

# Sean Fallon

Celtic's Iron Man

Stephen Sullivan

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## Chapter 5

### False Starts

For Sean Fallon, the final seven days of March 1950 were among the happiest of a full and remarkable life. Jimmy McGrory had permitted Celtic's new signing a week in Sligo before summoning him to Scotland, and a triumphant homecoming awaited. The Glenavon gamble had paid off handsomely and Sean's seemingly impossible dream – the dream of his father – had been realised. Intense satisfaction and delicious anticipation made for a potent blend.

“That was a wonderful time,” recalled his sister, Marie. “Daddy was so proud. In those days, it was special for someone to achieve something like that. Nowadays there are more opportunities to travel and to achieve things in different places, but back then you didn't have many people from Sligo going out to be successful in other countries. Sean was the talk of the town.”

It was a golden era for the Fallons. While Sean had been seeking out a route to Celtic Park, his father had been busy arranging a transfer move of his own. This one made for even bigger news. At the heart of the negotiations was the late WB Yeats, literary giant and favourite son of Sligo, whose body was being returned to his spiritual home after lengthy political wrangling. It had taken nine years since his death and burial in France, but Yeats' last wish – to be laid to rest in Drumcliffe churchyard – had been granted.

Sean was thrilled. Decades later, his children would joke that the only subject in which his knowledge of Celtic could be matched was the life and times of this esteemed Irish poet. That week in 1950, one of Yeats' most famous lines would have held added personal significance. "*I have spread my dreams under your feet. Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*" It might as well have been an entreaty from Fallon himself, pleading for reality to match his long-held Celtic fantasy.

Signing for Celtic, well, it felt like winning the lottery. Going home, seeing everyone so happy and proud, brought home to me what I'd managed to achieve. But I knew that I'd done nothing yet, or not really. I didn't want to sign and then go over to Glasgow and be a failure. I'd built up Celtic so much in my head, read everything I could and listened to all my dad's stories. But I also had no real idea of what I was going into. I'd never been out of Ireland, never lived in a big city and never played for a big club. I didn't know how good Celtic would be and whether I'd be good enough myself. But, by this point, I was beginning to believe in myself more. That was vital. Confidence in yourself is essential at a club like Celtic, otherwise you'll just get swallowed up. You can forget about becoming a top professional if you don't believe in yourself. And by then I did; I knew I could play. But, still, I was just praying it would all work out.

Ultimately, Celtic surpassed all his hopes and expectations. Youthful fascination blossomed into lifelong adoration. But while Fallon and Celtic turned out to be a marriage made in heaven, the path to true love did not run smooth. Homesickness, a disastrous debut and a career-threatening injury removed any prospect of a honeymoon period, and divorce very nearly followed. But in March 1950, all those difficulties lay ahead, dormant, unknown and generally unexpected. Before he could begin facing them, Fallon first had to negotiate the crossing from Belfast, and even that was rough and uncomfortable. It also posed his first major challenge as a Celtic player: staying sober.

That was easier said than done with Charlie Tully looking after me! Mr McGrory had arranged for Charlie to meet me on the boat, to make sure I would find my way in Glasgow, and I was

excited about it because I'd already heard a lot about this great player. But I don't think I made a good first impression. No sooner than he'd introduced himself, I was ushered down to the bar. 'What are you having, Sean?' he asked. 'I'll take a lemonade thanks, Charlie,' I told him. 'A *what?*' he said. 'A *lemonade?* Ah, don't tell me you're one of *those!*' I could only apologise. Charlie's tippie was always the same – a beer and a half of whisky – and I had no idea how he managed to put so many of them away. I must have had about 14 lemonades just keeping pace with him that night. And with the sea being so choppy, I've never been so sick in my life. I've not been able to look at lemonade since!

The two travel companions would become great friends, to the extent that Fallon was asked to sponsor Tully's son, Charlie Jnr, at his confirmation. But their personalities would never align. Extroverted and streetwise, Tully was in his element amid the bustle of Glasgow, and what he loved most was the reciprocation of his affections. The city had fallen in love with Celtic's mischievous maverick; the proliferation of green-and-white Tully cocktails, Tully ties and Tully ice-cream even spawning the phrase 'Tullymania'. Cheeky Charlie lapped it up.

On and off the field, Fallon was altogether less flamboyant. It was not the promise of fame that had attracted him to Celtic, but romantic notions of the club's charitable origins and commitment to cavalier football. And the same city that exhilarated Tully left him utterly overwhelmed.

Glasgow was a shock to the senses. I'd been used to living in small towns and had never experienced anything like it. I found it very difficult to adjust and suffered badly from homesickness. It's hard to imagine now, having lived here for over 60 years, but I found Glasgow to be a very lonely place at first. I would get out of the city at every opportunity I had, disappear out to the countryside and go for long walks. It would be up in the Cathkin Braes, places like that, and I'd be out there for hours. It became a habit. Even years later, when I was much happier and more settled, I'd still be walking 10, 15 miles most days. I can't imagine players these days would be allowed to do that.

I suppose it just showed that I was a country boy at heart and those early days in the big city were very difficult for me. I always remembered how I'd felt years later, when we had boys coming

in to the club from Ireland and elsewhere. I would try to look out for them because I know it's not easy. I don't know how I would have coped, only I was fortunate enough to have an aunt living in Glasgow. Having a bit of family to help me through those times made all the difference.

This same Aunt Winnie had given a roof to his mother during the war but, with four children of her own, she was unable to make Sean the same offer. Instead, digs were arranged by Celtic, with a house just off Alexandra Parade selected on the recommendation of first-team coach Jimmy Hogan. What the homesick recruit needed was somewhere to settle; a refuge in this unknown and intimidating city. What he encountered nearly had him dashing for the first boat home.

The first night in these digs, I went out like a light. So I wake up the next morning, happy to have slept well, turn over... and there's a man in bed beside me. I nearly had a heart attack! I don't know what Jimmy Hogan had been told, but it turned out that the chap had four sisters and this was the only other bed in the house. When he'd finished work, he'd just crawled in beside me. So, after the shock of my life, I was on the move again. Fortunately, the chairman, Bob Kelly, got wind of the situation and made sure to sort out somewhere for me personally after what had happened. I think he probably realised that I was homesick and was worried about me chucking it altogether and going home. So he arranged for me to stay in a place in Rutherglen, and this time he made sure I'd have a bed of my own.

This house was perfect. Funnily enough, the woman who owned it, Mary McGuigan, was the niece of Jimmy McMenemy. That family were becoming quite an influence on my life. She was a wonderful lady and lots of the other players would come to stay with her from time to time. I loved it there. The fact that Bob Kelly had taken such an interest in making sure I was happy and settled always stayed with me. I even remember when we first arrived at Miss McGuigan's, he was looking the place over, even testing the springs in the bed. He kept on asking, 'Are you sure this will be ok, Sean?' I was embarrassed. It was way beyond what I would have expected of the Celtic chairman and I never forgot it. I remember thinking at the time how happy I was that Celtic had men like him and Mr McGrory running the club. And I was determined to repay him.

That small kindness, ensuring the comfort of a homesick player, was the beginning of an enduring and reciprocal respect between player and chairman. Nor was it the only lasting alliance formed by Fallon in those early days at Celtic. In Bertie Peacock, he made a friend for life. The Coleraine youngster was a kindred spirit and saw in the newcomer the same startled look he had exuded after arriving from Glentoran the previous May. Without Tully to guide him, Peacock had wandered the streets of Glasgow for fully two hours before summoning the courage to ask for directions. But empathy wasn't all he could offer. Crucially, Peacock was also in a position to guide his fellow Irishman through the antagonistic excesses of a divided dressing room.

There were a few cliques in the Celtic team at that stage. Some of the older, more experienced players tried to be clever with me initially; they would make fun of me, tease me about my accent. Maybe they saw me as coming in to take the place of one of their pals, I'm not sure. A few of them certainly didn't make life as easy for me as they might have done. But Bertie looked out for me in those days, kept me right and also put one or two of the others in their place, in his own quiet way. He would even interpret for me when some of the other players – deliberately or otherwise – couldn't understand what I was saying. On and off the park, Bertie was a gem. There were no flaws in his make-up. He was a great wing-half – the kind of player who seemed to be doing four jobs at once – a tremendous professional, and one of the nicest guys you could ever hope to meet.

We became great friends. In fact, he was my best pal throughout my time at Celtic – even after Jock arrived. Neither Bertie nor myself took a drink, so we would go out socialising together. They used to bring some great shows to Glasgow in those days; you'd have all the big stars, and we'd go along to see those together. Even years later, when he'd finished playing and gone back to Coleraine, we would meet up every year. He would bring a team of his pals over here for a golf tournament at my club in Pollok, and I'd put a team up against them. I would also take the family to see him every time we'd got the boat over to Ireland, and Myra and the kids loved him every bit as much as I did. You couldn't help but love Bertie.

Peacock had yet to establish himself in the first team by the

time Fallon arrived, but the extent of his promise was apparent. Already a full international at just 21 – in his case, with a bona fide birth certificate – he was displaying all the attributes that would make him a much-loved player for club and country over the next decade and beyond. It had, in truth, likely been Peacock's early progress, allied to the spectacular impact made by Tully, that convinced Celtic to plunder the Irish League for the third time in two seasons. Fallon, therefore, arrived with a great deal to live up to. The official Celtic Football Guide in 1950 reflected this sense of expectation, predicting that the club's latest Irish 'youngster' "would prove a real acquisition". Nor was it merely faith that Fallon had to repay, with the same publication stressing the "substantial fee" that had been required to secure his signature. The *Daily Record*, meanwhile, highlighted the versatility of 'Johnny Fallon' – a name they persisted with for some time – and observed that both centre-forward and full-back were longstanding problem positions at Celtic Park.

Despite these high expectations, it was a few weeks before McGrory and Kelly saw fit to thrust their new boy into first-team action. Fallon's first appearance in the green and white came, in fact, not at a packed Celtic Park, but in a reserve match against Kilmarnock. Only a handful of spectators bothered to turn up and Sean's contribution was such that he would have preferred there to have been no witnesses at all. A low-key, inauspicious second-string match it might have been, but he had looked – and felt – completely out of his depth. Even years later, in an article for *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*, he made specific reference to this match and its alarming, humbling impact. "It was during that game," he said, "I fully realised how much I still had to learn about football."

His sister, Marie, recalls Sean confiding these worries to their father the next time he returned home. "My father asked Sean how he was managing the transition to Scottish football, which was very well thought of in those days. I remember Sean telling him, 'It was a bit scary at first. I'd always felt I was a step ahead and fast enough in the teams I'd played in before, whereas at Celtic I felt like I was two gears lower than I needed to be'. The pace of the game was such a step up."

Fallon wasn't the only one left questioning whether he could



make that jump. Concerns emanating from his error-strewn outing against Kilmarnock ensured that he was again left out for the next first-team match, away to Partick Thistle on April 10. But Celtic – already out of the title race and beaten by Third Lanark just a few weeks before – lost 1-0 without him. Changes were demanded and, ready or not, that meant Fallon coming in at left-back to face Clyde five days later. Memories of his torrid reserve debut were still fresh, but he calmed himself with the assurance that, whatever happened, this match couldn't go any worse. Surely.

For most of the first half, it did seem that Fallon would indeed get away with a performance that, while disappointing, was not proving disastrous. Willie Fernie had even given Celtic the lead on the sodden Shawfield pitch, and chances were that a Celtic win would gloss over any of the new boy's perceived failings. Then, with 34 minutes gone, calamity struck. Goalkeeper John Bonnar, speaking in Eugene McBride's *Talking with Celtic*, remembered the incident well. "I'm organising the defence. Sean's on the front post. I tell him, 'Anything your height, Sean, you head it'. Over comes the ball. Sean puts it straight in the net. Lovely header! McGrory himself couldn't have done better."

What a start! Can you believe it? That can happen as a defender, of course – you go in to clear the ball, catch it wrong and it spins into the net. But to happen on my debut! It was one of those terrible moments. I just wanted the ground to swallow me up. It wasn't just the own goal either – it was a bad performance from me in lots of respects. From what I can remember, we needed a late goal from Charlie to save a 2-2 draw, and I felt responsible for the fact we hadn't won. I can only imagine what the people at Celtic must have thought. They'd have been wondering what the hell they had signed.

The sole consolation for footballers in such mortifying circumstances is the knowledge that there is always another game, with their chance to atone often arriving within days. Fallon wasn't so lucky. Pride hadn't been the only thing wounded at Shawfield. More worrying was the damage inflicted on an ankle that had been intermittently troubling the player for almost two years. It was an injury that dated back to a chapter in his career that already seemed a lifetime ago.

Remember that coaching course I went on to Dublin, while I was still at Longford? The one with George Hardwick? Well, on the last day of that course, everyone involved was put into a little match – just a bit of fun to finish things off. Unfortunately for me, someone came in to tackle me, fell and his weight all landed on my right ankle. I was in agony. It was probably the most painful injury I ever had, and it turned out later that I had suffered what they called a flake fracture of the ankle.

It bothered me on and off all the time I was at Sligo Rovers and Glenavon, and I mentioned it to Jimmy McGrory before I signed. Don't ask me why I was so up front about that and told him lies about my age but, anyway, he told me not to worry about it and said that Alex Dowdells, Celtic's trainer, would sort me out if it flared up again. And, sure enough, Alex worked hard with me after the Clyde match, got me on my feet again and I was back in the team within a few weeks.

But it was to prove a false dawn. Fallon did make his comeback, and it was a much happier occasion than his debut, with Third Lanark dispatched 1-0 at Hampden in the Charity Cup semi-final. He more than played his part too, and left the national stadium confident of retaining his place in the team to face Rangers three days later in the same competition. It would be his first cup final, his first Old Firm derby, and it would be remembered as one of the truly great games of that era. The Hollywood star Danny Kaye was presented to the players beforehand and stuck around to see Celtic – led by hat-trick hero John McPhail and the irrepressible Tully – beat the champions 3-2 in front of over 80,000 spectators. Among the victors was a young Peacock who, despite, going on to play in the legendary 7-1 game, named this final as the pick of his 453 Celtic appearances. Fallon? He watched it all from the stands, distraught. And missing out on one match, however memorable, was the least of his worries.

My ankle had flared up again and I thought that could be it for me; that my career could be over. Injuries like that could finish you in those days, and it wasn't looking good. The ankle had been bothering me for years and, if anything, it was getting worse. Alex Dowdells did his best but neither he nor any of the doctors could seem to get to the bottom of it. I could tell they were worried.

Fallon was not for giving up easily though. Having spent close to two decades dreaming about playing for Celtic, he was not about to settle for an association spanning just two matches. But nor did he spend his summer trawling the country in search of specialists and alternative medical options. Instead, he took a path that would be unthinkable for modern day footballers, and was remarkable even at the time.

Rather than check into hospital, Fallon took the boat to Belfast and headed for home. But as Sligo drew near, he diverted from his usual route and took the road north towards County Donegal and his final destination. He was on his way to an island in Lough Derg known as 'St Patrick's Purgatory', a place of pilgrimage where Ireland's patron saint was said to have witnessed a vision of hell. Fallon might not have been able to match that, but foreseeing a future without Celtic and football had been bleak enough. And so it was that that he entrusted everything – his health, his dream and his livelihood – to the same higher power that had comforted St Patrick.

All I did at Lough Derg was pray and fast. I starved myself for three days in the end. But it was worth it. You never know that your prayers will be answered, but you leave it with God. I was so fortunate. When I came back from that pilgrimage, the ankle injury that was causing me so much bother, which no-one seemed to know how to fix, suddenly felt fine. In fact, after Lough Derg, it never bothered me again.

By mid-September, Fallon was back in the team and showing just why he had been signed. Though six months of physical pain, homesickness and on-field setbacks had left their scars, he felt a turning point had been reached. Had he been reading his beloved Yeats at the time, another of the poet's famous lines would likely have resonated like never before. *"Joy is of the will which labours, which overcomes obstacles, which knows triumph."*

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