

Book Review

By Jim Munro



Blue Moon — Down Among the Dead Men with Manchester City

Mark Hodkinson

(Mainstream Sport, pb, £7.99)

A DIARY of a football season, though it would be wrong to think it is of interest only if you have a habit of draping a sky blue scarf around your neck.

There are enough poorly written football diaries to smother Manchester in an avalanche of pulp. Mark Hodkinson, the scribbler here, is neither player nor frustrated fan, he is the journalist who was assigned by The Times to patrol the corridors of Maine Road as Manchester City, former League champions, FA, League and European Cup Winners' Cup winners, endured life in the third tier of English football for the first time in their history.

Hodkinson delivered his despatches from the battle front in a Saturday column that was always in danger of being skimmed over by the general reader in favour of the big-match previews. Presented in this book, however, in their original form, uncramped by the restrictions of a newspaper's column inches, the essays flow intelligently and entertainingly, each entry punctuated with some chronological diary notes that set up his prose like a Mike Summerbee cross for Franny Lee. That declaration assumes you have heard of the latter two gentlemen. What Hodkinson never does is assume knowledge or hunt the big game.

Meet Chris Muir, a director of City for nearly 30 years. On his wall at home, a team photo from the 1960s, besetted Muir at the back, blond-haired player Lee up front. It was Lee, returning as chairman in the 1990s, who broke Muir's footballing heart, suggesting that he "step down" from his position. Witness the 10-year-old son of chief scout Jim Cassell answering the phone for the umpteenth time, calling out, "Dad, it's Joe again", a sign that Mr Royle, the club manager, is hungry for another chat.

The roll-call of characters is of such a variety that although the initial taste is of a season's fall from grace, you can gorge yourself on the depth of feeling and frustration surrounding a club that three decades ago was invading European territory but is presently dragging itself by the boot straps off less salubrious turf.

It also re-emphasises the romantic notion that a boy's first and only love is his football team, come what may.