

The Daily Telegraph, 7 May 2005

Review by James Flint

In 1894, Charles Miller stepped off the steamer Magdalena and onto the dock of the Brazilian port of Santos. A hundred years later to the day, Brazilians held a nationwide party to celebrate this event. Why? Because in his baggage, Charlie carried two deflated footballs, a football shirt, and a pair of football boots. With these simple tools, he'd change the course of the country's history - and, in time, he'd change the world.

Miller didn't want to change the world. He just wanted to play football. Born in Brazil to an English mother and a Scottish father, he'd grown up ignorant of the game. He learned it at Banister Court, the small private establishment in Hampshire to which he was sent, aged 10, for his schooling, and soon found it the perfect refuge in which to hide from the rigours of a Victorian education and the series of disasters that befell his distant family, including the death of both his brother and his father.

Just as the school intended, Miller's football skills and his stiff upper lip developed side by side: a few days after his brother died, he won a game for Banister Court with such verve that he was asked to play both for St Mary's, a local Southampton side, and Corinthians, the famous team of aristocrats who scorned professionalism and the organised leagues and deigned to play the winners of early FA Cups only in order to demonstrate how easily they could beat them.

When Miller returned to Brazil the following year, he spent the entire voyage practising his ball skills on the deck, hoping to join one of the SCo Paulo clubs on arrival. He didn't expect to discover that not only were there no SCo Paulo clubs, but that football was still entirely unknown in his adopted country. Undaunted, he gathered a group of friends, taught them how to play the game, and eventually started a league of his own.

Josh Lacey uses Miller's extraordinary life as a springboard for sketching the wider landscape of the little documented British-Brazilian colonial adventure. And he does it as a novelist might, with plenty of imaginative *mise en scHne* and an eye for the entertaining diversion that ends up taking us to the heart of things. So we get the story of the San Paulo Railway, designed by the 26-year-old engineer Daniel Fox to negotiate a tortuous mountain range and link SCo Paulo - effectively the railhead for the region's coffee plantations - with the coast. "The very design of the railway is emblematic of a confident imperial power at the height of its influence," Lacey writes. "Just as the Romans drove their roads directly across a landscape, refusing to deviate for piddling irritations such as hills or ravines, [so Daniel Fox] stood at the base of the mountain, saw his destination at the top, and drew a line between the two."

The railway went on to become one of the most profitable in the world, the financial mainstay of what was soon to be a flourishing ex-pat British community, which in stereotypical fashion soon set about trying to impose its values of morality, hard-work and timeliness on the "limp, lackadaisical natives" by building a large clock tower in the centre of the growing town.

Less impressive, but rather more amusing, is the tale of the American opportunist and journalist James Harden-Hickey who, in flight from a trail of bad debts, worse novels and libel actions, came across a lump of uninhabited rock in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Never one to pass up a pointless waste of energy he rowed ashore, took possession, and promptly declared himself King -- King James I of Trinidad, to be precise. It seemed like a merry jape until Britain and Brazil nearly went to war over the place, at which point Harden-Hickey found himself sidelined and ignored. He ended up dead by his own hand in a lonely motel room in New Mexico, penniless except for the crown he'd had commissioned.

And then there's the football. Lacey proves a cogent and entertaining commentator (if you'll excuse the pun) who never gets bogged down in detail or carried away with his own enthusiasm as he gives us the Brazilian perspective on soccer's early history and tracks the vicious battles between amateurism and professionalism on both sides of the Atlantic, and the tussle between the British game and an American rival - basketball - for continental domination (football wins).

The older I get, the more I grow to love the beautiful game, in all its awesome ugliness. Books such as the gently fascinating *God is Brazilian* are doing a lot to make me understand just why it deserves the name.

The Observer, 4 Dec 2005

Charlie Miller is the forgotten man of football's founding fathers, but arguably one of the most important, having taken the game to Brazil in 1894. Josh Lacey proves an accomplished guide to the life and times of Miller in this overdue biography. It's a good story well told and keenly researched, yet curiously dispassionate in its telling. Brazil is the spiritual home of football, but there's little sense of Brazilians' passion and love of the game except in the last couple of chapters when Lacey considers the contemporary resonance of Miller's import. Overall, though, this is a strong and imaginative debut from a young writer.

The Sunday Telegraph, 10 November 2005

Review by Andrew Baker

Think of Brazilian football, the rhythms, the joy, the self-expression, and it is easy to assume that the sport evolved in the South American country as naturally as sugar cane and samba. But the football authorities in Brazil date the birth of the sport there to the day in October 1894 that a young Anglo-Scottish man named Charles Miller stepped ashore at the port of Santos, carrying a football under each arm.

God is Brazilian (Tempus, £20), by Josh Lacey, is the story of how the sporting enthusiasm of one man ignited a passion in the Brazilian nation that would lead to World Cup glory and international superstardom for the likes of Pele, Ronaldo and Ronaldinho. Without Charles Miller, Brazilian history would not have been the same.

Fitting to note, then, that Miller was not arriving as a newcomer, but returning home. He

was born in Sao Paolo on Nov 24, 1874, the son of a prosperous merchant of Scottish descent. Like many children of colonial families, young Charlie was sent back to "the old country" to be educated, and at the age of nine he enrolled at Banister Court School near Southampton.

This was not an academic powerhouse. There were just three teachers, and the emphasis was on the development of character rather than intellect. But the headmaster was convinced that frequent and rigorous exercise would prevent the minds of his charges from straying to baser matters, and Charlie Miller discovered he had great aptitude for cricket, and greater still for football.

In his late teens he played for the Hampshire senior football team and turned out for St Mary's, a club soon to become better known as Southampton FC. The age of professionalism was dawning and Miller could have earned a handy living as a centre forward with a top-class club. Alternatively, he might have become a clerk and played his football with Corinthians, then the country's leading amateur side, who were keen to have him.

But instead, perhaps concerned for his mother in Sao Paolo, perhaps disappointed by his failure to gain election to the Hampshire FA, Miller boarded the steamer Magdalena for the long passage back to Brazil.

On arrival he was horrified to find that while cricket thrived at the Sao Paolo Athletic Club, the social centre of the city's British contingent, football was unknown. Miller invited 21 members of the club to meet him on a patch of wasteground on a Sunday soon after he arrived in the city. Only 10 showed up, and one of those tried to cry off. But that little party played the first organised game of football on Brazilian soil and a fortnight later there were 22 players: enough for the real thing.

Life in Sao Paolo was challenging. Political unrest was rife and anti-British feeling easily stirred up. The heat was often intolerable and there were outbreaks of cholera, yellow fever and bubonic plague. But Miller managed to make progress as an import clerk while transmitting his passion for football to anyone who would listen.

Word spread to the other expatriate communities that the British were playing football on Sundays and soon there were four teams - enough for a league. Miller's SPAC won the trophy for the first three years running, which entitled him to keep the cup. Touring sides came visiting, including the celebrated Corinthians, and the indigenous population were inspired. Clubs sprang up in the city, then all over the country, and the game that Miller had brought with him from Southampton was on the way to becoming a Brazilian religion.

Miller retired as a player and pursued a career in commerce and diplomacy, frequently giving interviews to news-papers keen to celebrate him as the founder of the national game. But not all was rosy: his wife Antonietta, a pianist of some renown, ran off with a radical poet, a liaison that created headlines. Footballers' wives, eh?

This is not a run-of-the-mill sports book. As well as football, the reader will discover a lot

about late 19th century education in Britain, early urban and social development in Brazil, and how to cure yellow fever: "Castor oil. Pump out the stomach. Lime juice and rum. Weak tea. No food for a fortnight. After black vomit, serve out arsenic on the fourth day, with coffee enema."

The author's research has clearly been thorough, but Lacey has a fine, dry style and the story never plods. Here and there he has used his imagination, but such instances are always plausible, and you cannot see the joins. A peculiar book, perhaps, but, as Charlie Miller might have put it, a dashed fine read.

Buenos Aires Herald, 30 July 2005

Review by Eric Weil

God is Brazilian is basically the story of Charles Miller, the man who brought soccer to Brazil. But as it traces the story of Miller's life, it can certainly not be called a book on soccer. 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.

Charles Miller was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, of British parents and as was the habit of ex-pats in those days, they sent their children to be educated in England. But by tracing his life, the reader gets an interesting insight into the British community in Sao Paulo and the tremendous growth of the city itself in his lifetime, initially due to the coffee trade which resulted in the no less interesting construction of a railway down the steep mountain to the port of Santos.

Miller learnt his soccer at school in Southampton and we also read a lot of the 19th-century education system in England. He quickly stood out for his ball skills and the game became what he lived for for most of his life. He went on to play for what today is Southampton FC and also Corinthians, England's leading amateur team early in the 19th century.

In 1894, he sailed back to Brazil with a pair of boots, a book of rules and a soccer ball in his suitcase and was shocked to discover that the British community only played cricket and others knew nothing about the game of soccer. He immediately collected a group of young men from the British community and organized games which were soon watched in wonderment by Brazilian youngsters. When the men finished their game, the boys went onto the field to kick around anything they could find. The seed had caught on and, as we all know, Brazil are now in the habit of beating everyone else at the game.

Josh Lacey, who writes regularly for The Guardian newspaper, also tells us about the Sao Paulo Athletic Club (SPAC) where the first proper matches were played and which won the early championships of the Sao Paulo League, the first in the land formed in 1902 with Miller being its guiding light. And there are some amusing anecdotes.

The year 1894 - when Miller came off the boat in Santos with his soccer ball - is taken as the birth of Brazilian soccer. The story is repeatedly told by historians that he came off the gang plank into the arms of his father who asked him if he had graduated. "Yes,

father," he said. "I graduated in football." But, as the author points out, this one is not true as his father had died a number of years earlier.

In 1905, however we hear of what could be termed the original barra brava when a Brazilian team, Paulista, first beat SPAC. The winners' cheering fans ran onto the field at the end - a little boy was said to have kicked a SPAC player. The celebrations continued in town afterwards and eventually at the theatre where they disrupted a performance. A policeman was called and when told what they were cheering, he joined in.

Earlier, in 1896, Augustus Shaw had arrived in Sao Paulo with a basketball under his arm to teach at the American School (now Mackenzie College) and after he had taught the boys the rules, they played kicking the ball about as in soccer - already their favourite game.

Approaching the stadium of Corinthians (who took their name from those British amateurs after they toured Brazil several times early in the 20th century) and the first club formed by working class men, although today it is arguably the richest in Brazil, there is a square called Charles Miller. On the way in there is also a plaque commemorating him, but the fans do not know who he was.

But in Salvador, in the state of Bahia, the author found the Charles Miller Bar with walls lined with photos, flags, posters and other soccer memorabilia as well as a small photo of Miller. When he left, he asked the taxi driver about the name.

"Yes, yes," he replied. "Charles Miller - he invented football." If the Brazilians feel he invented the game which has brought them so much prestige, he must be the God of the title.