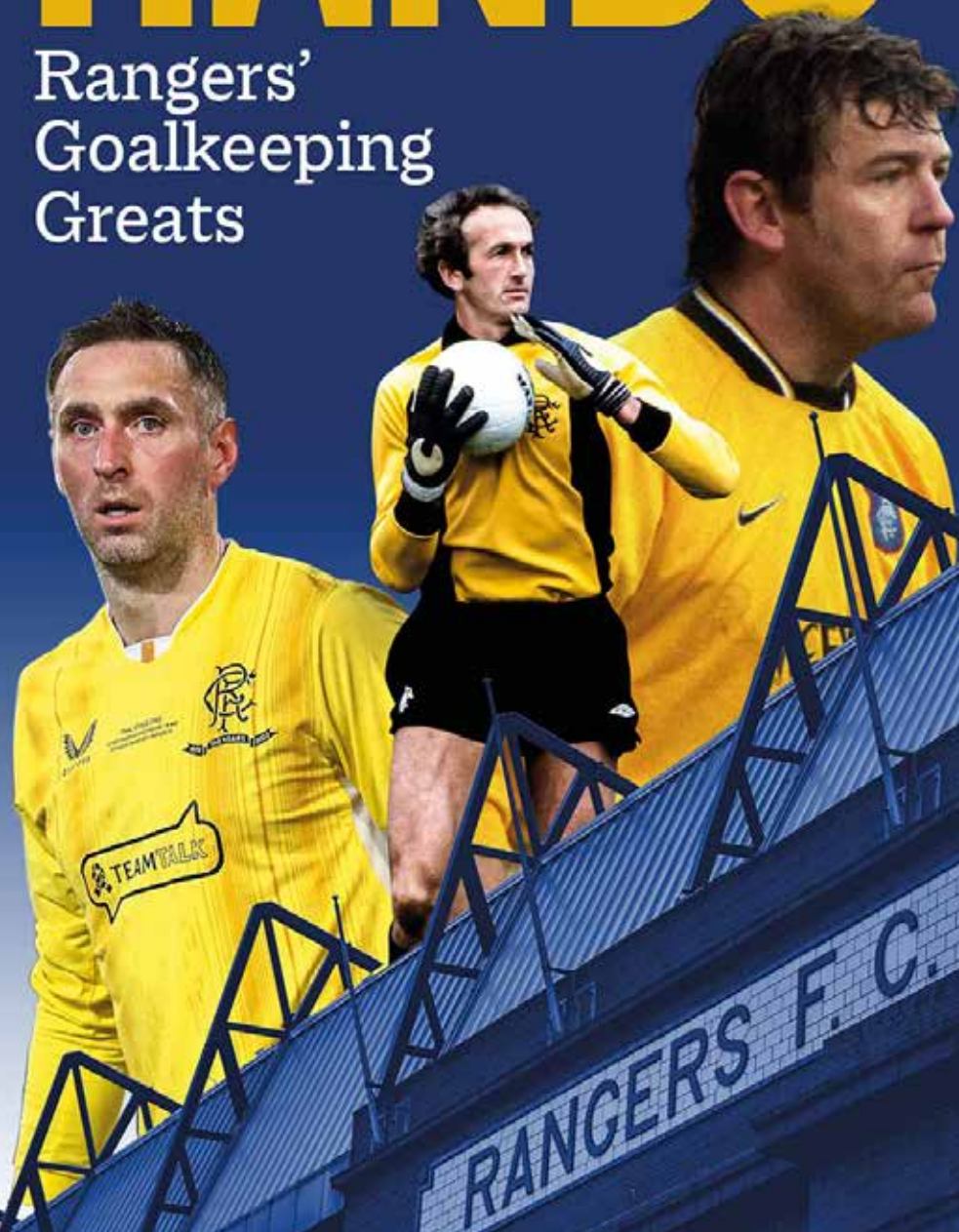


Alistair Aird

IN SAFE HANDS

Rangers'
Goalkeeping
Greats



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Foreword by

Michael Beale



Contents

| | |
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| Foreword By Michael Beale | 7 |
| Introduction: Who wants to be the Goalie? | 9 |
| 1. The Days of the Founding Fathers. | 13 |
| 2. The First Regular Custodians. | 20 |
| 3. The Inter-War Years | 43 |
| 4. The Iron Curtain and the Swinging Sixties | 62 |
| 5. Triumph, Trebles and Tough Times | 99 |
| 6. Turbulence and Transition | 117 |
| 7. Rangers Reborn | 143 |
| 8. The Goalie | 159 |
| 9. On the Double | 193 |
| 10. A Different Perspective on The Goalie | 206 |
| 11. The Dawn of a New Era | 209 |
| 12. Der Goalie | 227 |
| 13. Revolt Rather than Revolution. | 239 |
| 14. Greegsy. | 244 |
| 15. Alexander in Adversity. | 267 |
| 16. The Journey Concludes (Eventually). | 286 |
| 17. A Wise Move for Wes | 296 |
| 18. Return of the Mac | 302 |
| 19. The Present and the Future | 311 |
| Postscript: A View from the Training Ground | 327 |
| Appendix – Stat Attack. | 338 |

Chapter 1

The Days of the Founding Fathers

FINDING EVIDENCE of starting line-ups for some of the early matches played by Rangers is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. For example, according to the excellent compendium, *Rangers – The Complete Record*, ten players are recognised as having played in the club's first-ever match against Callander in May 1872, but it is unclear if any of those named kept goal in that match.

What is clear, though, is that when Rangers played Clyde – a different variant to the one that Rangers would regularly cross swords with over the years – at Flesher's Haugh on Glasgow Green on 20 September 1873, a D. Smith was the goalkeeper. Unlike today, when the goalkeeper is named first in the line-up, Smith was listed last with the word 'goal' in brackets after his name. Each of the four founding fathers – Moses McNeil, Peter McNeil, Peter Campbell and William McBeath – played in what was a comprehensive victory, with McBeath's performance being 'greatly admired' as he 'cleverly made six goals'.

Smith is also listed in the line-up when a team called Argyle, featuring the McNeil brothers, Tom Vallance, McBeath and Campbell, drew with Clyde a couple of months earlier, but this fixture appears to be one of only a handful of matches Smith played for Rangers. He is also in the line-ups for matches against

Gramby in January 1874 and Kelvinside in September 1874, but the next recognised goalkeeper after Smith seems to be a chap called John Yuille.

He was between the posts for a 0-0 draw against Star (later Vale of Leven) on 19 September 1874, and is credited with having played in each of the 15 matches listed in McElroy and Ferrier's *Rangers – The Complete Record* for season 1874/75. Remarkably, he conceded only two goals in those fixtures.

And Yuille has a place in the annals of Rangers Football Club. On 10 October 1874, Rangers competed in the Scottish Cup for the first time, taking on Oxford at Queen's Park's Recreation Ground. Rangers won 2-0, and Yuille kept goal thus earning the distinction of being the first goalkeeper to play in a Scottish Cup tie for Rangers.

Yuille would feature eight times the following season too. He conceded four goals in a 4-0 defeat against Vale of Leven, and he was also involved in the controversial Scottish Cup defeat against Third Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers.

Peter Campbell's goal looked to have won the tie for Rangers, but Third Lanark lodged an appeal on the grounds that Rangers had kicked off at the start of the first half and the second half. The appeal was upheld, and Rangers lost the replayed match 2-1.

Cue protestations from Rangers – the Thirds goalkeeper had apparently donned 'plain clothes' so couldn't be set apart from the crowd that gathered behind his goal, while John Hunter, who had scored Third Lanark's opening goal, had used his hands to do so – but they were rejected. Thirds made it to the final where they lost to Queen's Park.

Seven days after the defeat against Third Lanark, John Yuille looks to have played for Rangers for the final time – the Light Blues lost 2-0 against Queen's Park – and for the seasons that followed the goalkeeping position was in a state of flux.

James Watt played the majority of games in season 1876/77, including the Scottish Cup Final trilogy against Vale of Leven. And Watt was also in goal when Rangers were thrashed 4-0 by Queen's Park in the final of the Glasgow Merchants' Charity Cup.

The following season, David Hill started the first game of the season against Beith in goal but made the rest of his appearances as an outfield player. Hill was one of NINE players who played in goal during that campaign by Rangers (there may have been more than that too, since some of the line-ups from games played have not been traced). Watt was one of them, but his Rangers career effectively ended when he conceded five goals against Vale of Leven in a Scottish Cup fourth-round replay. Rangers had been rampant in the early rounds, knocking in 34 goals in their opening three matches, but came a cropper in a replayed fourth-round tie, losing five goals without reply.

Watt became club president in 1876 and served the club as honorary treasurer too. Along with captain Tom Vallance, Watt played an instrumental role in the protestations that were presented to the SFA in the wake of the 1897 Scottish Cup Final. More on that later.

Watt, who was a partner in Dimmack and Watt, the iron and steel merchants, died on 22 March 1898. He was suffering from heart disease. He is buried in Craigton Cemetery.

Combining playing outfield and in goal was not uncommon in that era. Indeed, two of the founding fathers, Peter Campbell and Moses McNeil, did so. Campbell played in goal during a 2-0 defeat against Caledonian on 9 April 1879, while McNeil did likewise in a 1-1 draw against First Lanark RV on 7 December 1878. And Alick Vallance, brother of Tom, was another who took his turn in goal too, playing there three times in season 1878/79.

George Gillespie played in goal more than most, though. He initially played as a left-back, a position he occupied in Rangers'

first-ever Scottish Cup Final appearance in 1877. He started the following season on the left-hand side of defence too, but when James Watt was absent for the Scottish Cup tie at home to Alexandra Athletic, Gillespie took over in goal. Rangers won 8-0, Peter Campbell and Moses McNeil both scoring hat-tricks.

Thereafter, Gillespie emerged as arguably the best Scottish goalkeeper at that time. In the Scottish Cup campaign of 1878/79, Gillespie was the number one. He played in six of the seven ties – all but one as goalkeeper – including the final against Vale of Leven that ended 1-1.

Rangers refused to replay. Leading 1-0 courtesy of a goal from Willie Struthers, they looked to have gone further ahead when Struthers headed in a cross from Willie Dunlop. The goal was chalked off, the officials insisting that Struthers was in an offside position. Three minutes from time, Vale of Leven equalised to force a replay. Gillespie seems to have been culpable in the concession of the goal, misjudging the shot from Ferguson, thinking it was going wide.

Perhaps in a portent of things to come, the SFA considered a protest from Rangers regarding the legitimacy of their second goal but upheld the result. A date of 26 April was set for the replay, but while the Vale of Leven players turned up at Hampden, Gillespie and his team-mates were enjoying a day at the races! Vale of Leven were awarded the trophy.

George Gillespie was still keeping goal in 1883, although in the intervening period he had played at right-back, left-back, left-half, inside-right and outside-left too. He even notched up some goals, scoring in a 10-0 win over Arbroath in October 1879, netting in an 8-0 win over Caledonian in February 1881 and he was also on the scoresheet when Hibernians were beaten 9-3 towards the end of April 1881.

George was also capped for Scotland. He won the first of seven caps against Wales at the original Hampden Park on 27 March

1880, the same day Rangers were thumping Drumpellier 11-0. He kept goal again when Scotland travelled to London to face England a year later, playing his part in a rousing 6-1 victory. He won two further caps as a Rangers player, matches against Wales in Wrexham and England at Hampden, both of which ended in 5-1 wins for Scotland.

Gillespie played in goal for Rangers for the last time on 24 November 1883. Rangers lost 5-2 at home to Queen's Park. He moved to Queen's Park a few months later and was in goal when the Spiders won the Scottish Cup in 1886 and 1890. Less than ten years later, in February 1900, George passed away, aged 42.

It was a chap called Willie Chalmers who took over from Gillespie in season 1883/84. Chalmers made 26 appearances that season, keeping six clean sheets. One of those was in a 10-0 thrashing of Abercorn in March 1884. Charlie Heggie, who himself had played in goal since he joined the club, scored six goals in that match. Abercorn must have been sick of the sight of the Rangers attackers; less than a fortnight later, they lost 9-2 although the scorers in that game are not known.

Chalmers was the principal custodian for the next three seasons. In the second of those seasons, Willie endured a 10-2 defeat against Airdrieonians at Kinning Park, Rangers' worst-ever defeat. There had been heavy snow in Glasgow to such an extent that this match was the only one to go ahead in the city. This was at the behest of the Rangers committee, but the visitors mastered the conditions better and doled out a real hammering.

Chalmers was most unfortunate. In the ten games that followed the Airdrie mauling, he conceded a further 27 goals. Among those games were matches against Bolton Wanderers and Blackburn Rovers. And on 6 November 1886, he conceded five goals in a match against Dumbarton. Rangers recovered from 5-0 down to draw the match 5-5, but they got another hiding on 3 January 1887.

They faced Preston North End away from home, and Chalmers was beaten eight times.

But Willie Chalmers does have a place in Rangers' history. He is one of only seven Rangers players to have been an ever-present in what was the club's first and to date only appearance in the English FA Cup. Chalmers kept clean sheets against Everton and Lincoln City as Rangers went all the way to the semi-final. However, the journey ended at that point, Chalmers conceding three goals as Rangers lost 3-1 against Aston Villa at Nantwich Road in Crewe.

Willie Chalmers made his last appearance for Rangers on 17 September 1887. He conceded three goals in a 3-2 home defeat against Dumbarton. A month earlier he had lost eight goals as the first Ibrox Park was opened, visitors Preston North End gate-crashing the party by winning 8-1.

The following season, on 28 May 1888, Rangers faced a team called Celtic in what was the latter's first-ever fixture. Jimmy Nicol was the goalkeeper, and he conceded five goals in a 5-2 defeat. Thankfully, Rangers would fare much better over the years as the Old Firm rivalry evolved.

A couple of years later the Scottish League was formed. Rangers were one of ten teams to contest the first-ever title race, and the man trying to keep out the opposition attackers was, for the most part, David Guthrie Reid.

Born on 7 June 1865 in Milton, Reid made his first appearance for Rangers on 2 May 1885. That was in the second replay of a Glasgow Merchants' Charity Cup first-round tie against Dumbarton at the second Hampden Park. Rangers lost 2-0.

Over the next couple of seasons, Reid would compete with the likes of Willie Chalmers and Jimmy Nicol for the goalkeeper's jersey, but by season 1889/90, he seemed to be the favoured option. He played in all four Scottish Cup ties and four of the five matches played in the Glasgow Cup. Both campaigns ended before the final;

Queen's Park winning 2-0 in the semis of the Glasgow Cup, while Vale of Leven triumphed 3-2 after a replay in the third round of the Scottish Cup. Reid also played in 13 other matches, including a 6-2 thrashing at home to Everton.

In what would prove to be a historical season for Rangers, Reid played in 16 of the 18 league matches in 1890/91, conceding 25 goals. He kept a clean sheet in five of those 16 games. Alick McKenzie took over for the two league matches Reid missed, 1-1 draws against Cowlairs and Abercorn. Reid also played in the play-off that was ordered after Rangers and Dumbarton ended up tied at the top on 29 points. Although Rangers were 2-0 ahead at half-time, the Sons scored twice after the interval and the first-ever Scottish title was shared.

After quitting the game, Reid carried on the family business as a muslin manufacturer. He passed away on 5 November 1941 at the age of 76.

It's fair to say that the position of goalkeeper changed hands numerous times in the first 20 years of Rangers' existence. But that was soon about to change, and as the world saw out the last years of the 19th century, Rangers finally found regularity in the last line of their defence.