

God is Brazilian

by

Josh Lacey

Tempus, 2005

ISBN: 978-0752434148

“Fascinating.” - *The Daily Telegraph*

“A good story well told and keenly researched.” - *The Observer*

“As Charlie Miller might have put it, a dashed fine read.” - *The Sunday Telegraph*

Introduction

The rich kids from Mackenzie College have been let out early. They're standing on the pavement, sucking a surreptitious cigarette, jostling and gossiping, waiting for their mums or dads or chauffeurs to whip them home. Some of them, the squares, the swots, proudly wear the school's uniform - a sweatshirt emblazoned with a big red capital M - and others hide their allegiance under a Benetton jumper or a black leather jacket. Massive cars with tinted windows jam the road, queuing to pause beside the group. A gleaming silver S-class Mercedes eases to a standstill. The passenger door swings open. A teenager pushes forwards, waves to her classmates, leaps inside and tosses her satchel onto the back seat. The door slams. With a snarl, the Mercedes rejoins the traffic, and its place is taken by a Toyota Land Cruiser. A rottweiler hangs out of the back window, blinking, slavering, his tail thumping when one of the boys emerges from the crowd and reaches for the door handle.

This is the old centre of São Paulo, the derelict heart of one of the most dangerous cities on the planet. That's what they'll tell you, anyway. Tourists are advised to leave cameras, jewellery and passports in their hotels. Doormen guard the entrance to every apartment block, scrutinising visitors through the boxed eye of a CCTV camera before easing aside the tall metal gates which divide residents from pedestrians, insiders from outsiders. Bullet-proof windows are a standard extra offered on all but the cheapest cars. Residents swap horror stories. Some accept an occasional mugging as an additional urban tax. Others choose to insulate themselves. I know one wealthy woman who has always lived in São Paulo but been robbed only twice in her life - once in Portobello Market, once on Park Lane. On her annual

shopping-trips to London, where she sheds her usual entourage, neglecting the precautions that she always takes at home, she comes into contact with the type of people who could usually get nowhere near her. Here in São Paulo, they wouldn't get within touching distance. In the sprawling suburbs of a city whose population is roaring towards twenty million, most of whom wallow in dismal poverty, the rich spend their lives cocooned behind high walls and toughened glass, protected from the streets by barbed wire, reinforced steel, underfed dogs and taut bodyguards with bulky shoulder holsters. Many of the middle-class never even come into the centre of São Paulo. They recognise the city's oldest monuments only from pictures, and don't even know the names of these historic streets. It's too dangerous, they say. Too scary. Nothing will tempt them to desert their anodyne suburbs and hygienic shopping-malls.

Walk for five minutes down the street from Mackenzie College, head through the Praça Republica, and you'll see why. Under the shadow of tall palms, lit by the jaundiced glow of flickering streetlamps, whores and druggies hiss at passers-by, reciting an endless list of promises and invitations. The homeless have pitched their tents on the pavement. A beggar gestures at the stumps of his legs, cauterised above the knees, and stretches out a bruised palm, begging for coins. Stallholders sell pirated tapes, cheap clothes, sugarcane, cigarettes, plastic lighters, counterfeit metro tickets. A child writhes in the gutter, both hands tucked down the front of his shorts, his eyes closed, his mind absent, frazzled by drugs.

The kids from Mackenzie College don't walk anywhere. They emerge from the school in a group and stick together while waiting for their rides. They don't wander. They don't even sneak down the street to the nearest bar, where a bunch of mechanics in blue dungarees are drinking beer. Nor do they glance across the road at

the stolid entrance of the Protestant Cemetery. If they did, they'd see me. I'm standing on the steps, doing nothing, watching them. But they don't look up - they have Prada bags to ogle, and gossip to swap, and scores to settle, and impatient parents to look out for.

There have never been many Protestants in São Paulo, and most of those who did live here took care to die elsewhere, but they were a sufficiently powerful minority to grab a prime slab of real estate to bury the incurable, the accident-prone and the stillborn alongside those oldies who could not endure the long voyage home or the miserable weather that awaited them there. Just like the governors of Mackenzie College, the administrators of this cemetery, the prominent Paulista Protestants, have never seen any reason to move. Over the past few decades, the local area may have lost its lustre, but these wide streets will be gentrified again one day. The rich will return, and pick up where they left off.

I turn around, walk up the stone staircase and pass through the tall black wrought iron gates that protect the cemetery from intruders. Gravel crunches under my feet. A gardener kneels on one of the graves, pulling up weeds. As I pass, he lifts his eyes, and we nod to one another. Looking around, I notice a small army of uniformed gardeners and wardens, striding between the graves, polishing the headstones, keeping an eye on visitors, ejecting strays. For this intimate cemetery, smaller than a country churchyard, the number of attendants seems ludicrous. In Britain, one part-time gardener would do the same work as these eight professionals.

I stroll into the most deserted corner of the graveyard, furthest from the gardeners, and try to forget them. It's a test. Can I convince myself that I am standing in a cemetery in Britain rather than Brazil? The light is different, of course, but I can pretend that the British summer sun occasionally glares with this harsh beauty. The

polished marble, the gravel, the modest crosses, the cropped grass, the mottled stone - all of these could belong to a British churchyard. Looking at the gravestones, I see a succession of recognisably English and Scottish names. As in a cemetery in any British port, they are peppered with an occasional German or Scandinavian. Over there, I can see Hubert James Singleton Boyes, born in Swinton. Here is John Sutherland, originally from Aberdeen, now lying alongside his wife Maria and their three children, Christina, Elizabeth and Archibald. This stone is sacred to the memory of Harriett, beloved wife of F. C. Harrison, born in Nottingham, England, 1868. Beside her, I find Annie Harrison from Maidstone, and Kate Harrison, beloved daughter, born in Croydon, deeply regretted by all who knew her. A large tomb records the Rule family, the plaques beginning with Joseph Edward, born on 28 January 1845, and culminating with Anthony McCulloch MBE, who died on 2 December 2000. On the stones surrounding them, the names read like a roll call in a British classroom: Anderson, Andrews, Baring, Blackford, Campbell, Cotton, Crook, Dickinson, Dulley, Forster, Hall, Holland, Hunter, Lane, Lister, Neal, Nicol, Norris, Perman, Ralston, Scott, Singer, Skinner, Snape, Speers, Warner, White, Wilson, Wrigg.

The repetition of these names might lull me into thinking that I really am walking through a country churchyard in England or Scotland, but one fact repeatedly nags at me, disrupting my pretence. Not the brash sunlight, nor the heat, nor the sound of roaring traffic and the helicopters buzzing overhead, but the empty plots scattered between the marble tombs. In Britain, these unused plots would be grassed-over, neatly-mown, patiently awaiting an owner. Here, they have been put to good use, and turned into miniature vegetable gardens. The fertile soil is covered with neat lines of tomato and rocket. Seed packets perched on sticks remind the gardener what he has planted and where. The tomato plants are tiny, not yet bearing any fruit, but the rocket

looks excellent, pert and crunchy, and I'm tempted to snap off a couple of stalks to check the flavour. Grown in this compost, it must taste great. The bones of long-dead Protestants now make a generous contribution to someone's lunch. Perched among the seedlings, a white card is scrawled with a phone number and a message: sepultura disponível. This grave is available. Call now if you would like to make a reservation.

Down in the other corner, I find what I've come here to see. A family plot, three heavy stone crosses, a succession of black marble rectangles inscribed with brass names and dates. Here is the sister who died before her second birthday. Here is the brother who never saw twenty. Here are the uncles, the cousins, the siblings, who collapsed in this unfamiliar country, their foreign bodies worn down by heat and hard work and the strangeness of it all. And here is the man whom I have come to see. I walk over to him, but he doesn't get up. We stay like that for a few minutes, me standing, him lying down. Neither of us speaks. In the melancholy silence, I try to imagine what he was doing that day in June, a year ago, an hour before dawn. Did he stay right here, lying on his back? Or did he slither out of bed, pad along the gravel to the gates and peer across the road to the cafe? From here, he wouldn't have been able to see the television screen, but he could have watched the cluster of mechanics in their blue dungarees, each of them clutching a beer in one hand, a coffee in the other, all of them united as they shouted encouragement at the players, their players, their heroes. From the expressions on their faces, their yells of joy or cries of horror, he would have been able to tell who was winning. When the game ended and the wrong side won, he turned his back on their delirious whooping and sloped back to bed.

That day, I was in London, sitting on the sofa with my wife, staring at the blurry screen of our small telly. My eyes hurt. We drank coffee. My wife was going to be late for work, but no-one in her office would mind. No-one would even notice.

That day, everyone would be late, not only in her office but throughout the country. Outside, the usual sounds of commuter traffic, squealing brakes and furious horns, had been replaced by unexpected noises - birdsong, a distant rumbling train, a child's voice.

Later, I talked to a friend of mine who lives in Brazil. Not being a football fan, she hadn't bothered getting up at 3 a.m. to watch the game. Nevertheless, she was woken by the echoing shouts of despair or elation which greeted every goal. And they must have been bloody loud: she lives on the twenty-seventh floor of a tower block in the centre of São Paulo.

For two hours on that Friday morning, the streets were deserted in England and Brazil. Their populations clustered around TV sets, watching two teams kick a white ball around a grassy rectangle. This particular beautiful game was inconveniently timed for both of them - rush hour in Britain, pre-dawn in Brazil - having been planned for the convenience of spectators in Japan and Korea, but that didn't matter. Commuters missed their trains. Schools started late. In the absence of war, nations need a focus, a collective obsession which unites their citizens, and this was ours.

For those of us who watched it in England, the match was a dreary disappointment. The English team wilted in the heat and crumbled under the Brazilian onslaught. After ninety minutes, eleven Englishmen stood on the pitch with slumped shoulders, weary, weeping like children, wondering what had hit them. It can have been little consolation for Seaman, Beckham, Campbell or Ferdinand to remember that this particular sport had been introduced to Brazil by a British man who played for Southampton.

But they probably didn't know. Not many people do. Charles Miller has been forgotten. A good proportion of Brazilians recognise his name, but even well-educated football fans can recite no more than a few inaccurate facts about his life. In Britain, no-one has a clue who he was, just as no-one knows why A C Milan isn't called A C Milano or Dynamo Moscow play in blue and white shirts.

Charles William Miller was born in Brazil but, like most of the sons of wealthier expatriates and Empire builders, he went Back Home for his education. At the frail age of nine, he was put on a ship and sent to a boarding-school in Britain. Ten years later, Charles sailed back to Brazil. On the long voyage, he practised his ball skills, dribbling from one end of the deck to the other. From his education, he had only learnt one lesson that really mattered to him: the rules of football. His talent matched his enthusiasm. Having captained his school team, he played for the St Mary's Church of England Young Men's Association (now better known as Southampton FC) and the famous Corinthians.

When the ship docked in Santos, Charles discovered to his horror that no-one knew how to play the beautiful game. The expatriate community retained many British customs - cricket on Sundays, afternoon tea at four, visiting-cards on silver trays - but not football. Charles had found his mission. He summoned his friends, divided them into two teams and explained the rules.

A hundred and eight years later, England holds its breath while Ronaldhino lines up a free kick. The ball soars, dips, slithers into the back of the net. Brazil leaps to its feet. In England, people put their hands over their eyes, then peek through their fingers to watch the replay. There it is again. There goes Seaman, wandering off his line. There goes the ball. And we've let those sneaky Brazilians grab another. A few minutes later, the scorer of that audacious goal gets himself sent off, but ten

Brazilians seem to have no difficulty defending their lead against eleven Englishmen, and the game ends 2-1. Brazil heads towards the semi-final. England stands on the pitch, dazed, blinking, weepy.

What would Charles Miller have thought? What would he have done if he had been there? Would he have hugged Rio Ferdinand and patted Beckham on the back? Would he have brushed away David Seaman's tears with a white silk hankie?

No - he would have reminded them which shirt they were wearing, and why, and what it meant to wear those colours, to own that cap, to represent that country. I can see him now, hurrying back and forth across the pitch, going from player to player, whispering a few words of encouragement to each, telling them the words that had resounded throughout his own life. Play up! Play up! And play the game!

o - o - o

At the end of the nineteenth century, the British were everywhere. Wherever they went, they took their values. As Jan Morris writes, "There were tastes and taboos so pungently British that the whole world knew them, and expected them to be honoured. *The Times*, the club, leaving the gentlemen to their cigars, the stiff upper lip, hunting halloos at midnight by tight young subalterns on guest nights, bacon and eggs, walking around the deck a hundred times each morning, cricket, *Abide With Me* - all these were imperial emblems, symptoms of Britishness, parodied and envied everywhere." Britons amused themselves - and created their cohesive sense of identity - with famous and warmly-remembered stories of pride, pluck and politeness. There were the two Englishmen whose paths crossed in some vast, barren desert, but neither even nodded to one another because they had not been formally introduced. There

was the colonist who died of thirst on the banks of a river, unable to drink because he had no cup. These charming, idiotic and obviously untrue stories gave the world a keen sense of Britishness. And if someone failed to see the funny side, the Brits could always shout for help, and the world's biggest navy would come steaming down the coast.

The Victorians built an army of strong-chinned young chaps, tough-minded and broad-shouldered, ready to defend Britain and the Empire against the encroaching hordes. Wherever they went, these strapping young men took their games. Golf to America in the 1790s. Cricket to Barbados in 1806. Rugby to New Zealand in 1870. Football to Japan in 1874. And so on around the world. Although many of the players might have claimed that they were simply showing the natives a jolly good way to spend an afternoon, there is no doubt that many civil servants, administrators and theorists of the Empire understood exactly why games should be encouraged. Team sports instilled team ethics, displayed the importance of rules and regulations, and sublimated sexual desire. Manliness and muscle, self-reliance and independence, temperance and team spirit, fair play and patriotism – imperial games imposed imperial values..

When these ideals came into contact with other cultures, strange things happened. The rules of soccer might have stayed the same in London and Lhasa, Birmingham and Buenos Aires, Dundee and Delhi, Southampton and São Paulo, but the players and spectators added their own innovations, instilling a sniff of their individual culture, sneaking under the skin of their rulers, using a feint, a move, a pass, which would never have occurred to their imperial overlords.

Brazil was not part of the British Empire, but British values, institutions, expertise and money permeated the country. Even São Paulo, a provincial little town

of only twenty thousand people, plopped in the middle of uninteresting farmland, had a strong British community which led a determinedly colonial existence. During the nineteenth century, South America had much stronger emotional, economic and cultural ties to Europe than to North America. The sophisticates of Rio de Janeiro or Buenos Aires would follow every change in artistic or cultural fashion in Paris, Berlin and London, but turn up their noses at anyone who chose to live in a hick town like New York or San Francisco. Likewise, the tight historical links between England and Portugal led directly to strong ties between Britain and Brazil. When the Portuguese Royal Family fled from Napoleon, they sailed from Lisbon to Rio under British escort. London banks supplied the capital that paid for Brazil's expansion, and the country's official bankers were the Rothschilds. Brazilian gold funded Britain's Industrial Revolution. British engineers built railways, ports and bridges, creating an infrastructure to facilitate Brazil's economic expansion, while British manufactures exploited the Brazilian markets for their goods. This led to some ludicrous anomalies. If you were a Victorian visitor to Brazil, you probably would have returned to Britain with some nice souvenirs of your travels. A decorated knife, perhaps, or a frilly ethnic shawl. But you probably wouldn't have realised that both the knife and the shawl had been made in Scotland, and exported across the Atlantic to Brazil. While you wandered through the streets of Sao Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, admiring the local colour, you might have bought a bag of Brazil nuts to fend off hunger pangs. There can nothing more Brazilian than Brazil nuts, can there? Maybe not, but any Brazil nuts eaten in São Paulo would have arrived in the city via Liverpool. Grown and harvested in Manaus (a city in the north of Brazil), they were transported across the Atlantic to Merseyside, cleaned, sorted and packaged in Liverpoolian factories, then sent back across the Atlantic to Santos (a port in the south of Brazil).

Along with cash, trade and railways, the British brought football. When Charles Miller sailed from Southampton in 1894, his luggage contained eight items which would change the course of Brazilian history: an air pump, two football shirts, a pair of football boots, a book of rules and two footballs. Now, hardly more than a hundred years later, Brazil is the undisputed ruler of world football, winning the World Cup with infuriating regularity, producing an endless stream of players who make the rest of us look like lumbering loons.

The spread of football from Britain to Brazil is a story with many ramifications, and acts as a neat riposte to anyone who is fearful of cultural imperialism. The English may have invented the rules of football, and the British may have carried the balls and the rulebooks in their imperial baggage, but Brazilians took to the game with unexpected skill and enthusiasm, and quickly re-made it in their own image. A hundred years later, talents and skills are flowing back the other way. In Britain, just as all over Europe, home-grown players display the skills and techniques which they have learnt from their Brazilian colleagues. The gift is being repaid.

o – o – o

In 2002, having beaten England, the Brazilian team raced past Turkey in the semis, and faced Germany in the final. During slack moments in the game, TV cameras swept across the crowd crammed into the stadium, usually zooming in on the green and yellow bikinis bouncing on the terraces. At one moment, as the camera searched for lithe Brazilian babes, the picture picked out a long, slim banner waving among the fans. Whoever painted the banner had used English rather than Portuguese so the

whole world would understand. In big bold capitals, they had painted three words on the white material: GOD IS BRAZILIAN.

Deus é brasileiro. It's a well-known phrase in Brazil, summing up something about the country, although perhaps no-one is quite sure exactly what. Nowadays, it would be impossible to say "God is an Englishman" without sarcasm, but the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo retain a quiet confidence that God really is Brazilian. If He came to earth, they feel sure, the Almighty would choose to live in Brazil. Who wouldn't? Take a stroll down the hot sand at Copacabana, and you might see Him, playing football on one of the impromptu pitches. He'll be barefoot, wearing shorts and a t-shirt, running as if He doesn't even notice the heat. He picks up a loose ball, dodges past one defender, then another, and fires an unstoppable shot at the goal.

Just like God, football is Brazilian. A hundred years ago, both of them might have been English, but there's no doubt where they live today. Charlie Miller can't be blamed for the deficiencies of the English football team, but he does bear the ultimate responsibility for the brilliance of the Brazilians. If Charlie Miller hadn't carried a couple of footballs across the Atlantic in 1894, Brazil might never have fallen in love with the game, and God might still be an Englishman.

This is the introduction to *God is Brazilian* by Josh Lacey, published by Tempus in 2005. (ISBN: 978-0752434148).

“Fascinating.”

The Daily Telegraph

“A good story well told and keenly researched.”

The Observer

“As Charlie Miller might have put it, a dashed fine read.”

The Sunday Telegraph

“When reviewing a book, one usually skips through the pages as one cannot take weeks over it. But I did as I really found it interesting and read it word for word.”

The Buenos Aires Herald

For more information or to contact the author:

<http://www.joshlacey.com>

josh@joshlacey.com