 victory. No doubt Sunderland's directors also tried to strike a deal for the much-wanted full-back.

The chase for McCracken was hotting up and a number of clubs were now in the transfer race. Several heavyweight names took a liking to Bill's robust defending and clever distribution of the ball. At 5ft 11in tall, Bill was now of solid build, at over 12st, athletic-looking and he kicked the ball true. Even at that young age, he read the game well and started attacks moving with intelligent use of the ball.

Apart from the Tyne and Wear rivals, Newcastle and Sunderland, Everton were reported to have an interest, as were

Woolwich Arsenal, Wolves and Aston Villa. McCracken revealed that some clubs took illicit avenues, with some 'not particular whether they received permission or not'.

Glasgow Rangers were very keen, while Liverpool were stated in the press to have agreed a £700 fee for his transfer, denied by the club. Yet McCracken was to note, 'Goodness knows how many times they must have approached me.' He confirmed that Liverpool 'nearly succeeded'. All the transfer advances gave the player a mighty headache. 'The more they all talked, the greater the whirl I was in,' he said.

At one stage Rangers seemingly led the pursuit and an alleged illegal bid to close a deal that season was debated by both the Irish FA and Scottish FA. That made news but nothing was proved and Rangers were cleared of any wrongdoing. The Ibrox club remained in the hunt to the end. But it was Newcastle United that won the race for McCracken's talent.

Bill later made the comment that United's timing was just right as he had become embroiled in what he called a 'grievance' with Distillery officials. 'That more than anything made me cross the [North] Channel,' McCracken admitted. Suffering a knee injury, he took a bit of time to fully recover, but the club ordered him to play on. Bill was a strong-willed character, as the rest of his career would show, and refused. As a result, he was suspended. 'I took their action very much to heart and then decided to leave Ireland,' he noted.

Negotiations with the Black'n'Whites from Tyneside, as Colin Veitch documented, 'took many comings and goings before the bargain was struck'. Distillery's secretary-manager was still Bob Kyle, an astute Belfast man. Somewhat ironically, he soon followed McCracken to the North East of England, becoming Sunderland's leader in 1905, a post he held until 1928. The pair probably met up a good few times during their long period in the region.

Following Newcastle's Easter visit to Belfast, the Magpies quickly headed off on an end-of-season mini-tour of Scotland. They faced Rangers at the end of April, but chairman James Telford missed the game. He suddenly decided to leave the tour party bound for Belfast. Had he heard whispers of a Rangers deal for McCracken? It was reported soon afterwards by the *Belfast Telegraph* that the Ibrox club had indeed sent officials to Ireland and had offered a 'large sum'. McCracken, though, did not fancy playing in Scotland by all accounts and rejected any move.

The pull of performing in the Football League was just what he wanted. Telford met up with Kyle once more and a deal was finally agreed for McCracken to join Newcastle United. Bill recorded, 'When I did eventually sign, I think it was due partly to having heard from other Irish players that Tyneside was a warm-hearted sort of place, and partly to the persuasiveness of the chairman Mr Telford.'

Having totalled 87 appearances for Distillery over his four seasons at Grosvenor Park, on 29 April 1904, the Belfast club recorded that Bill McCracken had joined Newcastle United. He was registered by the Football League and the formal entry in the Magpies' records is dated 4 May. The transfer and fee were the subject of much debate and controversy. Indeed, a much-publicised Football Association Inquiry took place after accusations of dodgy dealing. Bill was to begin his career in England with headlines. And many more would follow.