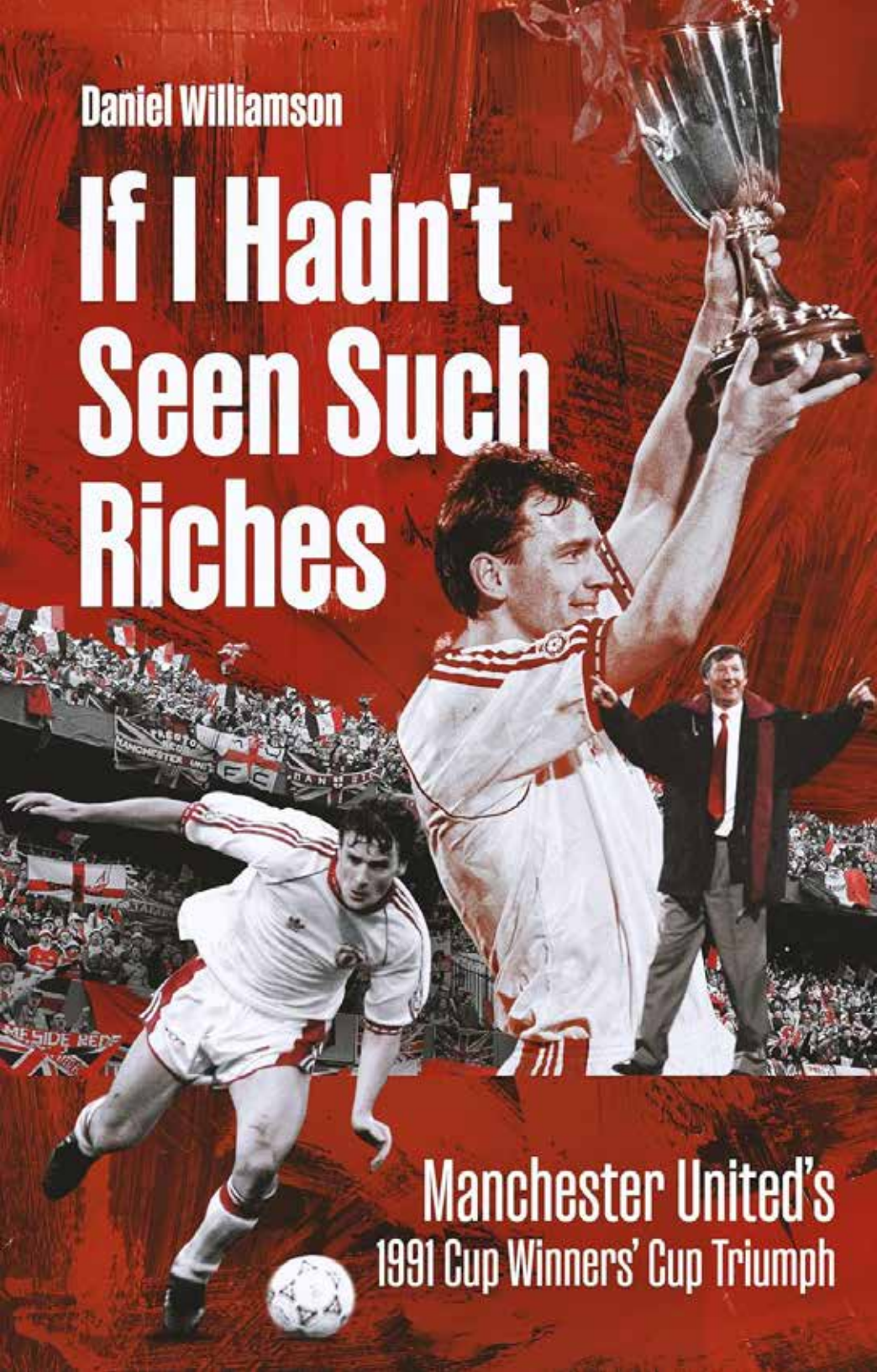


Daniel Williamson

# If I Hadn't Seen Such Riches



Manchester United's  
1991 Cup Winners' Cup Triumph

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**Daniel Williamson**

# **If I Hadn't Seen Such Riches**

**Manchester United's  
1991 Cup Winners' Cup Triumph**



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# The Red Volvo and the White Jersey

THE RED Volvo pulled up outside our suburban semi-detached house, less than four miles from Old Trafford as the crow flies. My view from the living room window was partially obscured by the large silver birch tree that dominated our front garden, but I knew who the driver was. It was my dad.

By the summer of 1991, my parents had separated; Dad wasn't living with us anymore. It was a surprise visit and, as he walked across the driveway towards the front door, I could see he had something in his hand.

Reaching into the bag, he pulled out a white football shirt. It had red trim on the sleeves and collar, from where three red stripes ran down each shoulder. Sublimated, abstract shapes gave it an almost silver shimmer. The classic Adidas trefoil logo, in red, had a felt effect, as did the club crest, which, in those days, still included the words 'football' and 'club'. Around the badge, to commemorate the recent achievement, were the words, in capital letters: EUROPEAN CUP WINNERS CUP WINNERS 1991. It was a Manchester United shirt. My first-ever replica jersey.

On Wednesday, 15 May 1991, the Red Devils tamed Johan Cruyff's mighty Barcelona, dubbed the Dream Team due to their potency, fluid style of football and stellar line-up of stars. Less than 12 months after that rainy night in Rotterdam, they'd underline their prowess by beating Sampdoria at Wembley to lift the European Cup. They were a serious outfit, with a formidable Cup Winners' Cup pedigree, and they'd just ended Real Madrid's domestic dominance. But on that rainy night in De Kuip, they were no match for the determination and quality of Alex Ferguson's side.

I watched the match at home, perched anxiously on our sofa for 90 minutes. I was eight years old, coming of age as a United fan at just the right time. For me, a boyhood obsession was solidified that night. After nearly four years of struggle, Fergie's hard work was finally paying off. At first, the trophies trickled in. Then the floodgates opened.

The day after the triumph in the Netherlands, tens of thousands – it's always difficult to calculate the exact number – of expectant Mancunians lined the streets to greet their returning heroes, who travelled through Greater Manchester on an open-top bus, clutching the silver trophy. At the time, my dad's company had a first-floor office on Washway Road in Sale, opposite what was then a nightclub, and diagonally across from where stood the now-demolished Trafford Magistrates' Court.

We waited patiently, hanging out of the window, looking left towards Altrincham for a first sighting of the bus, slowly making its way up the A56 towards the city centre. The pavements thronged with people, although the road was empty, closed to traffic. That was until Les, someone of short stature from Ashton-upon-Mersey, who lived round

the corner from my nana, rode down the middle of the main road on his bike, greeted by loud cheers. He lapped up the attention.

My mum held a cardboard sign. Written in large letters in black marker pen ink were the words, ‘Get Your Kit Off, Les!’, referring to the late goalkeeper Les Sealey, not Les from Ashton-upon-Mersey, I assume. It was embarrassing at the time, although, looking back now, quite funny. Every time the subject of Sealey or the Cup Winners’ Cup comes up in conversation, we laugh about it. Speaking to Les’s son, Joe, for the book, I told him about the sign, and he thought it was hilarious. Eventually, the bus passed our window. Mum waved her sign. I marvelled at the men on top of the bus. Les kept his kit on.

It wasn’t long after, in August, the opening day of the 1991/92 season, that I went to my first match at Old Trafford. Dad was busy – he played a good standard of amateur football – so I went with his best friend, Colin. We boarded the train – this was before the Metrolink network sprawled across Greater Manchester – at Dane Road. I remember clutching a bag of Maltesers. It was just two stops to what was then Warwick Road station, now renamed Old Trafford. We walked from the station, past the cricket ground and across Chester Road. As the stadium came into view, the excitement grew with every step.

After hearing the unmistakable *clickety clack* of the turnstiles, we made our way to our seats in the South Stand (now renamed in honour of club icon, the late Sir Bobby Charlton). Then came the moment seared on to the brain of every football fan: the first walk up the steps and out into the arena. The azure, August sky enveloped the

stadium; the red seats and the green grass soon came into view. To my left, on top of the Stretford End, was the iconic Wonderfuel Gas advertisement from British Gas. What had been a television show was now stretched out in front of my eyes, in the flesh, in vivid technicolour.

I don't remember much of the match itself. But then, going to the match isn't always about what happens on the pitch. It's about memories. Feelings. Relationships. Togetherness. Rotterdam hero Mark Hughes and Captain Marvel Bryan Robson downed Neil Warnock's newly promoted Notts County 2-0.

I never went to a United match with my dad. Instead, most Saturdays, I followed his team across Greater Manchester, Cheshire and Merseyside. My mum played the stereotypical fatherly role, sourcing tickets for me until I was able to do so myself. Dad passed away from cancer in 2009, at just 48. I still have the shirt he gave me. I pulled it out of the loft recently. It seems tiny, not as brilliant white as it once was. Full of bobbles and loose threads. I doubt it would fetch much on the thriving, nostalgic market for replica shirts. But it's a gift I'll treasure forever and wouldn't part with for any amount of money. Because it was my first shirt, because it was given to me by my dad. There aren't many photos of me and my dad – I grew up in an era before every inane moment was captured on smartphones. Therefore, the earliest, tangible item I can cling to from our relationship is this shirt. To me, that makes the Cup Winners' Cup of 1991 even more special.

It's momentous to countless others as well for a myriad different reasons. Most fans who went to Rotterdam say it was one of, if not the, best night of their lives following

United. It was a pivotal moment in the career of Alex Ferguson, now a Sir, and the trajectory of modern-day Manchester United. The FA Cup win, Fergie's first trophy in Manchester, was celebrated with gusto. But United were no strangers to the FA Cup and indeed won it twice under Ron Atkinson in the mid-1980s. Atkinson was sacked a little over a year after the second triumph. Erik ten Hag and Louis van Gaal were handed their P45s not long after lifting the prestigious trophy. Winning it in 1990 was special, but it didn't guarantee a new dawn. It may sound arrogant, but the litmus test of a manager's capabilities at Old Trafford was and always will be the league and continental competition.

European football is in United's DNA. The Munich disaster, the defining moment in the club's history, was part of a tragic story that saw the club defy English football's authorities to fly the flag on the continent to compete against Europe's best. Rushing back from Belgrade – where they'd faced Red Star in the quarter-final of the European Cup – to fulfil domestic duties, the plane took a refuelling stop in Munich, never making it off the icy runway. The Busby Babes were decimated. Their manager clung to life.

Ten years later, Matt Busby's astonishing arc, from his deathbed to a Wembley date with Eusébio's Benfica, was concluded. Two goals from Charlton and one apiece from George Best and Brian Kidd gave United the iconic trophy and capped off a decade-long struggle to reach the pinnacle of the sport from the ashes of Munich. It's a comeback story a Hollywood scriptwriter could only dream of conjuring up.

Rotterdam was United's first continental final since that night in London in May 1968. United were popular in 1991, even beyond England's shores, but it mustn't be forgotten

that at the dawn of the 90s the club wasn't the global behemoth that we know it as today. Like the pioneering venture of the late 50s, United were guinea pigs once again, along with Aston Villa, the first English clubs to compete in Europe after the lifting of the ban imposed by UEFA on English clubs in the wake of the Heysel disaster in 1985 and the rampant hooliganism that had come to define the sport.

Ferguson's second trophy in as many seasons proved the FA Cup was no fluke. It also showed that his side could compete with the best on any given day. Now all that was left was to remain consistently brilliant over the course of a league season and win the title for the first time since 1967. That's what the club craved, and that would come in time. As he promised, Ferguson knocked Liverpool off their fucking perch, like he did with the Old Firm when he was managing Aberdeen north of the border.

This was a special campaign for United, and a time of great promise for English football and society. Looking back now, we can cherish the classic kits and the old heroes. Football before the Premier League and bloated, somewhat predictable European competitions. When you could stand with your mates at football grounds and spontaneously pay cash on the gate.

The rain-soaked night under the dark Rotterdam skies is a momentous milestone in the history of this grand club. Flags. Bucket hats. Denim jeans. Replica shirts. James's 'Sit Down' booming from the speakers after the final whistle. *If I hadn't seen such riches, I could live with being poor.* This is the story of the 1991 Cup Winners' Cup triumph.