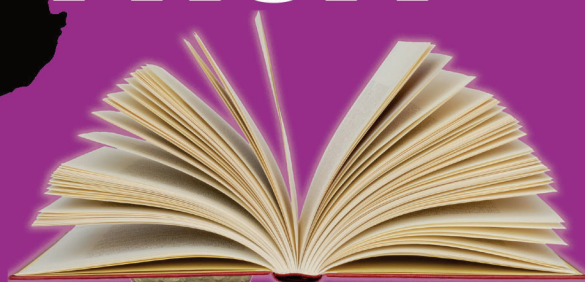


ICS BOOKS

# THE BEST OF 25 YEARS OF **THE SCOTTISH REVIEW** **ISSUE 6**

SCOTLAND  
THE BANKING  
CRASH  
ARTS AND  
LITERATURE



# The Best of 25 Years of the Scottish Review

Issue 6

Scotland  
The Banking Crash  
Arts and Literature

Edited by  
Islay McLeod

ICS Books

To

*Kenneth Roy, founder of the Scottish Review, mentor and friend,  
and to all the other contributors who are no longer with us.*

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# Contents

<b>Scotland</b>		<b>1</b>
Losing the heid	George Rosie (1995)	2
Three Faces of Scotland	Sana Sadollah, Farkhanda Chaudry, Jonathan Squire talk to Fiona MacDonald (1995)	5
Letter from Aberdeenshire: oilies and Old Blind Dogs	Steve Bruce (1998)	21
Letter from Paisley: A separate tribe	William Hunter (1998)	25
Letter from Lewis: still we sing	Francis Thompson (1998)	29
Letter from Selkirk: Brigadoon-on-Tweed	Allan Massie (1998)	33
Is Scotland governable?	Ian Mackenzie (2003)	37
Proud to be Scottish?	Stewart Conn (2006)	44
The Scotland we need	Tessa Ransford (2008)	48
1320: a Scottish myth	Andrew Hook (2009)	51
Tribal nation	Walter Humes (2011)	53
<b>The Banking Crash</b>		<b>55</b>
A run on the bank	Douglas Wood (2008)	56
House of cards	Walter Humes (2008)	60
My evening with Sir Fred	Kenneth Roy (2009)	62
Assume the worst	Alan McIntyre (2009)	65
<b>Arts and Literature</b>		<b>68</b>
Pilgrim's progress	James Aitchison (1995)	69
Darkness into light	Stewart Conn (1997)	75
A rum do	Maurice Lindsay (1998)	79
Road to nowhere	Tom Hubbard (2000)	84
Found inside a book	Vivian Linacre (2003)	89

Funny man	Rikki Fulton in conversation with Kenneth Roy (2004)	94
The man who kissed the Primavera	Magnus Linklater (2006)	100
Iain Cuthbertson stole my dad	Liz Taylor (2009)	107
Naked Edinburgh	Andrew Hook (2009)	109
Boys still rule	Andrew Hook (2010)	111
Literary stalkers	Lorn Macintyre (2011)	113
The real Braveheart	David Weinczok (2013)	115
How movies break up relationships	Richard Craig (2013)	118
A celebrity list of Scotland's 'best' novels	Walter Humes (2013)	120
Irvine Welsh has lost the power to shock	Andrew Hook (2013)	122
Our strange fascination with Nordic noir	Barbara Millar (2014)	124
Anybody here ever heard of a Margo MacDonald?	David Black (2014)	126
Crockett and the fleeting nature of literary fame	Catherine Czerkawska (2014)	128
John Buchan and a world of Scottish extremism	Andrew Hook (2014)	130
Scotland's history boys	Christopher Harvie (2014)	133
The ruthless literary Scots	Kenneth Roy (2016)	139
A better kind of noise	Katie Grant (2016)	142
I weep for my maze	Allan Shiach (2018)	144
Attlee, the forgotten man	Bill Paterson (2018)	147
Set in Scotland, a tale for all time	Marcy Leavitt Bourne (2018)	149
The next act: what should follow Creative Scotland?	Gerry Hassan (2018)	154
The right way to restore Mack's broken vision	Mary Lockhart (2018)	157
Modern jazz at Dizzy's	Alan McIntyre (2018)	159

<i>Widows</i> is as thrilling as it is unexpected	Jean Barr (2018)	162
Brave Scots in the New World	Marcy Leavitt Bourne (2018)	165
Creative Scotland is doing little to support Scottish talent	Allan Shiach (2018)	170
<i>Mary Queen of Scots</i> was rather dull viewing	Jean Barr (2019)	174
Marie Colvin: martyr or passionate journalist?	Jean Barr (2019)	178
<i>Hand to Hand</i> : an exhibition of the modern art medal	Marcy Leavitt Bourne (2019)	181
Godot in Edinburgh	Noel Foy (2019)	184
<i>A Symphony in Stone</i> : Glasgow's architectural past	Jean Barr (2019)	188
The painted canvas knows more than its artist	Jean Barr (2019)	191
Something to hang on to in times of upheaval	Marcy Leavitt Bourne (2019)	194
Finding out the rest: history and Scotland now	James Robertson (2019)	196
<b>Contributors</b>		<b>201</b>

SCOTLAND

# Losing the heid

George Rosie

1995

A few weeks ago, I found myself sitting for hours in our draughty attic absorbed in a book. It was one of those tattered tomes that you never knew you had, but which the Oxfam shop will take off your hands if you can be bothered getting it there. It was dated 1937 and was entitled *Scottish Industry To-day*. The author was C A Oakley, a former Board of Trade controller in Scotland.

It made – it makes – intriguing reading. What Oakley set out to do was to provide a 'snapshot' of industrial Scotland in 1936. So far as I could see, he succeeded brilliantly. His book should be required reading for every self-respecting Scottish politician. As I turned the pages, it struck me that I knew of no finer testament to what we have lost – or had taken away.

Oakley described a Scotland brimming over with industrial enterprise. The sheer variety was astonishing. Some of the companies were ailing but the majority seemed to be flourishing. No doubt the wages and conditions in many of these firms were lousy and injustice was rampant in some. But the pages just reeked of energy. You could almost hear the clatter of the rivets, feel the heat from the molten steel, and smell the coal dust in the air.

Take, for instance, my home city of Edinburgh. In 1936, the mills and factories were churning out a dazzling range of manufactures: rubber products, ropes, whisky, ships, paper, printing machinery, transformers, gas meters, marine steering gear, porridge oats, wire cable, chocolate bars, printing ink, beer, biscuits and oatcakes. The Edinburgh print firms did more business than any outside London. A fleet of 60 steam trawlers sailed out of Granton and Leith.

Sixty miles away in Dundee, more than 70 factories were spinning and weaving jute, despite 'intense competition from firms located within the Empire but paying wages on Asiatic scales'. In Aberdeen, they churned out hosiery, woollen gloves, shirting and blankets on an awesome scale. Hall Russell & Co, John Lewis & Sons and Alexander Hall & Co were building steam trawlers while companies like Bell & Robertson were supplying paper-making machinery to the granite city's five paper mills.

But it was Oakley's account of the Clyde shipyards that would break your heart. He described 1936 as a 'bad year' for the river. Between January and November, the local yards launched no fewer than 91 ships. This represented a huge tonnage. And most of them were 'engined' by Clydeside engineering shops.

Vessels launched into the Clyde that 'bad year' ranged from 9,000-ton admiralty cruisers to a 230-ton non-propelled tank barge. In between, there were survey ships, motor cruisers,



steam yachts, general cargo ships, coasters, motor tankers, a bucket dredger, motor yachts, an admiralty sloop and a 'torpedo boat destroyer'. We could all do with a few 'bad years' like that, as the men of Yarrow's scramble for a few crumbs off the admiralty's table and are terrified that GEC will close them down.

But what was plain from Oakley's account was that almost all the companies he was writing about were home-grown. They had been born and raised in Scotland. They were owned and controlled in Scotland. What the Scottish bosses wanted, the Scottish bosses got. All the initiatives lay at home. If they wanted to expand, contract, develop new products or burst their way into new markets, then they did it on their own.

They stood or fell (and many of them did) by decisions taken here in Scotland. They may have been stone-hearted capitalists but at least they were *our* stone-hearted capitalists. In the week that the government announced the demise of Scottish Nuclear – which, let us remember, supplies 55% of our electricity – the thought had a particular poignancy.

Sixty years on, the industrial landscape has changed. Scotland has been haemorrhaging power and influence. Year by year, company headquarters have been vanishing: Distillers Company, Britoil, Anderson Strathclyde, William Collins, William Low, the House of Fraser, Arthur Bell, British Caledonian, Barr & Stroud, John Brown Engineering, Clydesdale Bank, Carron Phoenix, Culter Guardbridge, North British Steel Group among many others. The list is long and being added to every year.

Oakley's book raises a number of obvious questions. Where has it all gone? What happened to the drive, wit and creativity that allowed Scotland to fight so far above its industrial weight? Why did we let it slip away? Just when did we stop doing things for ourselves? There are three parts to the answer.

One is so-called 'hostile' takeovers. The peculiar 'open' nature of the British stockmarket makes Scottish firms vulnerable to corporate predators. Hostile takeovers lost us the House of Fraser (our biggest retailer), Distillers (our biggest whisky-maker), Anderson Strathclyde (our biggest mining-equipment firm) and Britoil (our biggest industrial company).

Then there are the 'friendly' takeovers and mergers. These are the big majority. And not all of them are of tired old family firms whose directors want to head off for the golf course. There seems to be an alarming tendency for Scottish firms to sell out once they reach a certain size. Often it is for the best of motives: more capital, better R&D, better access to markets, etc.

And then, of course, there is nationalisation. This is the one that we Scots are loath to confront. It goes against the political grain. But the fact is, the great Labour nationalisations stripped Scotland of the ownership of most of its heavy industries; coal, railways, steel, gas, shipbuilding, the aircraft industry, all went south. And as Scotland was unduly – Oakley thought unhealthily – dependent on heavy industry, this was a savage blow.

But when the sector was re-privatised by the Thatcher regime in the 1980s we could never muster the cash (or the bottle) to buy back the industries we had lost. All the shipyards nationalised in the 1970s are now owned by UK or foreign groups.

All of which raises another question: does it matter? My own view is that it does. I am not alone. Bruce Patullo, the governor of the Bank of Scotland (and no nationalist), has long argued that the loss of headquarters can be drastic. Not only does it suck power away from Scotland, it also drains away work for trades and professions that cluster round important bureaucracies: accountants, lawyers, advertising agents, surveyors, printers, designers, architects, bankers, even caterers.

And when the power goes the money follows. Then the talent and ambition follows the money. And the end result is what the Scottish economist Neil Buxton brilliantly describes as 'the neutered cat syndrome'. There is no visible deterioration. The cat looks just the same. Its coat is sleek, it purrs, it wags its tail. But '...it just ceases to grow, adapt, innovate, reproduce'.

Buxton's syndrome produces subtle injustices. One of them is who earns the money that pays the tax. Normally a company's corporation tax is paid through head office. If that head office is based in London, then south-east England gets the credit. Which means that, for example, the profits created by United Distillers' whisky craftsmen in Scotland are attributed to the Guinness group's pen-pushers and memo-shufflers in London. Multiply that by the number of companies who keep their HQ in London but make their money in Scotland, and you get some idea of what London is *really* worth.

Oakley's excellent book got me thinking. It was his fellow Englishman William Cobbett who came up with the notion of London as some kind of debilitating cancer on the body of Britain. There may be more to that than radical propaganda.

# Three Faces of Scotland

Fiona MacDonald in conversation with...

1995

## ... Sana Sadollah

*The province of Dahak in Kurdish northern Iraq – now declared a safe haven by the UN Security Council – is where Sana Sadollah has her origins. She came to Britain with her three young children in 1976 to join her husband, Zuhair, who was studying mechanical and production engineering. Today, the children are grown-up and Sana is a community development worker with the Scottish Refugee Council in Edinburgh. Sadly, in spite of qualifications from universities of the East and the West, and years of teaching experience behind him, Zuhair is unemployed. The couple, who are now British citizens, ponder whether their race has anything to do with this fact. The Scots like to think of themselves as a people who believe in international brotherhood, but is this a myth?*

I think it depends on the colour of your skin. For people who are black, there is really no doubt about it: racism is there. The darker you are in colour and the more of an accent you have, the worse it is. The ones who come from African countries, they get a lot of hassle and harassment.

A friend of mine from Somalia, Ahmed Sheikh – his case was well publicised at the time – he was stabbed and as a result of his injuries he died next morning. And he was stabbed for no reason but because he was black. A mob of six or seven thugs attacked him at a pub near Cowgate. He didn't do anything wrong. He was sitting having his drink and he didn't bother anybody. He didn't call for a fight; he did not provoke anything. Actually, the guy who was serving – he was Algerian, I think – he noticed these thugs were wanting to provoke something and Ahmed was just ignoring them, and he [the barman] advised him not to go out until maybe they would go away. And he waited until four o'clock in the morning. They didn't go. And the minute Ahmed stepped out of the pub he was stabbed – he and his cousin. His cousin was injured, but luckily he survived.

Racism varies. Sometimes when people are walking along the street abuses are shouted at them: 'Go home'. 'What are you doing here?' 'Black bastard.' Things like that.

The more deprived the neighbourhood, the more racism there is. If there is a high rate of unemployment and other problems, often the refugees are a scapegoat.

We have just had a family from Sudan who left because of that. Where they were living there was constant harassment. They really felt like they were prisoners in their own home. The husband had to be at home all the time because the wife was absolutely terrified to stay alone. The district council was sympathetic, they were trying to do something about it, but

there wasn't enough housing to put them in a better place. This family came from Sudan to get away from persecution and harassment. It's really sad when you go to a place where you think there is freedom and democracy, where people can do what they like and should not be condemned because they are black, and then blackness becomes an issue and people are harassed and bothered so much that they have to leave.

They went to London, feeling London is bigger, more multicultural. They felt they would not be as targeted as in Edinburgh. I think one should not stereotype and think that because some people have a tough time, that everyone will have a tough time. No, I think I would have to be fair. There are people who are extremely good, who are very friendly, who are very supportive and who work very hard against these issues. But we should not, at the same time, say that racism does not exist in Scotland because I think this is a myth. We have to face up to the reality – to say, okay, it's not as bad as maybe it is in other big cities, but racism is there and it is alive and kicking.

I'll tell you a story of another Somali who also knew Ahmed. He was in a very nice area – lots of people envied him that. And all of a sudden he was spotted by BNP [British National Party] members. What we didn't know was that this area was active with the BNP. And, in a matter of two weeks, they harassed him so much that they made his life absolute torture. He was stabbed, he was kicked, when he went to the telephone box to make a call, they hit him with a metal bar. He would come every day to the office and stay with me from nine to five. When we closed he would go home – but really unhappy. And he kept on saying that what had happened to Ahmed would happen to him. I felt really sad because I didn't want him to go away thinking that Scotland is just a racist country; so I felt I should give him some kind of balance in that. At the time I had an arrangement with some Scottish families where they would take refugees temporarily and accommodate them until a solution was found. So I phoned and explained the situation and they said he could come and stay with them. And he did. The people were really very nice to him and I think that gave him some comfort. He was living in a family atmosphere and just having someone to talk to was a relief.

I must say, the police were very supportive. A couple of times he called them to escort him. And once he had forgotten his keys and he was frightened to stay alone and they came and waited with him until the council came and opened the door.

The press were very interested in speaking to him but he did not want to speak to them. He was frightened he would become a target – that wherever he went he would be followed and maybe killed. Eventually I said well, you know, I cannot force you to stay. I will not ask you to stay or to go – it's really a choice you have to make.

So I think he weighed it carefully and he made a decision to go back to London. He felt safer there.

The Bosnian refugees were received extremely well in Scotland. I was absolutely overwhelmed by their reception. Obviously, there had been a lot in the papers about them, so there was a lot of interest. I remember for the first two weeks I was inundated with calls

from the Scottish people saying they wanted to befriend a family or they wanted to give them food, money, clothing. One thing did make me a bit disappointed. I was saying to them that, well, they are still new in the country, they can't speak the language, they're quite traumatised, so it will take a bit of time for them to feel settled and be able to see people or become friends. But meanwhile, I was deliberately saying, I have an African family who I think would like to be befriended. But no, they wanted Bosnians.

I could understand that in a sense because the media was full of news about the atrocities taking place against the Bosnians – they were horrendous. People were leaving the country in their thousands, and all kinds of ordinary people, church groups, Islamic groups, charitable organisations, organised themselves to help. They got coaches of food and clothing and medicines and they went all the way there and brought people back. So there was a lot of willingness to support them. But I was disappointed that the same reception wasn't there for the Kurds, for example. The Kurds are in a situation where they are freezing to death in the mountains in Turkey. I don't think it is impossible for people to take buses and go to Turkey and bring Kurds back. Or to do the same for Somalis. Or Sudanese.

When I asked Scottish people why there had been a different reception for Bosnians, the answer I was given was that a lot of Scots have been in former Yugoslavia for holidays and they appreciate the country and the people. But I think the fact that they are European, they are white, makes them feel closer.

But people are individuals. You cannot possibly say that a nation is racist, and you can't say racism doesn't exist. Racism happens on an individual basis.

Some people are overwhelmingly kind. I think the Scots are more friendly than other nations. Once you get to know them, they are very nice. I have some friends who have been extremely supportive to me, especially during the time when Saddam was using chemical weapons against Kurds and people were dying in thousands. I think without their support I could have just died. I was so depressed and desperate. You feel so out of your depth at a time like that.

We weren't really able to keep in touch with our family then and you always imagine the worst. You feel sad for everyone victimised by what has happened but your hand is always on your heart. You think, oh my God, is my brother in it? My mother? My father? My uncle? The clan I come from is quite big and well-known in Kurdistan. I have hundreds of cousins – at home it doesn't matter how distantly you are related, you are still a cousin – and we are all close. We lost a lot of people during the uprising.

My husband came over here first and he was hoping he could just get out to study for a couple of years. It was the norm during that period that the Iraqi regime never really lasted more than two or three years. There were attempted coups continuously. The authorities were very anti-Kurds, but we were hoping that that would change.

So he came to do his MSc in Birmingham and after he finished he 'phoned his family to say we would be back and they strongly recommended that we shouldn't go back because

there would be a lot of fear for this future. The problem was that he left without the authorities' 'blessing', let's call it, and they had issued some kind of legislation that anybody leaving without permission would be liable for imprisonment of between five and 15 years and their qualifications would not be recognised. So that automatically made him a target if he went back. And obviously he would not be alone – they usually target a family. So, instead of creating such anxiety for the whole family, it was better for him not to go back. That's why we decided to stay. And he was very lucky because he got a job at Aberdeen University doing research.

I came to join my husband here about a year after he arrived. It was extremely difficult for me to get my visa from the British Embassy in Iraq. When I went for an interview, they would keep asking me: are you going to work? And I would say I can't work, I have three little kids, I have no qualifications and I can't speak the language. But they were very suspicious and they would say, well now, who is going to support you if your husband runs out of money? Well, I would say, my father, my father-in-law, they will help. How can they help? What property do they have? And actually my father and my father-in-law had to go to the embassy with deeds to show that they had property and that if we needed money they would support us.

For some reason, they thought I was coming over and I wouldn't go back. And, believe me, I had no intention whatsoever of staying in Britain. All my hope, all my husband's hope, was that things would get better and we could go back. I had not prepared myself mentally to stay for such a long time. But the reality was that things got worse in Iraq after I came here. So the embassy's worst fears were right [laughter]. But it was not our intention to stay.

At the time you felt really sad – a feeling of insecurity, uncertainty. You worried about what would happen to you, to your husband, to your family. How could you cope on your own?

I come from a culture which is really different from here. We rely a lot on the family for support and I miss that dreadfully. If you are ill, you are never alone. Your family would come in, cook for you, clean for you, look after the kids. If you are in any kind of trouble, everyone is there to help you and support you. Here, you have nobody and I think because of the political and economic situation, you always have a feeling of insecurity. I think we haven't made it like some who have money in the bank, or property to support them, or a pension. We have none of that. So I always feel that if tomorrow something happened to my husband, how would I cope?

At home I never ever thought of money. I never thought of the future. I always felt I was secure.

For me, it was really very hard because after the decision to stay, I went home for a visit in 1980 and three months after I came back, the war between Iraq and Iran started, and for 10 years it never stopped so I couldn't go back to see my family. And my mother was extremely distressed because I was the only daughter in the family and we were very close.

And as a result, in 1988, my mother died without us seeing each other again. I felt extremely guilty. I really did. I still do. I feel like I had a part in her agony and illnesses and worries, and that contributed to her ill health. I think there was no doubt about it and I still feel very bad that I was never there for her. In our culture, the daughter looks after the parents, especially when they are ill, and I felt that I had done absolutely nothing for them. And they did so much for me.

After my mother died, I felt so unhappy and so distressed. For a whole year I was just miserable and then I thought, well, I think I should go – no matter what – and see my father. He was getting old too. So it was a very big chance I took because I have been very active here against the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein, and my name is definitely on their books. And I told my husband that I didn't care if they hanged me, I would go. So, I went with my daughter on 6 July 1990 for a month. I seem to have had bad luck because at the beginning of August, two days before I was due to come back. Saddam decided to invade Kuwait and all the borders were sealed.

I had gone on my Iraqi passport. I didn't want to raise any suspicions by going on my British passport. And I was stuck. Absolutely stuck. It was such a horrifying experience. And I was there for six months. I couldn't go to the British Embassy and say, well, I'm a British citizen. At the time there were a lot of British citizens in Iraq and they evacuated everybody except me. But I couldn't go to them for two reasons. One, when you apply for citizenship they tell you Britain can protect you anywhere in the world except in your home country, so I thought there was nothing they could do for me. Secondly, Saddam issued some kind of statement to say any family in Iraq harbouring a British citizen would be hanged. And I was practically all over the country and had stayed with so many people that I thought if I went to the embassy and it became known that I have a British passport, I would endanger all their lives. It would have been a disaster.

But during that time, some friends here were campaigning for me – the vice chair of the Refugee Council, and the secretary general of the Scottish Council of the YWCA. I was working for the YWCA at the time and she wrote to the Foreign Office to say I was a British citizen and I had employment with them, and family here, and she wanted them to do something. And, out of the blue, I received a call to say I should go to the embassy because they had documents for me. I thought it must be something to do with my husband because he was doing everything he could to satisfy the Iraqi Government to let me leave the country.

*The Iraqi authorities knew not only that she was there but that she wanted out because she had family in Britain. What they didn't know – what put her in danger – was the fact that she was now British.*

So I went to Baghdad, to the embassy, and said I am supposed to be receiving documents, and the man there went inside and looked and came back and said they had nothing for

me. So I went the next day and said, well, could I see somebody inside? And I went in and saw the consul and she asked where had I been? They had been waiting for me and trying to send all kinds of messages to me to tell me to come to them. I explained why I didn't come earlier and she said don't be silly, you have rights, we can help others, why couldn't we help you?

So they were very, very nice and helpful and we got out through them [using fake British passports]. But it was traumatic, I tell you. I felt so bad that it was my own country I was fleeing away from, pretending to be someone else. And I was petrified leaving because during the six months I was stuck, there hadn't been a stone I'd left unturned, saying to people let me go, I am no use to anyone here. I had been to the minister and right down the scale to immigration, nationality officers – the lot. And I had relatives working at the airport. So I was petrified going through there escorted by a British person, in case someone would recognise me and talk to me. I was told I should not speak in Arabic at any price – or any language but English. My daughter said she was worried I would have a heart attack because my colour was changing from white to blue to red all the time. I was sweating like mad. The security was so tense it was beyond belief. I could have been exposed at any point. It was an experience I would never like to go through again.

My daughter lost a year at university and my husband had to go to Saudi Arabia to work so my two sons who were teenagers were left in the house alone. Psychologically, it was very unpleasant for all of us.

When we go now, we go in through Turkey. With the creation of the safe haven we can't go through Iraq. Well, according to Iraqi registration I am still there anyway because they never gave me a visa to get out – so it would look very suspicious if I went back in.

The Kurds have been given safe haven and the West has stopped Saddam going in to persecute them, but the situation in Kurdistan is absolutely appalling because he had already destroyed a lot of buildings – all the hospitals, schools and offices were looted. So, basically, there is nothing left and they don't have a budget to re-build or re-start. They must rely on people like ourselves going there and paying \$25 per person. Dollars exchanged into Iraqi currency is a lot of money.

All that is being done is that people are being kept alive. It is not a living. The ones who were working have been given some kind of discretionary salary but it is not enough to keep you going. I'll give you an example. All civil servants, teachers, and so on, they get something like 400 dinar a month, but to buy a sack of rice is 750. So you can imagine the extreme poverty. I have never in my life seen so much poverty in Kurdistan.

People *could* live supporting themselves because the land is rich – they have water, they have minerals, they have everything. The problem is that there is no machinery, no help and support. They don't have anything to sell to bring in more money so they are totally relying on charity, which is giving them very very little. So I think a lot of Kurds are feeling they have been betrayed by the West. A safe haven has been created but there is no provision, no budget, no support in building, in industry, in getting agriculture going.



What is also difficult is that Saddam has cut off the electricity from the Dahak province. The temperature can reach 45 degrees centigrade in summer and there is no cold water, no ice. People have fridges and freezers and air conditioning but can't use them. And, in the heat, obviously there are bacteria and germs and they have an effect – especially on children and the elderly. Children get diarrhoea in the summer and a lot of them die.

I don't think we will ever go back permanently, no. There are many reasons for that. Obviously, the conditions are a factor. And my parents were a big motive for me to go back, and I lost both of them. My children were raised in this country and I think English is their mother tongue. They have grown up in Scottish society and have Scottish accents. I don't think they could go and live in Kurdistan. For them, this is home and what would I do without my children?

I think what I miss most is the family atmosphere. In our culture we are not very formal. You can drop in at any time to see your family, your friends, your neighbours. You never have to phone and make it clear you're going for a chat, or a coffee, or a meal. When people come to you, you share whatever you have. If it's something luxurious or just cheese and bread, we are not embarrassed about it. I really miss people dropping in. When I'm ill I feel really alone. I remember when I was ill at home, my mother and father were at my bedside, bringing me food, and fruits, and pampering me.

And I miss the celebrations. Oh yes, absolutely. During the Ramadan and the Pilgrimage celebrations I feel, oh I don't know, depressed. Obviously, this is not an Islamic country so there is nothing visible to remind you that there is a celebration going on.

When we first came I used to make all the traditional sweets. You make specific food, you clean the house, you decorate, expecting someone will come. And nobody does [laughter]. And you feel silly. At one point I thought, as a matter of principle, I would ask the children to stay at home, and I did this a couple of times. And I thought, what is the point? They could go to school and have a much better time. There isn't a huge Kurdish community here where you could exchange visits or things like that.

I remember when I was little and we had a celebration at night I just couldn't sleep because I was so excited about receiving presents, money, special foods. I had everything new from the shoes to the ribbon, and I would lay it all on my bed. I couldn't wait for morning to come when you would greet your parents and they would give you presents, and constantly people would be coming in, exchanging food and sweets.

I absolutely love Edinburgh. It reminds me of my home town. I like the hills. You know the Braid hills? There are certain spots where you would swear it is exactly the same scene as in Kurdistan. There is a hill there which is the same height, the same shape, as a hill at home. Very often I go and just look at it. I love this area. In Kurdistan, we also have forests and rivers and mountains and snow. So these things are all similar to what I grew up with. Some of the birds are the same as we have in Kurdistan – partridges and pheasants.

I think I feel quite Scottish when I'm outside Scotland. When you're abroad and you

meet people from Scotland in Spain and other places, and we're all foreigners together, we feel closer and we talk about Scottish things, and you feel proud.

We've been here 19 years. Sometimes I get annoyed because all the time people ask how long have you been here? When are you going to go back home? They never think here is 'home'. Obviously, from my looks and my accent, I don't look Scottish and I'm not accepted as such. Not that I'm denying my own identity. I'm a Kurd and I'm really proud of that. But if you live in a country and you contribute – you work and pay tax like everyone else – you would like to be treated equally.

### **... Farkhanda Chaudry**

*Farkhanda Chaudry came to Scotland from Pakistan at the age of three. Now 35, she lives in Glasgow with her husband, who owns a takeaway business, and their five children.*

My father came over because at the time there was almost an invitation to come and fill jobs. When he arrived, I think he became a bus conductor. He'd just finished his studying and got his BA degree, but that was typical of the kinds of jobs that were available. And he, and his friends, and others, did them. But they wanted to go into mainstream jobs, which was a very hard thing to do. There was discrimination which made it difficult for people to go into the career they had chosen. But the Pakistanis, or the Asians in particular, had that entrepreneurial sense and they started in business.

I can remember my father talking about how people first started – people who are now running very, very big cash and carries. They've really made it big and they started by buying a few items and selling them door to door. Their roots are quite humble really.

My father went into business. He has had a lot of different things – grocer shops, restaurants, a meat shop, hardware shop. He also became a JP and he was involved in a lot of the groups that were started here – things like the Pakistani Cultural Organisation. He also became active in the Labour Party. At one time, he stood for a council seat in Pollokshields. This is going back to when I was about nine. There are councillors from minority communities now, but that was quite unusual in those days.

Initially when we came here we were in the Gorbals, and that was where most who came at that time settled, because there was a mosque very near. And about two or three years later, we moved to Pollokshields and I believe we were about the second [Pakistani] family to move into the area, and one thing I really remember of that time was that people used to come and see it. We'd bought this house and friends came to see it. And my father and a few of his friends got together and they decorated it. You don't see that now. They are all so busy. But that's what happened in those times.

People saved money together and one family got a house although the money did not all belong to that family. And then they saved for another family for a house. It was a very

collective effort and the families got together and whatever skills they had, they would use on the house.

There was a need then for that kind of support. If you had four families in Glasgow from Pakistan, there was a natural bonding. You did support each other because you were in a foreign country.

But as the community got bigger, there wasn't that same need. And some became prosperous, and some did not. In fact, now, I would say, there is most definitely a class structure which was not there at that time. The need overrode the class structure in the beginning.

I went to school initially in the Gorbals and then to Pollokshields Primary School and I think I saw myself as, quote, white. You know? So, I didn't think of myself as having this black skin. I was the same as everyone else – that's the idea I took on. Which isn't good really, because there is more strength in knowing that you *are* different, but being positive about that difference. But the schooling which I went through had a white perspective and therefore that was what I fitted into.

As I grew older, I questioned: well, what am I really? I think it was difficult for me then. When I was in second year at secondary school, I did start to question it. I went to Pakistan for the first time and I got this picture of where my family had come from, and that was when I started thinking: why should I be different from what my roots are? Why should I need to be something else because I'm living in Scotland?

I remember, from my childhood, the women who came over used to wear a material that was called crimplene, and they used to wear crimplene dresses with trousers. They didn't wear our national dress, the shalwar-kameez. So, it was almost an attempt to 'blend in' is the word I would use. There was the attitude that you shouldn't wear the shalwar-kameez because you would be too conspicuous. You were trying to be very 'nice' about living here, very apologetic. We are different, but we really apologise for it: I think that was the kind of thought.

And I remember going down the street with my mum, and she was talking in our own language [Urdu] and I would say don't talk like that because we're here and English is the language that is spoken. And that was my behaviour coming from the systems that I was going through – where other languages were not permitted. In fact, they made fun of you. So you spoke English to be part of the system.

I went to Pakistan when I was in second year and the one thing that really struck me when I went over was the different way people meet each other. For instance, here, friends, when they meet, just say 'Oh, hullo' and that's a very formal kind of greeting. But when I went over there and I saw my cousins and how they met their friends, it was almost as though they hadn't seen each other for years. And I found that good. And I found peace in that. Do you know what I mean? I think it was something to do with that missing element you have as a human being. As a person you have got different needs and some of them are part of nature. And I found that acting in that way gave me that missing part of me. You

know? It's almost like thinking, there's got to be something more, and discovering that was part of the puzzle of what the 'more' is.

But the question that arose in me was, well, why not behave like that here [in Scotland]? Why not here? I brought that question back with me, and the other questions like why not wear the shalwar-kameez to school – in the school colours? Why is the system so rigid?

At secondary school, I formed my friendships with white girls. I didn't have Asian friends. I think the reason was that in second year the group that was more able was put in one class and I was in 2A so I formed my friendships with girls that were there, and with the girls who took hockey and were sports-orientated. Of course, I couldn't do all the usual things like going to see the groups – Donny Osmond or the Bay City Rollers, or that sort of thing. But I think I accepted that I couldn't do it because I wasn't of that culture. I think I was a good wee girl [laughter], I wasn't one of the rebels in that way. I contemplated a lot, but I didn't rebel.

I think the reason I didn't maintain friendships with these girls was that I married at 16, whereas they all went on to university, or to do other things.

We were a family of four children – my three brothers and myself, and my two younger brothers were born here. There is an eight-year gap between me and my younger brother, and a 16-year gap between me and the brother younger than that. And it's quite interesting because you can see the differences in ways of thinking between each of us. I would never have said to my mum: 'I want to buy this...'; or 'I want to do that...' My mother did the shopping and we wore what she bought us, and so on. What our parents said, we would do. Whereas, with the younger brothers, it's different. With my own children it's different too. They do challenge you and that's not a bad thing. I would never say that's a terrible thing to do. It's a good thing as long as they are challenging you in order to understand and not because of what my daughters call an 'attitude problem' – they keep using that phrase to each other so I've picked up their jargon and I put it to good use [laughter].

I did want to go to university. Oh yes. But I think it goes back to who I was as a person. I wasn't the kind of person who would rebel and I didn't have any kind of support system where I could discuss it with someone and ask are there any other options? There wasn't that support system at all. Whereas I think for girls now there is. There is much more support. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I would debate on.

So I just accepted, this is the way it is done.

*Farkhanda was married during a family holiday in Pakistan, to her cousin whom she first met two weeks before the wedding. Was it an arranged marriage?*

Well, I was *asked*: Do you want to marry this person? But 16 is particularly young. You would need to ask my father what he was thinking then. He did see that academically I was very good from the reports he had from my teachers – reports that said I had the potential to go far. When I analyse it now, maybe there was a fear that if I went on to university I

would change. And that's quite an acceptable thing – fear of losing. At that time, I did feel I had been hard done, but when I analyse it now, with the experience I have of life, I think maybe that was what he was thinking. It wasn't about suppressing my development, it was about safety really, from his point of view.

In fact, my older brother got married and my husband and my sister-in-law are brother and sister. It was a double marriage.

I could talk to you about this, but it may be harmful because when people write about, in quotes, arranged marriages, you get stereotypes coming out. People say tut-tut, arranged marriages... And I would protect against the kind of harm that the media can cause. You have to look at the whole process. There is a fuller picture. But the media is quite a monster sometimes, they always just focus on the one bit.

My oldest daughter has just sat her Highers and she will go on to university. I think my older children have got a very good understanding of their religion... which I didn't have at that age simply because, here, there wasn't the same access to becoming aware of Islam at that time. In fact, becoming aware of Islam for a woman, is becoming aware of her rights.

So I will facilitate the [marriage] process, but she has the right to marry whom she wants. What I may do is say, look, there are three people, or two people, that have said they want to marry you, and this is what their backgrounds are...

Now, from my knowledge of my daughter, the things that she may be looking for would be someone who is a practising Muslim, someone who is quite well-educated, and will give her her rights within Islam. So these are things that I know she would be looking for, and we will discuss what she thinks of these men. And there will be an opportunity for them to sit down with a chaperone to talk about it. But in the end it is her right to decide, and that right has been given to her by God.

I think there is a misconception that a Muslim woman is a very submissive creature that walks 10 paces behind her husband, and that her life revolves around the kitchen. Well, there are extremes in every society – extremes of white women too. I would say that I am not a submissive person and I do really think about things, and I am not around the kitchen all day. As a Muslim woman, I have views on the community around me and how I should participate in that community, and I have views on the political agenda and how it relates to me. From an Islamic perspective, I have a very important role: yes, it is about bringing up the children, but it is also about being knowledgeable in other areas which affect how you bring up your children. You need to be on your toes about all the issues that are out there in the society in which we are living. And as I have developed my Muslim perspective, in fact, it is calling me to be a much stronger person, and it is calling me to be involved in other areas.

*As part of that commitment to the community, Farkhanda now works for Strathclyde Poverty Alliance with the ethnic minority poor in Dunbartonshire. She has also recently become a JP, the first ethnic minority woman to do so in Glasgow. On our way to her home, she mentioned*

*casually that while working she prefers to travel by car rather than public transport because her hijab draws attention to her.*

I think you can link that especially to the Gulf War. The hijab comes from the Middle East – it's a Middle East look – and if you analyse the media, it's very anti-Muslim. They present Muslims almost like violent terrorists – that image is quite rife within people.

It's mostly name calling. But It can go beyond that as well, especially if you're in an area where there isn't anyone else around. I think it's something my organisation recognises. You're not really supposed to use your car for work, but I did make a point that this is how I feel; that from a safety aspect, I don't want to set myself up.

It's part of life, really. One of the things I'm doing in Dunbartonshire is asking people if they have experienced racial abuse and 100% have said yes, And it is not taken as anything unusual. It has become accepted that you will be called names.

They say things like go back home, go back to where you belong. Things like that... And you think, well, I don't belong anywhere else. I belong here [laughter].

My children are slightly different from me in that very often they don't let the other person get away with it, depending on the situation – if it is a group of five boys I think they would just keep quiet. If someone says 'Go back to your own country', they'll say: 'Where do you think I come from?' They do react, the girls, the older ones, do. My sons are younger, they're not mature enough to challenge the person.

When the children were younger I went back and stayed in Pakistan for a year, and then I did the same thing again for another year, because I recognised the importance of enabling my children to get a feeling of where their grandparents came from. Essentially they are Scots, but it gives them a kind of wholeness.

When I was 17, I went back with my child for a year and it was a learning experience. For example, firstly, you went through the whole weather system in a natural way. Here, you don't have a defined summer period, and you don't have a defined winter period, or autumn period. It's much more focused in Pakistan – the monsoon season, and the really, really hot weather, the cold weather, and so on. And I found that a very revealing experience.

Secondly, you're used to just turning on the tap and the water comes out. You're used to always having the lights. Whereas, in Pakistan, the energy is hydro-energy, so when the water levels go down it means the electricity is put off, and the water goes off – and still you've got all your washing to do. Things like that.

So it really enriched me, and I think it also in later years equipped me with a sense of globalism, of how things that happen in one place affect the lives of people that you don't see – for instance the ozone layer, or the recent conference on population. Now, when you sit down and read the material round that conference, one of the main things people wanted was for third world developing countries to control populations. But when you look at consumption, the Western world is consuming far greater amounts of stuff than the

developing countries. In many ways it is an imposition on the developing countries without questioning the Western world and how it's acting.

So I think the experience of living in a different environment really opened me and you lose out on that if you're always living in comfortable, well-off surroundings.

I think there have been different stages in my life. I would have classed myself as a Scottish Pakistani at 12 because my parents told me I was a Pakistani. That Scottish part of me was never promoted as valuable – it was almost like, well, we're living in this foreign country, and we're going to go back home.

When I went to Pakistan and lived there, my sense of being Pakistani was very, very strong in comparison to the Scots bit of me – it was counteracting what I had gone through in growing up. So I thought, if I wish to work, I will work, but I will not give up my dress.

But I've moved on from that as well and I think as I've developed and grown in my religion, I feel being a Pakistani or not being a Pakistani, or being a Scot or not being a Scot, is irrelevant. It's more about being a Muslim living here. It's not about nationality – these are lines drawn by humans. I am a Muslim – a Muslim person who lives right here in Scotland.

### **... Jonathan Squire**

*Jonathan Squire is a psychiatric nurse in Glasgow, an active volunteer with numerous organisations and founder of the first Scottish steel band. Originally from Accra, Ghana, his first language was Ga. Educated, as is usual there, in English – the country's official language – he came to Britain in 1974 at the age of 20, after a spell working as a clerical officer in the Ghana Foreign Office.*

I came over with a sense of adventure and a sense of going into the unknown. I came to Glasgow to attend nursing school at the Victoria Infirmary, but it wasn't my intention to stay in Britain. I intended to do the course, then look around for another course, and go back home. So probably I thought I would stay a maximum of six years.

Well, after I finished my nursing training, I started working at the hospital, and I did a part-time business studies course. Towards the end of that, I met my wife, who is from Barbados. So along came the children, and time passed and I find myself still here.

I work at Gartnavel Royal Hospital on night duty, which I enjoy. My wife is a nursing sister. She works in the day. We pass like ships in the night. The recipe for a successful marriage [laughter].

I also do a lot of voluntary work. I serve on many ethnic minority committees. I'm a director of the Ethnic Minority Law Centre in Glasgow, a law centre which was established to cater for the legal needs of the black and ethnic minority population. I'm also the organiser of the first African Caribbean Advisory Service, and a 24-hour helpline which we

set up jointly with the YMCA Glasgow. On the helpline I do some counselling to the African Caribbean community. It's a small but growing community – they are isolated in all parts of Glasgow and beyond, so there was a need to help them get in touch with each other.

One of the complaints we get from a lot of students and people like that is their feeling of loneliness, their lack of contact with other people from the same background. Therefore the helpline is a means by which we bring people together. The other part of it is work on discrimination, work on housing needs. We do advocacy along these lines as well, because as the population grows, by and by, the number of people falling foul of racism will grow as well. Racism goes from one end of Glasgow to the other. Everywhere where there are ethnic minorities, there are people experiencing racism. It takes the form of graffiti on doors, abuse from other people in the area. I wouldn't say that everyone encounters it, but a lot of people do.

I have had all sorts of abuse on the helpline. People have phoned just to hurl abuse down their telephone [laughter]. But you take it along with the job.

One of the disturbing trends we have within the black and ethnic community in general is not just one-to-one racism; what we hope to combat is institutional racism in terms of jobs, in terms of promotion. This is particularly bad in Scotland. If you look at England and other places, black people have broken through a barrier into jobs which, 10, 15 years ago you wouldn't have found black people in. In Scotland, you'll still hardly find black people in many offices and institutions.

So we monitor employers, we monitor where equal opportunity policies are being pursued, we highlight where there is a deficiency.

We intervene if people feel they are being discriminated against because of their colour. Some of the organisations say there have been no black people applying for the jobs but that is certainly not true – there are a lot of black and ethnic minority people who are very well qualified and they are not getting the opportunity.

I once went to watch a parade or something like that on Glasgow Green and there was a racist-incited attack. Name calling and abuse, and a whole gang of youths jumped on me. When something like that happens, you try to understand what is going on. You try not to look at it at face value. You wonder what generates that kind of hatred. You meet some people you get on with, and there are no barriers at all. On the other hand you can meet naked hate and aggression and you wonder where the problem lies, what is the solution, and how it can be dealt with.

It is born out of misunderstanding or misconceptions that have to be clarified. I feel you can only clarify these by educating people. I would say it should start from schools, by teaching the true history of black people – where they are and where they came from. And basically pointing out that although there are differences, we are all people – biologically we are all the same. There might be variations in colour, but basically we are all the same.

Another positive approach is by giving good examples – and that's where institutional



racism comes in. Only when people are seeing black teachers and doctors and so on, and when a positive message is coming across in the media, then maybe it will start to disappear a little bit. I think that's where the approach should be.

The issue of community relationships and all they entail goes beyond race. We have all got problems – black, white, everybody. And these problems have to be analysed and together we have to solve them. The days when black people were accused of creating unemployment by swamping this country are gone, I think. We have got to look at the entire community and work together to solve the problems that we all face. That is the message that should be coming across.

Attitudes must be changed from school, but not as a passing whim. It can't be that today we are doing racial awareness training and tomorrow we are over and done with it. It has to be a consistent and serious approach – not seen as a problem that should be glanced at in Racial Awareness Week.

Sport has gone a long way to removing some of the stereotyping. You get black footballers and black athletes and you will find that followers of these are from both the black and white communities. But the same thing must happen in areas other than sports because this is another stereotype: that the black man or woman is only capable of doing sports, or dancing, or whatever. In the academic field, they are very well qualified, if only they are given the opportunity to compete.

When I left Ghana, my colour was not in my consciousness. You were never aware of your colour or whether it was important. Ghana has a lot of expatriate whites, and whites who have settled there. But you never think of colour until you leave. You arrive here and you are confronted with colour as an issue.

When I arrived in Scotland, I had the misfortune of wearing my African costume. I thought it was going to be a lovely sunny day. In Glasgow! At the end of September! So I had this colourful costume on and apart from being cold, I became a spectacle. Maybe people were looking at what I was wearing, not what colour I was....

Anyway, from day one I was confronted with my colour: people calling you names, things like that. So that's when you become aware that you are different – that your colour is an issue.

When people call you names on buses or wherever, it's important to ignore that kind of thing, to rise above it. If you went about challenging everybody it would be a full-time occupation [laughter].

But the other thing I found when I arrived in Glasgow was that people were very, very friendly. They were very welcoming. That's the other side of the coin. If you were lost, you would get somebody actually going out of their way to take you and show you where you wanted to go. That happened to me quite a few times. I've been on buses and found that people were not only willing to give directions, but to actually take you where you were going. So people were friendly like that. Also, in pubs you get a lot of free drinks from people wanting to cultivate your friendship.

I suppose what I miss most about Ghana is the outdoor life. Life is mainly outdoors. You can go to the beach any time and parties are all held outdoors. Here, in summer, I will be out and about, but in winter in this country you are virtually a prisoner of your own making.

I still retain my Ghanaian culture as far as it is convenient to life here. There are certain aspects of my culture where that is impracticable – a manner of dressing, eating certain foods.

I still speak my language and I try to teach it to my children – to no avail due to the fact that my wife speaks English to them.

As far as my children are concerned [his son aged 13, and daughter, 11], they have an affinity with Ghana to some extent. But the fact that they are born in Scotland and their friends are Scottish and their impressions are formed in Scotland means that when they go to Ghana, they enjoy it, but they do miss Scotland as well. So I see them more as Scots than as Ghanaians. Given a choice, I think they like the best of both worlds, but they wouldn't follow me to Ghana if I went back.

Where possible, I have given them some of my culture in terms of the way things are done, some of the traditions I grew up in. An example of that would be teaching them about naming ceremonies. There is a naming pattern we follow. My children are called Torgbor and Toshie – for the first boy and the first girl – and that comes down the line. I am called Adja, and my father was called Torgbor, which is my boy's name. So I didn't get my father's name, but I gave it to my son, and my children will give my name to their children. So that is the kind of thing which they need to know about.

Because of Christianity and colonisation, we are given what are called Christian names, and some of the surnames we have in Ghana have become European names. Jonathan is the name my father picked for me when I was baptised. So my full name is Jonathan Nii Adja Squire.

For my children, I use their African names but they also have Christian names with which they have been baptised, following the tradition of the family as Christians. But at school they are Torgbor and Toshie because I want to reinforce their African heritage.

I keep in touch with home regularly. I go back every two or three years. I'm hoping to spend some time there when I retire. Some time there, some time here, and some time maybe in Barbados. We need to find some common ground that would satisfy all parties!

## Letter from Aberdeenshire: oilies and Old Blind Dogs

Steve Bruce

1998

Dear Dad,

I suppose it is your memory rather than your spirit I am addressing. Both of us were raised in the Kirk but neither of us much believed in it. We absorbed the psychology – serious, diligent, dutiful and regular – but I could never take the supernatural bits seriously and you were never a great one for the bodily resurrection and the life here after. Much too fanciful for Presbyterians from Aberdeenshire. But if Auden could send his impressions of Iceland to Lord Byron, then I think I am allowed the pretence of communication with you. Despite the years abroad, you were ever the Buchan loon, happy to hear news on the doings of your neighbours but shy of expressing your feelings. So I will not embarrass you by dwelling on how often I think of you fondly when a place or sight reminds me that this was once your country. I will just get on with bringing you up-to-date with life in your old parish.

Of course, 'they're awfa saft noo!' and they should have tried making a living when you were a lad, but our farmer neighbours have been hurt by BSE. Or, to be precise, they have been hit hard by our European Union partners using public hysteria to engage in some covert protectionism. The disease in cows is pretty rare in these parts and the human version unknown, which just makes my neighbours feel worse; thousands of healthy beasts slaughtered and millions of tons of good food wasted. For the first year of BSE, pigs and sheep were some compensation but the strength of the pound has ruined them too. And barley. One friend was offered less for this year's crop than he got in 1972. Peter has had to get himself a full-time job. His wife now works 300 acres with his help in the evenings and at weekends. The rumour is that Aberdeen and Northern Mart has been given 74 farms by the banks but they dare not put them on the market at once. Hard times indeed.

*The Press and Journal* is full of farmers pleading with us to insist on Scottish meat from the supermarket. I buy local anyway because I share all your prejudices against the French and the Germans but the 'Buy Scottish' line would sound more persuasive if farmhouses were not full of Japanese electrical goods and there were not so many foreign cars at the mart. I don't suppose many of them shed tears for British engineering when they were buying John Deere and Claas harvesters!

Taking of the *P & J*, about the only new feature is the horoscope, but it is a bland thing

that smells of syndication. How much more fun if it told Arians to swathe their rape, Geminis when to fish off Iceland, and Taureans when it was propitious to search for oil west of Shetland.

As with every previous agriculture depression, the result will be bigger farms with fewer people employed on them. The machines get bigger and the fields expand to accommodate them. And big is fast. Last month, Georgie and I watched a squadron of behemoths rumble into the field next to us, cut and bag 100 acres of silage in two hours, and then rumble off again.

The old steadings are much too small for these monsters so anyone with cash to spare is putting up great metal sheds. With all the amalgamations, half the farmhouses are spare but townie commuters like us have saved the place ending up as empty as the Highlands. After decades of permitting ghastly bungalows, the council has belatedly acquired an aesthetic sense. Consent for new houses is hard to get so the redundant steadings are being converted. A friend in Methlick has had a new house built so that it looks like a converted steading. The builder even inserted rusting door hinges in the stone work on either side of a picture window! Kitsch, you might think, but with a bit of weathering and lichen (a few buckets of pig manure on the harling produces a fine patina) it will look like it has always been there.

You would be astonished at how cosmopolitan the village has become. There are a lot of oilies, English mostly, who reminisce of life in Dubai and Alaska. Joe, who owns a music shop in Inverurie, is an American. Davie, insurance salesman and potter, is from Orkney. A fair few of the farmers are white settlers. But you would be pleased at how much of the old culture survives. Last month, we all sweated our way through the *Gay Gordons*, *Dashing White Sergeant*, and *Military Two-Step* at a fundraising dance in the British Legion in Meldrum. There was a barn dance in Tarves. We managed the Inch and the Methlick Farmers' Balls this winter. Huge amounts of local beef and pork (and that was just the dancers!). You would have recognised the accordion trio; actually they were so old that you might have gone to school with them. The popularity of country and western songs would surprise you, as would the hairstyles of the young folk, but they can rave (take drugs and jog on the spot for five hours) one weekend and do a cracking *Old Time Waltz* the next.

Talking of music, Charlotte's violin is coming on. Remember how, when mum was away, you used to get out the old Beltona 78s and sing along to the Jimmy Shands? Well, Charlotte may be developing a fondness for Australian soaps but she can do a spirited rendition of *The Muckin' o' Geordie's Byre*, *The Back o' Bennachie*, and *The Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie*. She plays in the Central Aberdeenshire youth orchestra and the Garioch Young Fiddlers. What greatly pleases me is that this is not nostalgia. There is a popular local band, Old Blind Dogs, which produces the most beautiful renditions of Scott Skinner Scottish airs, but the lads can lean forward and turn the volume up to play the *Battle of Harlaw* as if they meant it. Of course, much of the interest in bothy ballads is 'heritaging'. Young people who find them quaint, and old people who ought to know better, sentimentalise the old

days and forget that life in the bothy was usually hard and often miserable. But we pack the village halls to hear Old Blind Dogs because the music they play is alive and kicking.

The school does a lot to preserve the local culture. Three of the four teachers are natives. I remember you saying you weren't allowed to speak Doric in class. At the end of term, the whole school put on a revue in which the locals played English parts and the incomers gave it 'fit like'. All a bit camp, of course, when the weans idolise girl groups from London and the cast of *Friends*, but it is a refreshing trend.

As with agriculture, religion is in trouble. Like the farms, parishes get amalgamated in the search for the viable unit. The minister rushes through one service and then jumps in her car to drive 10 miles to her other charge (yes, it is a woman). Interestingly, this change cannot be laid at the door of incomers. If anything, they are more likely than the natives go to church (because they are middle class and because they want to support local institutions). Joe the American, who was raised as a Jew, is an elder.

There is no argument about religion: it is lack of interest rather than atheism or humanism which is eroding the Kirk. I was reading in the papers last week of some parents in an English city complaining about their children being 'indoctrinated'. There is none of that here. The entire primary school is forever trooping into the church for some ritual or other and no-one minds. The local minister is very good with the children. Children and old people are what the church does now; it is the bit in between that has disappeared.

Horizons have broadened but the natives have a knack of reasserting the parochial. Men with wind-reddened faces in dirty overalls and tweed caps stand about in the mart and complain about vet bills and the price of feed, but when I joined such a group last week at Thainstone, they were talking about their eastern European operations! One chap has bought 1,000 acres in Poland where the labour is cheap, the regulatory regime weak, and the levels of productivity so poor that he cannot fail to become a local hero (and make a few bob on the way). Another was home on holiday from his job as grieve for a former Soviet state farm. And it is not like when your aunties went off to Canada and never came back. The laird of Wraclov can get from here to there in the time it takes me to drive to England. For all his international holdings, he is back at the mart still wearing the same clothes and still moaning about the weather, the workmen, and taxes.

What else is new? Well, the food has improved. The American influence of the oilies resonated nicely with local resources and appetites to produce the sort of eatery that beats customers round the head with a 10 pound steak and promises another if they can finish it. The big supermarkets have brought us exotic vegetables with cooking suggestions on the wrapping. We have Chinese and Indian restaurants and there is even a Hungarian bistro in Ellon: a long way from brose and boiled tatties.

Our politics have changed a little since your days, but there is still a rural-urban divide. Labour can get a monkey elected in the central belt but up here Conservatives and Liberals still hold sway. Or at least they did until recently. I suspect you would be distressed by the recent success of the SNP, but there is a strong pull away from England. Margaret Thatcher

must take a lot of the blame for that. I still have all your books on my shelves and they show that your conservatism and unionism was that of John Buchan and Walter Scott, not the little Englander consumerism of Essex Man. When you thought about your own relatives in Canada and South Africa and Australia and your career in the army, you could see the part that the empire played in holding the country together. With that gone, a lot of us are rethinking our commitment to the United Kingdom. Like the decline in religion, it is not a great crusade. There are some gung ho nats, but most of us just sense a widening gulf between us up here and them down there. Few of my friends and neighbours see independence as a romantic project, but a lot of them assume that we will continue to drift apart and do not mind that.

What can I tell you to leave you smiling? Oh yes, we have moved 100 miles west. It's official. You may have known this area as the lowlands of Gordon and Buchan but according to the name of the Meldrum distillery, I live in 'Glen' Garioch. Mackie's are at it too. A few years ago it launched a new line of delicious artery-clogging ice cream with the title 'Highlander'. The packaging described the beasts I can see from my windows as 'contented cows from the Highlands of Scotland'!

I'm afraid that the rebranding of Lowlands Scotland has passed beyond repair. A combination of tourism's need for a marketable image and our growing disenchantment with England has fuelled the demand for an autonomous identity. I know you would say that the climate and the land gave this part of the world a sufficiently distinctive culture, but the international trade in images needs starker contrasts and clearer lines of demarcation. So we have all become kilt-wearing teuchters.

More later.

Love,

Steve

# Letter from Paisley: A separate tribe

William Hunter

1998

Dear Dizzy,<sup>1</sup>

Please accept the intrusion of this letter which you are likely to find as mundane as it is late. Or else, it could be a welcome interruption to yet another long, easeful morning. You said once that your idea of death was eating ortolans to the sound of soft music. Ortolans are delicate finches, ain't they? Wherever you are, I hope there are enough little birds for you to nibble. Whiles, though, you may wish for something rawer to chew on and for background music that has a bang of drums in it.

It could not have been easy for you to leave your daily round of flattering Queen Victoria, giving cheek to Mr Gladstone, while running the country between making smart-ass remarks. Among the zillion sizzlers you wrote and spoke, four little words and one big one have brought this letter on you. Keep your eye on Paisley you wrote, and may God have rebuked you for them. They have caused much innocent confusion to the best people on earth and more cruel mirth to some others.

Many of the good things you said continue to be said by people who don't know you said them first. Such spanking stuff as about how there are lies, damned lies and statistics keeps being trotted out by wags who mouth the crack as if they had minted it. Another of your funnies was: 'Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of the country depends'. Oh boy, are the people, whoever they are when they're at home, still being fed that pabulum by your successors. I digress. Let us get back to giving Paisley the eye.

To be fair, and I do not much want to be, your contribution to Paisley's problems gets famously misquoted and torn from context, as you Westminster jokers like to complain. But your response is likely to be altogether blander and more sophisticated. Chances are you don't remember writing the words. As close to Paisley as you came was to a banquet of portly Glasgow keelies to celebrate your becoming rector of the old university. You had them chortling over your sly dig at the literati that an author who speaks about his own books is as bad as a mother who talks about her children. And the Paisley eye whimsy occurred in one of your volumes of fiction. *Endymion* you called it, and heaven help you again. It was your last tome of tale-telling written in grand old age, if you remember as you probably don't.

Its hero (wrong word) was Endymion Ferrars who remains a thoroughly modern politician, being clever and energetic and sexually athletic and money-greedy, except that

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield (1804–81), otherwise Dizzy, was Prime Minister twice and seven, maybe eight, times the perpetrator of novels

he was also beautiful. He was the private secretary of a Cabinet minister who was equally ambitious but less lovely. At the time of the novel, there were fears that the people (or peasants) were restless or even revolting. There was much disgust and dissatisfaction with their poor lot. So Endymion was sent by his boss to spy out the land. He was to find out how things really were at what London calls the grass roots as if the rest of the country lived in meadowland. (The political party you reformed, Mr Disraeli, is going through similar motions again, if you are interested, although you probably are not.) Really, it was an undercover mission.

When, in his stealthy way, dear Endymion reached Manchester, he fell in love with a mill owner wise in the ways of the real world and of liberal tendencies. This Job Thornberry told Endymion what to do if he really wanted to find out about the mood and temper of the peons and factory serfs. 'What you should do [he informed the government snoop] is go to the Glasgow district; that city itself, and Paisley and Kilmarnock – keep your eye on Paisley. I am much mistaken if there will not soon be a state of things there which alone will break up the whole concern. It will burst it, sir, it will burst it.'

Practical Job was giving warning that if Britain became inflamed with revolution, the first bonfires would be lit in Paisley. Should the rivers run with the blood of rebellion, the first to turn red would be the White Cart. Time has sandpapered his words and softened them. Paisley thinks that the idea you put into your character's mouth meant that you yourself, sir, thought that Paisley was always worth a look. That the eyes of the world should dwell on it for how it keeps ahead of the game. They believe you saw it as they do as the centre of the universe. You Endymionised the old place. I wonder what you would make of it now.

To be honest, as I don't suppose you will expect me to be, I also wonder if I may not have become as much an old phoney as yourself. In stern truth, this is not a letter from home. I do not stay there any more. But it is home for being where my heart is, home being the place where they have to let you in again. In my more missionary moments, I sometimes see myself as some sort of half-baked ambassador for Paisley. At every opportunity – and at other times which offer no opportunity at all – I bore for Paisley. I commit happy falsehoods on its behalf. But I do not often walk its pavements nor gaze in daily wonder at its skyline of domes and steeples.

Whereas my Paisley had eight picture houses, Paisley now has not one. There were gentlemen's clubs. Tramcars made epic voyages as far as Airdrie. There were three different Co-ops. My Paisley built ships, dyed cloth, built machinery, stirred cornflour, manufactured soap, made marmalade, while it turned out several bobbins of sewing thread. Nearly 10,000 worked in the thread mills. Now not one bobbin is reeled in the town. The local total of jobs lost in comparatively recent times gets put at 40,000, about half of the present population. Ellen Farmer, president of the Old Paisley Society conservation group, said: 'Sometimes I think that if you were doing a history of the industrial revolution you could do it all in Paisley'.

Similar unemployment has been dumped on other places. What you may want to know,



dear Dizzy, is what keeps Paisley as special as you made it. And why am I hawering on and not getting to the nub of the thing?, you ask. One adequate enough reason is that I dunno. The place is a magical mystery to me, always has been. Another reason for hesitancy is that, as you are a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, it would be folly to go on about the moral decline that seeps in with economic decline. And I'll bet the beautiful Endymion didn't get Paisley put on a postcard. It would take Solomon to do that. But, yes, among its many blessings, Paisley does have Solomon.

He sits sagely in a first-floor niche above the High Street. His building has empty windows. Its only other adornments are estate agents' boards. Presumably, he is there because he fronted a masonic hall. Now the abandoned look of the address seems to symbolise the peculiar melancholy that falls on all former textile towns. But the eyeful old Sol is getting brings good hope. Under his nose they are tearing up the street. But not to use its rubble for barricades as old Job what'shisname predicted: the Buddies (as we call ourselves) are relaying their plainstones to make them fitter to walk and shop on and out of the road of the buses. It took a long trek to make promenading possible. Fifteen years of argy-bargy had to be gone through first for nothing happens with undue haste in Paisley. That seems to be just the Buddy way of it. If it is happily enough accepted that our town is the biggest village in Scotland, then improving it may best be done in a village kind of way – a little bit at a time and slowly.

On my one day back, I decided how good it would be if Paisley could get back to being its old self – busy about everyday tasks, obsessed about learning, fancying itself as a nest of poets, insisting on separateness from the city of Sodom seven miles east, absurdly proud, endlessly argumentative and prudently thrifty – or if you insist on saying mean with money, Mr Disraeli, that's fine by me. Paisley's most enduring mystery lies in how Buddies continue to believe they are a separate tribe.

Ours has seldom been an easy place to live. There have been times when it was rated the hardest habitation in the country or perhaps the whole industrial world. Now the living is easier than when the women of the town toiled to make it the thread capital of the universe. 'People do want to live here,' Ellen Farmer said, pointing out how many acres of former industrial ground has been rebuilt with private housing. 'This is a cleaner place without all the work that went on, and the river Cart doesn't run with a different dye works colour every day,' she said. 'And it's easy to get to Glasgow,' she conceded.

She was speaking at Sma' Shot Cottages, a haven of hospitality created by the loyalists of the Old Paisley Society. In an 18th-century weaver's house and a dye-worker's old tenement with a courtyard garden in-between, they have enshrined the town's past and serve the happiest afternoon tea in the Western hemisphere. In a museum kitchen, an ancient packet of A1 soap powder by Isdale & McCallum brought a tear to the eye. (Also weepingly, sir, I could explain what the sma' shot was and its hallowed place in the town's working-class story. Even you, however, may not have the time for such complexity. It takes at least a third-generation Buddy to get the hang of it.)

As with many other things, Paisley has its own way with words and its lieges retain an accent all their own. Even seeking the roots of Buddies would take sundry paragraphs of a fatness you deplore. But since you are fond of exotic words like ortolans, you may agree that Paisley's best word is its name, however tainted it has been by drugs publicity and roughneck politics. It remains a beautiful word. It sounds good. It has elegant shape. My old heart leaps when I see it on buses as long-distant as in the polar regions of north Glasgow. It is what we have been taught to call a marketable word. It is international. Worldwide dictionaries give it an entry. The tadpole pattern worked by the town's weavers made it so. Even American crime book writers who like to clothe their heroes down to their gaudy socks dress them up with a Paisley tie.

Since you were once a (failed) journalist before becoming a powerful imperialist, you will expect me to be fluffy and superficial in the way of that shared trade. So be it. But taking pride in the name again might work wonders. For starters, local government, mystifyingly called Renfrewshire Council, should use it. Keeping an eye on Paisley is trickier than in your time because Paisley is not there any more on official maps of political power. Help may be at hand. Last month, Provost Nancy Allison, provost of Renfrewshire, started the campaign to have Paisley created a city. She hopes it would be a grand way to celebrate the millennium. 'If you don't ask and you don't try, you will never get,' she said. 'I want to see the people of Paisley get their pride back.' Only you, dear Dizzy, know if the sleek Endymion found an better answer.

Hope you are not wearying and still doing the wisecracks. Please do not feel obliged to reply.

Sincerely,  
William Hunter

# Letter from Lewis: still we sing

Francis Thompson

1998

Dear Murdo

I wish you were here. I really do. No, I'm not on holiday in some exotic part of the world like Achiltibuie. At least there they are bang up to date with their hydroponics, growing first-class fruit and veg, an idea which could well do with crossing the Minch. No, I'm in South Uist sitting on a floral-pattern machair listening to the sound of the waves on the beach, the birds up to their usual larks and a couple of corncrakes splitting the air into ragged-edged particles.

When Meg and I announced that we were going to South Uist for a week, we got nothing but looks of amazement. South Uist? Why there? But there was method in our seeming madness: the rare chance of a week away from it all, as they say. Peace and quiet and good eating at the Pollochar Inn, standing close to that lichen-covered prehistoric sea-marker that still says something about the continuity of life in these islands.

But the reaction to us opting for South Uist was a bit of an eye-opener. More than likely it was a reflection on the attitude which islanders have towards their own islands: it can't be worth much if it's local: I kent his faither; it can't be any good unless it comes from away. You know the syndrome.

Why do I wish you were here? Simple, *a'bhalaich*. You were part of the inevitable brain drain, leaving Lewis to go to university, graduating and then finding little scope for your talents back home. Only ministers and teachers returned, the latter in particular being lured back by that wee piece of family land surrounded by regulations, known as the family croft. Mind you, both religion and education were pretty safe bets in those days, offering a lifetime in the job and, oh! luxury!, a pension at the end of it.

You could do yourself a favour by getting back home, changing tack in the midstream of your career and profession and making a contribution to island society which would have the advantage of having a local flavour. Is it needed? You might well ask. Well, despite the fact that they say there's a lot of things going on here, I just wonder if it's all a veneer to hide some basic, long-standing indigenous and historical problems which can never be resolved unless a truly radical approach is taken to establish a realistic base on which the islanders can found a future for themselves.

You remember when as boys we picked up some pocket money helping weavers by filling bobbins for the loom? These were the boom years for Harris Tweed. Then, the mills were working to full tilt to cope with the output from weavers pedalling away at their clattering Hattersleys. Millions of yards were exported and everyone enjoyed the experience

of being in full-time work and taking home a guaranteed pay packet. Today, according to reports, the per annum output is down to a million yards, if that. Sad days indeed.

But that situation suggests that aggression is needed in the market place. The Donegal tweed makers have the right approach. They go in for 'value-adding', making ready-made suits, rugs, caps – everything under the sun. And they have the added advantage of getting their products into Irish shops which are to be found all over the world. If anything is made in Ireland, they'll sell it. Where are the Scottish shops? Maybe Lord Gus, our new Minister for Industry, might put that on his wish list for Scotland when he has a moment to spare.

And the future for fishing is not looking good – nor is it for the fish. The Minch has been almost depleted of stocks. Even sea angling competitions have to take place on the west side of the island if decent catches are to be had. Many of the young lads don't seem to want to go into the industry. Maybe the image is not attractive enough as a career option. Or maybe it's the hard graft involved in being a fisherman that puts them off. Who knows? And is anyone looking into the problem?

Our young folk are supposed to be the promise of the future. And that's for sure. Not that they lack talent, but it's the daunting task to make it to that first rung on the ladder when they fine-tune their ambitions to start up in business for themselves. It's amazing what they can come up with in ideas for market niches and then get them kick-started by the enterprise agencies and bodies like the Prince's Trust. They may not realise it but, once they get off the ground, they do help to broaden the economic base of the islands. And that is badly needed.

For far too long there has been an unhealthy dependence on traditional industries which, while holding on to a cliff edge by cracked and neglected fingernails, fail to give it the shelter needed on those days when it doesn't just rain, it pours down.

A case in point is the employment turmoil in Benbecula with the pull-out of RAF and military interests centred on Balivanich. And then there is the problem facing the seaweed collectors, whose air-dried exports from the Uists are no longer required by the overseas market. So much for the Tangle o' the Isles! More like a Gordian knot.

One might well ask the question: why was nothing done to investigate the possibility of setting up a seaweed-drying plant for these workers so that they could get some guarantee of continued employment? Was no one looking into the crystal ball, no one watching the moving finger writing on the wall before it moved on?

And take tourism, the new industry which employs hewers of wood and drawers of water. That's not everyone's cup of tea. But the tourists do offer some the chance to earn an honest bob or two. OK. Our weather is not the best in the world. But if it does rain, it's warm and it's clean. Mucho dineros are being spent at the moment in upgrading B&B establishments and guest houses to offer visitors acceptable levels of comfort, which is all to the good. But are service industries the answer?

Those chaps who live in the dim and distant past are digging up the islands' prehistoric heritage, and a good thing too. Because what the archaeologists are revealing in their digs is

evidence of a continuous occupation of these islands over a period of some six or seven thousand years. That is surely an aspect of tourism which can be developed in the future to put the Western Isles on some kind of map. They've done it to the hilt in Orkney, where they pay filial respect their built heritage. Here, we're not only way down the line but seem to be running on the spot.

I suppose the past can take care of itself, simply because it's there and, like the poor, will always be with us. At the moment, people are beavering away with their plans for the interpretation of historic and prehistoric sites, to give visitors something to look at and to give locals some sense of their history. But what is maybe more important is the recognition of the fact that in the islands people have pride of place, something which Highlanders in general have always retained as part of their psyche. Why else, when they emigrated last century to far-off lands, would they have composed so many Gaelic songs reflecting their sense of loss, even though they were aware of the conditions which had forced them to leave home and hearth in the first place? They still, in dreams, behold the Hebrides and return in their annual droves to view the ruins in which their forebears lived on subsistence levels. Maybe nostalgia is just a money-spinning myth, but nowadays packaged in a kind of virtual reality which one is allowed to see but not touch.

And speaking of virtual reality, exiles and others can now access the 'Virtual Hebrides', caught inside the world wide web from which there is no escape. Do these site pages herald the new world for islanders? Well, one reality is the number of people who make a daily track, not from the house to the moors, but from the kitchen to the PCs in their front rooms, to do work for the mainland companies through the Telecottage system. This is a godsend for those who set their face against the prospect of emigration but rather come to terms with living on the edge, living with the cutting interface of new technology and stay put in their respective townships. They could well be the modern equivalent of the Harris Tweed weavers chuntering out webs of cloth from well-oiled looms in their own homes. Is this what the islands in the new millennium will be like – houses in deserted landscapes with green lights flickering behind lace curtains?

Murdo, we've seen nearly seven decades of this century, me from the inside and you from your own safe distance, though you regularly come home to check up on us and partake of a dram or two. It's a far cry from those cat's-whiskers days and the crystal set, from the time Stornoway was humming with the buzz of activity based on herring and the Model T was a sight to behold.

Now the buzz is talk of oil exploration off St Kilda, coming to grips with the electronics age, New Starts and New Deals for young islanders, the Gaelic TV studio in Stornoway turning out interminable episodes of *Machair*, and communication satellites hovering overhead: the new stars in the firmament of the future.

Sitting here on the beach, watching oystercatchers poncing at the water's edge and looking out at a couple of rocky skerries being covered by an incoming tide, I'm reminded of an old Gaelic proverb which seems to be more than appropriate as the year 2000 looms

in upon us: *Bata Ur is Seana Chreagan* – New Boat and Old Rocks. Whoever came up with that one knew a thing or two about the uncertainty of the future. The new millennium could well prove to be a non-event. *Plus ça change* and all that.

If the new boat, bearing the hopes of the future, is not steered by those who know the waters at all states of the tide, then these old rocks, the problems which have beset the Western Isles for centuries, will be lying in wait.

Well, Murdo, back in Stornoway after sampling the flesh-pots of South Uist, we are being caught up with the Hebridean Celtic Festival, one of the bright ideas which has caught on and is literally music to the organisers' ears. In fact, from Barra through the Uists to Lewis, the air is full of strange noises, as Wullie Shakespeare would have it. Music festivals, all strutting the Celtic and Gaelic stuff, are the order of these summer days in the islands, to help us get rid of the bouts of manic depression which hit us from time to time, particularly when we read about the decline in the population of the Western Isles, now below the 30,000 mark for the first time in yonks. See what I mean about old rocks?

But, as the Melbost Bard, Murdo MacFarlane, once said: 'Still we sing'. We might not all be in tune when the new millennium pokes its face over the threshold with black bun, a lump of peat and a welcome bottle of single malt. But at least we can say we survived.

See you next time you're *Westering Home*.

Yours aye,  
Frank

# Letter from Selkirk: Brigadoon-on-Tweed

Allan Massie

1998

Dear Kenneth

Glancing at the teletext while I eat a lunchtime sandwich, I see that six stations in Scotland are to be upgraded by Railtrack. They are all in the Highlands. Well, naturally I knew they couldn't be in the Borders where I live. We have no railway line here, and haven't had for 30 years now. Intending visitors from the south are usually happy when I tell them we are equidistant from three stations; less so when told that the stations are Edinburgh, Carlisle and Berwick-on-Tweed.

Yet, this news from Railtrack is not irrelevant to our condition here. People in the Borders increasingly think that we are ignored, while public money (to which we contribute through our taxes) is lavished on the Highlands and the old industrial blackspots of the Central Belt. In contrast, though Selkirk is only 42 miles from Edinburgh, we seem to be a forgotten outlying province.

It's not entirely surprising. There is no obvious destitution here, no post-industrial squalor (or not much of it). The unemployment rate is low – partly because young people take their unemployment to Edinburgh, Glasgow or even London. The Border towns are comfortable and agreeable places to live. They all attract retired people, Melrose most of all.

I've lived here for 16 years now, very happily, in the Yarrow Valley, a couple of miles out of Selkirk. Difficult to think of anywhere pleasanter to live. Yet I'm a bit of an outsider, not because we haven't been made welcome here, or because we have found any barriers put up against incomers. The reason is simple. Making a living as a novelist and journalist writing for national newspapers, I am, as it were, economically divorced from the community in which I have chosen to live. The divorce isn't complete. I am affected by economic developments or lack of developments here. Yet my position is much the same as the position of those who have come here in their retirement, to enjoy the easy and comfortable pace of life, supported by a company pension, the value of which owes nothing to the economic circumstances of the district. The best that can be said is that, like these pensioners, I bring some money into the local economy that wouldn't be here if I moved away.

Yet it does mean that, though I follow Selkirk rugby club and have spoken at Common Riding dinners and have written a play for the (now sadly defunct) Borders festival, I am to an extent an onlooker, rather than a participant. And I'm not at all convinced that this onlooker sees more of the game.

The Borders is a region with a proud past. Wherever you go, you see examples of former

greatness, former prosperity. There are the great ruined abbeys, and now there are the great abandoned mills. Go along the low road in Selkirk that runs parallel to the Ettrick, and you see three or four of them, buildings of monumental confidence, memorials to the achievement of the 19th century. The mills are our ruined Victorian abbeys. Nobody knows what to do with them, however.

The prosperity of the Borders used to rest on sheep-farming and textiles. Sheep-farming is in trouble, and so is the textile industry. There are some who think both in terminal decline, who look ahead gloomily to deserted hill farms and ghost towns.

Textiles and agriculture have both been deep in depression before now, often enough, too often. People talk of globalisation as a new threat, but both the staple Borders industries have long been subject to global economic conditions. A slump in world trade brought the textiles industry to its knees between the wars. What's new?

Well, one thing is different, and that is the location of ownership, which, in too many cases, has moved away from the Borders. This year it is Dawson International which has been closing mills and laying off workers, while some of the mills which remain in local ownership have both been more adept at reading market trends and shown themselves more committed to their workforce. The same goes for the electronics firms introduced to the region 20 or 30 years ago as part of a process of necessary diversification. Some of these companies have served the Borders well, at least as a means of providing employment and keeping young people here. But they are vulnerable as all branch factories are. There are fears in Selkirk now that the American-owned Viasystems, will close their plants (formerly Exacta) which have been the largest employers in the town for more than two decades. They have another larger plant at Newcastle. 'The Selkirk one,' someone remarked to me the other day, 'would fit in the canteen at Newcastle'. It may not happen, but the possibility disturbs any sense of security.

There is a deep-rooted conservatism here, even though there is also a tradition of radical politics which has persuaded people to vote Liberal – partly because both the Conservative and Labour parties seem indifferent to their interests. The conservative bent is widely recognised. People deplore the 'aye been' mentality, even while they exhibit it. The Borders sometimes seems like a place where time has stood still; it's like my own calf-country of Aberdeenshire before the days of oil. This makes it agreeable to live in, but, increasingly, people are recognising that 'things will have to change if we want them to remain the same'. Something must be done to protect the threatened industries or establish substitutes. Nobody – and that includes Scottish Borders Enterprise – really knows what. The convener of Scottish Borders Council angrily observes that Locate in Scotland hasn't located a single job in the Borders. He is quite right – but are Locate in Scotland really the people most likely to come up with an answer? Do White Knights have to come from outside, or from the Scottish Office? What about native indigenous enterprise?

That question is certainly being asked by a good many of the region's farmers who have come to believe that survival will depend on their own efforts rather than on St Andrew's



House or Brussels. The question is: what sort of effort is most likely to succeed? One suggestion is that they have failed to market their prime asset: the quality of the lamb and beef they produce. There is no better eating than a hill blackface lamb, but the consumer is never invited to buy it as such; it is as if chateau-bottled claret was sold simply as red wine.

On one point everyone is agreed: that the Borders will sink into obscurity, become a backward if picturesque enclave, if nothing is done to improve transport links. It is not only that we don't have a railway, and require its restoration. It is also that the promise to improve the road to compensate for the closure of the railway has never been fulfilled. When my father-in-law, a keen motorist, retired here a few years ago, having spent his youth in Galashiels, he observed that the journey from Gala to Edinburgh took the same time as it had done in 1938. The roads north and south are poor, slow, and dangerous. The contrast between the absence of investment in roads here and its proliferation in the Highlands is marked and indefensible.

No doubt improved transport links would bring us within Edinburgh commuting range, which would result in some loss of individuality. But it would also stimulate service industries, and since only the obstinately old-fashioned now see manufacturing as the instrument of economic regeneration, this is much to be desired. Dormitory towns are not only sleeping places, whatever their name suggests. They also create a demand for restaurants, cafes, specialist shops, hairdressers, travel agents, etc; and they provide audiences for cinemas, theatres, concerts and the like. They may even support bookshops.

There is no need for our manufacturing base to go. With intelligent management, it can still have a future. But, if we have learned anything from the last 25 years, it must be that manufacturing is not enough. Prosperity requires a vibrant service sector; and that is something we scarcely have.

As it happens, when brooding on this piece, I was also reading a new book about France. Written by the experienced (and Francophile) journalist Jonathan Fenby, it is entitled *On the Brink, the trouble with France*, and it struck me that much of what he had to say about France was applicable to the Borders, and perhaps to Scotland altogether.

Fenby thinks that 'the current French model has reached the end of the road'. He writes: 'France suddenly seems very old-fashioned, and its protestations that it has a special prescription to remedy its ills sounds horribly like the announcement in 1986 that "we will stop the Chernobyl cloud; it will not pass over France"'.

'For all the pull of rural life and tradition,' Fenby says, 'the French have come to terms with the modern nature of their nation'. But this is difficult because 'there is still a strong strand of national denial when it comes to recognising how the world has changed'.

When I hear people, as I heard some at the Galashiels Manufacturers' dinner earlier this year, saying that we need European money to regenerate the Borders economy, I wonder at the inability to engage with the nature of the economy in which we now move and have our being.

Border life is still more agreeable than life in most places. But if we want it to continue

thus we have to adapt. And that is true of Scotland as a whole. The world has changed. We can change with it, or be left behind. If that happens, the next time American film producers want to make a *Brigadoon*, they won't have to make it in the studio, on the grounds that they travelled round Scotland and couldn't find anywhere like Scotland; they will find it all too easily. Brigadoon-on-Tweed perhaps.

Yours ever,  
Allan

# Is Scotland governable?

Ian Mackenzie

2003

*This is the text of the keynote lecture at the inaugural Young Scotland Programme in Glasgow in November 2002, which SR republished the following year.*

I don't have a talk to give to you. I did have. I had quite a reasonable talk. The subject was reasonable: is Scotland governable? The content, though I say it myself, was, I think, quite reasonable. That was the trouble. It was *too* reasonable. Which is possibly why, as my wife and son would tell you, I had difficulty getting it down on paper. And the nearer today got, the more tetchy I got, because the more irrelevant reasonableness seemed in the context of a crazy world and schizoid devolution settlement.

Then on Friday and Saturday two things happened – I'll tell you shortly what they were – as a result of which a subversive smile began to creep across my brain. I waited. Bang on cue, yesterday morning at 4.35am, I snapped awake and knew what I had to do. What I had to do was to embrace the irrelevant, namely what I believe. So that's what I'm going to do. Can you believe it? Tell you what I believe? Just think of the chaos in the world if we all went around doing that? I mean, of course, what we believe not what we're supposed to believe. So at 4.45am yesterday morning, I kicked the cat off the bed, kicked the dog off the stairs, kicked the kettle into life, kick-started caffeine into the bloodstream, and stumbled to my desk. What I'm saying now is what I wrote then.

It may not have as much to do with the governability of Scotland as you might expect. The truth is – and that's what I'm experimenting with here – I'm not greatly bothered about the governability of something I don't entirely believe in. Don't believe in Scotland? We're all supposed to – but deep down, do you? Or is it one of the many living parts of Scotland – Shetland, Galashiels, Galloway, Glasgow, Dundee, Kirkcaldy, Alloa, Alyth, Aberdeen, Peterhead, Inverness, Findochty, Falkirk, Larbert, Perth, Skye, Lochgilphead, Tarbert, Barra, Stornoway, Orkney, Wick, Kilmarnock, Dumfries, Crieff, Kirkintilloch – to mention but a few represented here? Or even deeper into the micro, is it your own community within a community that you believe in, whatever size it is?

Well, the two things that happened to me over the weekend. The first was a woman from Maryhill. No scandal. It happened on the television – the Scottish news – on Friday. Her home went on fire. The police were the first to get there. They were brilliant. They filled the bath with water – what else? Presumably they got buckets, pans, kettles. The Green Goddesses [fire engines operated by the Army during a firemen's strike at the time] arrived eventually, panting, but too late; the polis had already extinguished the fire. Then the woman, youngish, passionate, and crystal clear spoke. If her two bairns had been where the

fire was, they might have died. Her utterance was this: 'Bring back our boys, bloody give them what they want. This is ridiculous'. It was pure poetry; words of truth, spoken from the battlements of what mattered to her: the poetry of a mother's scorched love, a face raw in beauty because it was full of her heart.

Love, Truth, Beauty – a mother's reality. It was followed by words by one of our politicians. The contrast was unspeakable. The mother had expressed the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, of her Scottishness, her Glasgowness, her Maryhillness, her motherness. The politician, his tongue controlled by wires from London, was laying out words as lifeless as pieces of cod on a fishmonger's cold slab, with a label proclaiming that political ends justify political means.

So now, I'll tell you what's on my label. I believe in the Beauty of Truth. The Truth of Beauty. And Love. The poets Keats said it first: Beauty and Truth are the same, and they are all we need to know. But then he was a poet. I might sum it up like this. I believe in love and poetry. But remember what I don't mean by poetry: a po-em (though poetry may be *in* a poem).

There is poetry of words, there is poetry of motion (sport), there is poetry of politics (Nelson Mandela). There is even poetry in our Scottish Parliament, not because MSPs like John McAllion, Pauline McNeill, Margo MacDonald, Donald Gorrie, speak practically, but because they say things their parties don't approve of.

The planet is a poem, every part of Scotland is a poem, our galaxy is a poem in the epic of the cosmos, and each of you is a poem, each life a growing in time and space of the creative art of being human.

The second thing that happened to me this weekend is what made me mention the galaxy just now. No, I didn't pay a visit to it. I may be giving a peculiar talk but I'm not barking. I didn't have to pay the galaxy a visit. We're *in* the galaxy. And we've not much choice but to stay in it. It gave birth to our sun; our sun gave birth to us. That is the physical reality. The poetry of the stars and planets in their courses is what made each one of us in this room struggle into existence. That is the truth. The issue is not the governability of Scotland. The issue is the self-governability of each individual person interfacing with the governability of the planet.

The subject of the galaxy arose in a telephone conversation I had on Saturday morning with Nick Webb, the London publishing editor who took the decision to publish *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, written by the late Douglas Adams. This publisher was phoning me because he is writing the biography of Douglas Adams, and the Adams family had told him I'd been a friend of Douglas's father, Chris Adams. As we talked, it became clear that Douglas had been a wonderful person. Literally. His defining characteristic, the publisher said, was that he was full of wonder.

He was an atheist, but not the kind of fundamentalist atheist who is as full of shit as the religious fundamentalist. He was an atheist full of wonder – wonder at people, the world, the universe, life in its myriad forms. He was consumed by the beauty of everything. And

having known his father, I knew where it came from. I met his father one summer 50 years ago on the island of Iona. Chris was so enchanted by that enchanted isle that he almost went mad in a tempest of love for the poetry of life. If you want a flavour of it, read Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

In his last couple of years, Douglas Adams took a farther step into reality. He became possessed by a passion to protect our ecology. He developed a desperate sense of urgency to save this planet, this magic island in the sea of stars, this enchanted earth, this paradise which we have the power to close down or at least to uglify, to poison, to bury, under plague, blood, fire and ash. I'm too old now, but you have the power to destroy the poetry, the beauty, the truth of life itself in Scotland – or to save a living Scotland.

Poetry, you see, is not the opposite of action. Poetry is the best action each of us can engage in, to support and affirm what we love. Tell me who and what and where you love and I will have some idea who you are.

We hear of democracy, meritocracy, classocracy, economocracy and that's all very well; or rather it is not very well at all, it can be very ill. I put to you: loveocracy.

To take a tiny example, in my perception, our Scottish Parliament diminished itself in the tone of voice in which it debated fox hunting. Where was the love – love for the hunting people, the horses, the dogs, the ritual? Oh, the love was invested in the fox. As it happens I too love the fox, but I love no foxy principle. I love the urban fox creeping home at dawn across the Glasgow Kirklee lights after visiting West End dustbins. But I hate the fox from the Galloway hill killing at dawn my mother-in-law's hens. Fundamentalist religion has committed atrocities across the centuries, and still perpetuates physical and psychological atrocities. But does that invalidate the rituals of the mass, communion, a Salvation Army rally, a Hebridean congregation singing the line in a psalm, and all the meditative rituals of the Hindu, the Sikh, the Muslim?

And, speaking of love, who loves the hen? I'll tell you: my mother-in-law, in a remote glen in Galloway, morning after morning going out in all weathers to discover which hen the fox has mutilated before she struggles to repair the fencing. That isn't sentimental: she virtually lives on the eggs.

But will the Edinburgh Parliament's next jousting at windmills be to construct legislation to ban the eating of boiled unborn chickens?

At the end of that road, shall we be banned from eating anything other than chemically-formed molecules, and banned from doing anything other than lying in a clinically cleaned coffin, voting for Central Control by pressing a button? I'm not saying animal life doesn't matter. But who are we to judge? Foxes kill hens and sheep. Hunters kill foxes. But wow, they're amateurs! We humans kill in millions. And the millions we kill are other humans!

On what we call issues, we take sides too easily. We see things in black and white, right and wrong. And having decided what we 'believe', we demonise the others. Then we feel entitled to call it 'a crisis'.

Do you know the favourite joke of Eric Sykes, comedian and script writer? Here it is: two

Irishmen on opposite sides of a river. First Irishman shouts across: 'How do I get over there?' Second Irishman: 'You are over there'.

Why I make poetry central is because life is more than a battle of logic between two hostile sides, it is a complex cosmos of possibilities. The word 'poet' comes from a Greek word meaning 'maker'. It is for us to make a world we can believe in. You may say: 'But we have to take sides – we live in a time of crisis. We live in a time of revolution'. Yes... but has the human race not always lived in a time of crisis, a time of revolution? Every day on any journey, we are accompanied by danger. It may be heightened now.

It is true, since September 11th, this time seems a strange time between times, a journey from one time to another. That's the obvious danger. We've left the shelter of a time we were sure of, but not yet reached a time we're sure will welcome us; we're exposed in the open country of uncertainty. Nobody now can travel underground without wondering about gas in a tunnel. And it's not just in cities. A disco in Bali propels holidaymakers into eternity. Fighter jets at Leuchars were scrambled a week ago to intercept a helicopter over the quarantined space around the Faslane nuclear submarine base three miles from my home. And not so long ago fighters were sent to intercept a plane which might have been about to crash into the Sellafield nuclear plant on the south of the Solway. It was a false alarm, but if it hadn't been, and the worst had happened, the fallout would have landed on my mother-in-law's hens on her remote croft on the north of the Solway.

Nor is the danger confined to those of hostile intent. Years ago, my wife, son, and daughter were put at risk by the peaceful processing of energy in Russia. We were staying on that same remote croft on the Solway, the Sunday afternoon that the cloud from Chernobyl reached us. I can still see the sky – a dark yellow quilt of cloud hovering overhead like a spaceship and drenching us with poisoned rain. At once, the grass on the hill and the fields were so radioactive that the Geiger counters buzzed for years and the sheep who grazed there were excluded from the human food chain. We weren't travelling in dangerous places, just visiting granny and her hens in rural Galloway. Yet we were on a journey, from a time when grass and water and sheep droppings were innocent, to a time when the hills were alive with the sound of sheep crap crackling and nature was corrupted. Corruption and crap – that's the journey on this planet I'm near the end of and you are near the beginning of. At least I hope you are. I hope you are allowed the full stretch, your whole journey through time and history, not corralled on an open plain by ecological banditry or ambushed in a ravine which becomes a biological graveyard.

You see, nowhere is safe. Nothing is certain. The poet sits down with a blank piece of paper. Plus? Himself or herself. This is the moment of danger. Namely, being alive, every empty day. What will come out of my self-government? Can I govern myself? Can I save a bit of the world, a bit of someone else, even a bit of me? No place, no time is safe – or ever was. Take an apparently safe place, a true refuge? Where can one take sanctuary? In a sanctuary! Like? The church of the Nativity in Bethlehem? Surrounded by tanks? But that's the Middle East. Okay, go into a quiet Scottish church? – it may be closed because of

vandalism and the fear of the communion plates being stolen. All right, into a cathedral – but you may be invited to put money in a box, or be threatened by choral evensong.

Read *Murder in the Cathedral* by T S Eliot. In that lowering verse drama, T S Eliot spells out that there is no safety in the cathedral. In his evocation of the land and the people waiting between golden October and sombre November for their exiled archbishop to return and save them, you can hear the dark throb of the common people's alternating hope and despair in the cycle of oppression. In the case of Canterbury, it was real murder, actual blood on the floor. That was in centuries past. But in our time, cathedrals, churches, temples, synagogues, mosques across the world have throbbed to martyrdom, blood spilled, hopes crucified. Thus Eliot, the austere, intellectual poet, speaks for us all about the pain of waiting – waiting for what? That's the question. It's everyone's question, the question of humanity, that blood vessel connecting us all. On the edge of the prairie of stars, what matter if we are professors or poets, farmers or primary teachers, firefighters or terrorists, Scots or English, brilliant performers or girls in Cornton Vale whose dreams have crashed? We are the human family ranged against the dark. When shall the human species be born again in what Eliot calls 'The litter of Scorn'?

At that point yesterday morning, I pushed my chair back and looked at my watch. 7.45. I'd been writing for three hours. I stood up. Immediately the cat and dog stirred themselves and approached. The cat lay upside down to indicate it required the tummy to be rubbed, and the dog nudged my knee, a sign that its head could do with a pat or three. But I knew, and they knew I knew, that what they were really thinking was that their bowls in the kitchen were empty. They are both rescued animals, treated sadistically by terrorists called Scottish human beings (one lot in Glasgow's leafy West End), but now their visual poetry and behavioural beauty have blossomed because although nowhere is totally safe in the world, they feel safe by knowing they're loved. I asked them, therefore, 'Do I just stop now and shut up?' They gazed at me, thinking longingly of their empty bowls. 'Thank you, as always,' I said, 'for your excellent advice'. So I sat down and started to write again.

By now, dawn had arrived. No, I'm not going to turn that into a metaphor. It doesn't need to be a metaphor. It was physical and it happened. The physical sun which keeps us alive was unseen but slanting up rays which were flecking with a silver half light the naked trees across the road, and the evergreen trees which clothe the hill. And then the actual sun appeared. That extraordinary orb winked at me over the hill before throwing a silk scarf of colour around the town. No metaphor. The reality of life on a piece of our planet, a wee bit of Scotland.

While we wait, and think, and feel, and debate and plan, and learn to govern our country, our continent, our politics, our earthly resources, and the future of the planet, all during that time, we also have to get on with personal living. Life is often a bitch, a drudge, sometimes a nightmare. But, by and large, I have loved this life. It's been a party, and I was invited.

I will soon conclude but first a few, almost practical, suggestions, a story or two and some quotes. What I believe in managerial-speak are known as bullets.

First, governing is not the same as managing. There's no problem in managing Scotland,

one way or another, for good or ill. Management is about manipulation – of situation, resources, people. It's governing that's the problem. Governing is about stewardship – of situations, resources, people.

Second, no crisis is worth turning into a crisis. You either create a way out of it, or you work through it with good humour. Every crisis should be weighed against a bigger one – if, for example, if the sun suddenly went out tomorrow, that would be a crisis.

As regards creating a way out of crisis? In the last days of steam on British Rail, I caught the morning Talisman train from Kings Cross to Waverley. It left Kings Cross one dreich January morning half an hour late. It had lost its slot, its path through signals, so at first we were constantly stopped. The acceleration after each stop was phenomenal, and the speeds extraordinary. Gradually, it became obvious that the signals were beginning to go with us. We arrived at Newcastle half an hour early. We hadn't just made up the late half-hour. We had made up an hour. My friend Tom Scott and I raced up the Newcastle platform to congratulate the driver. He was portly and his face was full of years. But age had not wearied him. He smiled beatifically. 'Do you know who I am?' 'Who?' 'Almost right, I'm Driver Hoole.' We were baffled.

Only years later, did I discover he was the most famous engine-driver in Britain. He was notorious for breaking every record – and every rule in the book. He, the fireman, and the engine always became a team of stars who made every journey an odyssey. And they turned railwaymen along the route into subversives who broke the rules for them. There was one rule with Driver Hoole. Forget the rules. I recommend that rule to you. On this day, the engine was Gresley's streamlined loco Mallard, which still holds, I think, the world steam speed record. The signalmen, realising on that grey January morning that Hoole was on the case, began to halt other trains to let our chariot of fire through.

What was all this about? Efficient management? No, a celebratory stewardship of poetic freedom. The train is late. Wring your hands over a crisis? Or seize the moment to recreate? If you say it was irresponsibly bad management, I have nothing to say to you. You are in the same category as the Scottish driver who took over the train at Newcastle. He obeyed every rule. We arrived at Edinburgh Waverley five minutes late.

But – if you can't get out of a crisis, then you work through it with good humour. Crisis? What crisis?

Three months ago, on 17 August, I was on the electric train from Queen Street to Helensburgh. I was sitting in the leading coach admiring the Clyde. The train manageress, a lady no longer in the first flush of youth, had just looked at my ticket when suddenly the driver's door burst open and the driver hurtled towards us. His face lacked serenity. He shouted to us to get on the floor. Within five seconds, I was in the foetal position on the floor (I was very impressed by that feat of memory). The bang was loud. The coach shook; but it remained upright. The elderly conductress rose shaking to her feet and in a trembly voice uttered the following piece of sheer poetry: 'Scotrail apologises for this delay'. When we'd stopped laughing, a man shouted out, 'Where's our free cup of coffee then?' 'You're



on,' said the lady – no manager now, but our benign governor – and came round distributing a bag of boiled sweets!

It had been a car stuck on a level crossing. Nobody was injured, but it was on the telly news, so you can believe it.

Much of what we call government boils down, you see, to language. An ancient text puts it in these terms: 'In the beginning was the Word; and the Word became flesh'. We could put it another way. The language of the universe achieved a distinct form in our planet, in life, in the human mind and in the explosion of science in the last couple of centuries and in the gloriously inventive technology of our time. Physics, cosmology, mathematics, they are poetry made by the universe via our minds. In everything we do, we should cherish that language of creation, use it to affirm life, and work to liberate the governing of the world and of its people. Is Scotland governable? That depends on what you think Scotland is for and the manner of your love for whichever aspect of it means something to you. All of you gathered here today make up a living dictionary of Scottish potential.

It was reported recently that an American scientist has been conducting research into why the British and Americans so particularly die of heart disease. Is it too much food, or not enough red wine? The Japanese drink much less red wine, so they should have more heart disease, but they have less heart disease than the British and Americans.

The French drink more red wine, but they eat more food including fatty food, than the British and Americans, yet they have far less heart disease than the British and Americans.

The Italians drink more red wine than the French, Japanese, British and Americans, yet they eat more pizzas, and they have less heart disease than the British and Americans.

The scientist's conclusion? Heart disease is caused by speaking English. But this can't be right. Here we are in Glasgow, where less English is spoken than anywhere outside Stornaway. We speak Scottish, yet we eat more mutton pies and chips than anywhere else on the planet. Conclusion? Culture is not what you deposit in a museum or your belly. Culture, and life, and government is what you sing along to.

Or as the poet Lope de Vega expressed it –

*O what will you do  
If the day draws to evening  
And night overtakes you  
Alone on the mountain?  
I fear not the night  
For I carry the sun.*

My message? Good government depends on poetry and love, that is, on creation and commitment. What governs us is the beauty of life. Only if we find the freedom to carry the sun in our time, can Scotland be governable enough to move out among the nations and towards the stars.

# Proud to be Scottish?

Stewart Conn

2006

*This is the text of a Scottish Review lecture given in honour of Iain Crichton Smith in 2006*

Like all who knew him, I had great times with Iain Crichton Smith. Not least professionally. At readings, or in their aftermath. During radio productions. And one hilarious evening, in a rowing boat on the edge of Loch Etive, when an interview was foiled by a faulty microphone, drained batteries, growing thirst and finally man-eating midges.

His output was phenomenal. Once when I bumped into Norman MacCaig, Norman asked lugubriously if Iain was all right.

'So far as I know,' I said. 'Why?'

'He hasn't had a book out for days.'

With some poets, though I couldn't begin to duplicate their work, I feel I can at least trace how it was formulated. Time and again (as with his astonishing, 'winged nightingales of brine') Iain's pure lyric leap defied literality or logic. His directness and lucidity could also be striking. *The Beginning of a New Song*, commissioned for the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, starts:

*Let our three-voiced country*

*Sing in a new world*

*Joining the other rivers without dogma*

and ends on the hope that

*Its institutions mirror its beauty;*

*Then without shame we can esteem ourselves.*

How much have we come to merit 'esteem' and has the 'institution' itself, in the wake of the euphoria and acrimony surrounding the new building, lived up to expectation? What of the prevailing climate, and perceptions, vis-a-vis the parliament – and the literary community?

I have been shocked by the derision, in a section of the press, of the personal traits and appearance of our elected representatives. While doubtless symptomatic of politics reforming itself around personality, this demeans not just them, but the institution. On the other hand, a skating on thin ice, a blurring of the bounds of probity among MSPs themselves, has served to undermine trust. All can't be tarred with one brush. But too much smacks of gratifying *self* as against earning *public* 'esteem'.

The arts, jinxed in having had six ministers in six years (and the manner of their going), are further bedevilled by sharing a bed with sport and tourism. The prime sins have been of omission; and most destructively the dismantling (abetted by managerial arrogance) of Scottish Opera, rather than an acknowledgement of magnificent achievement.

When I started to write, the climate was very different. At a polished desk in Kilmarnock's Dick Institute, I hid my scribbles for fear their shapes would reveal those effete objects, poems. We were belted for not learning by heart works by a Dead Poets' Society; or for using dialect words allowed only in Burns. And blizzard sophisticates as we fancied ourselves, I recall our shock at hearing a Rangers fan at Rugby Park yell: 'Get tore in at thae country yokels!'.

On a BBC attachment to Edinburgh in the 60s I sensed an east-west linguistic split. Lallans was despised by many who urged a phonetic Glaswegian with a socialist as against nationalist impetus. It could be tooth-and-nail selling Scottish plays to the London networks. There weren't the grants and bursaries, writers' residencies and awards which provide a safety net (or trampoline) nowadays.

Poetry was a coterie activity. A National Poetry Day, far less a Scottish Poetry Library, were pie in the sky; with readings, pre-Traverse, pretty well restricted to the Saltire Society or soiree settings. Now in Edwin Morgan we boast a 'national poet', appointed by the Scottish Executive. Glasgow and Edinburgh have their laureate and makar. Under Douglas Dunn, the University of St Andrews houses a phalanx of poet-critics acclaimed here and abroad.

I recall Scots being prescribed; rows over style-sheets; echoes of Edwin Muir's claim that a Scot couldn't pen poetry of real stature in English; we *feel* in Scots, but *think* in the latter. Given the lie latterly in the interweaving dictions and rhythms of Don Paterson, Robert Crawford, Liz Lochhead et al. (Though I gather proposals for signs and information in Scots, at Holyrood, have foundered – through lack of agreement on orthography...)

Morgan's manifesto for the parliament building is displayed in Queensberry House. A sonnet sequence in *Voyage of Intent*, by the parliament's first writer in residence, James Robertson, contains a pithy injunction to MSPs. While Kathleen Jamie's *On the Design for the New Parliament Building by Architect Enric Miralles* reads simply:

*An upturned boat  
– a watershed.*

On the other hand, such is the plethora of writing groups, it can seem more folk are now writing the stuff than reading it. Poor sales figures are nothing new. Kenneth Patchen didn't beat about the bush: 'People who say they love poetry and never buy any, are a bunch of cheap sons of bitches'.

In the novel, even allowing for the allure of fashion, and hype, there seems every confidence that today's is a genuine high tide. Joining the advance guard of Gray and

Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Janice Galloway and A L Kennedy, surges an exhilarating new wave, with an energy and diversity unthinkable even a decade ago. Distinguished among them are James Robertson and Ali Smith.

This cornucopia of confidence, 'this glorious ferment' as Keith Bruce called it in *The Herald*, was not easy-won; but engendered in part by the efforts of previous writers, publishers ready to take risks; and through the Scottish Arts Council (though the slice of its cake allocated to literature has been derisory), Scottish Book Trust's 'writers in public schools' scheme, and the growing stature of the Edinburgh Book Festival.

Scottish drama, a creature of fits and starts, long pilloried as backward-looking, has won plaudits through the innovative energy of Peter Arnott, Gregory Burke, David Greig and David Harrower. And through directorial and audience nurturing. Most boldly a new Scottish National Theatre Company (for which there have been runners down the decades) stands on the threshold of its first season. I applaud its choice of plays and venues – and wish it well.

In his oft-quoted speech on St Andrew's Day 2003, First Minister Jack McConnell declared: 'I believe we can now make the development of our creative drive, our imagination, the next major enterprise for our society... Art for all can be a reality'. Last summer, a cultural commission set up under James Boyle presented its report; its aim not just to rearrange the cultural infrastructure (adding yet more tiers of arts administrators) but put us 'on the brink of the most exciting policy shift of our time'.

The executive's response, in *Scotland's Culture*, held fewer goodies and less in the kitty (£20 million for the arts sector) than hoped for. The national companies are to come under the executive. Libraries likewise (how much going on *books?*). The SAC and Scottish Screen, merged as Creative Scotland, will concentrate on development. Also targeted are education and 'cultural entitlement' (do we really need the right to attend and participate in artistic events conferred on us?). Dispiritingly, the booklet's numbing civil-service-speak was light years from the pulse of what it pertained to put its finger on.

Bodies other than the national ones sounded sceptical. Once again, a declaration of intent. But will the rhetoric bear fruit? All hinges not just on the reality of the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow but on its reasonable distribution, and a concession that literature *is* one of the arts. In this context, it will be interesting how Edinburgh realises its City of Literature promise on behalf of *today's* writers (and perhaps the provision of a writers' centre) and as a stepping-stone to other cities and cultures; rather than by 'salon' evenings or replicating the function of existing organisations – as in hitching their wagon to the glossy three of Rowling, Rankin and McCall Smith.

The arts merit more than slick VisitScotland catchphrases, being governed by market forces, or measured by a narrow community yardstick; but must be treasured as central to the nation's heartbeat and spiritual identity. With 'standards' not as a dirty word, and as an investment *in* and *for* the future.

I was recently at a poetry festival in Macedonia (my second in the Balkans). Even such

glimpses (many of you have far wider experiences) were salutary. Road signs to Pristina were a reminder of terrible events. No Serbs attended. Translations were solely into Albanian, Tetova University's teaching tongue – whereas Skopje's is Macedonian. A Croatian diplomat chastised my keeping in a poem the name of a girl I'd read about who had been shot – Melina – because it was Bosnian.

When I mentioned to one writer the flood-feud theme in Ismael Kadare's novel, *Broken April*, he said he wished there could be an end to violence 'stemming from events 60 years ago'. Our good fortune in not being similarly pressured, historically or racially, made me very aware of narrow views on Glencoe and the Clearances say; or scapegoating the English. Never mind the sectarian chants, still tolerated at our football grounds, harking back to 1560 and 1690. More trivially, how fatuous for our rugby team playing Samoa or Italy to brag of sending 'proud Edward homewards, to think again'.

We are accustomed to expressing ourselves without fear of imprisonment or worse. Yet horizons are narrowing. Language is increasingly under threat; with meaning distorted, as in the chameleon term 'rendition', and the cynical redefining of 'torture'. How to balance freedom of speech and right of response, and establish mutual respect, in an atmosphere rife with hypocrisy and incitement? Alerted by the religious hatred bill were groups not commonly aligned: academics and stand-ups. Writers can protest individually or through membership of International PEN whose remit, besides supporting those under repressive regimes, includes monitoring censorship and other practices, at home.

At least, while the West Lothian Question has been raised anew, and pseudo-political correctness leads to farce, neither has yet given rise to shooting in our streets. Pedantic calls for 'respect' are seen as a sign of authority seeping away; pleas for a reclamation of the union jack as a reminder of the ambivalent motives for waving any national flag.

In his last radio interview, I asked Norman MacCaig, whether he was proud to be Scottish. He replied: 'No, it certainly isn't pride. I can never understand why people say "I'm proud to be a Scot". He's only Scottish by a bunch of accidents. Pleased if you like. I'm very *pleased* to be Scots. But I see things in Scotland that I'm not proud of at all. That's common sense, isn't it?'

At one extreme, Iain Crichton Smith bemoaned 'the land God gave to Andy Stewart'. At the other, he showed a detestation of dogma... any form of ideology. With the world close to spiralling out of control, we can afford neither complacency nor insularity. Our writers and parliamentarians alike must speak responsibly *to*, and *for* us; and (as commendably underpins the Institute of Contemporary Scotland) not *exclusively*, but *inclusively* – with moral values and vision, humanity and tolerance. Bearing a torch not just for us to observe and praise, or bask in, but to illumine and inspire... and be passed on. *Then without shame we can esteem ourselves.*

# The Scotland we need

Tessa Ransford

2008

Living or animate beings, including plants, are self-motivating and self-organising. Human consciousness goes along with complexity but a certain inbuilt awareness with regard to food, rest, danger, safety, birth, reproduction, death is present in all that is animate. Scientists have begun to use the term autopoiesis to describe this capacity: 'self-organisation and self-repair are essential autopoietic properties' writes Steven Rose, who is without doubt that 'all living forms are active players in their own future'. Fritjof Capra provides a rhythmic definition of such systems as 'self-bounded, self-generating, and self-perpetuating' in a being-with becoming state of 'poised equilibrium.'

These concepts are not new, but are becoming more central in our understanding of ourselves in a dynamic world, as ecosystems within ecosystems and the earth itself as a complex, comprehensive ecosystem (the Gaia Theory). We could think of the myth of Penelope weaving and unweaving her tapestry as an image of this personal or communal weaving of our destiny, which we both choose and cannot avoid.

In Scottish thinkers such as Patrick Geddes, John MacMurray, Hugh MacDiarmid, John Muir, James Clerk Maxwell, even going back to Hume and Adam Smith, and countless others, this kind of understanding of the relational, self-organising properties of successful living systems was seminal. It lies at the heart, too, of George Davie's theory of 'the democratic intellect', which depends on communication between a variety of experts, who are willing to learn to understand the root principles of one another's speciality and thus to try to comprehend one another's visions of reality, thus coming to a 'truer' one in common than any single discipline could achieve on its own.

To begin to bring to mind and vision the future of Scotland requires a concept of Scotland. In Hereford Cathedral the Mappa Mundi is kept, a medieval map of the world with Hereford at the centre. Other locations are sited in relation to their importance to Hereford. The idea of putting Scotland at the centre of our thought-world is surprisingly revolutionary. For three centuries, we have taught ourselves to think of our country as the north of Britain, whence anyone with any ability will emigrate. Through our broad-based education system we have provided intellectual, practical and administrative talent for London and for the larger world. At home we have allowed ourselves to behave as parasites, less able to take control of our lives than the smallest beetle. We have guarded control of certain spheres such as Presbyterianism and Scots law, as it were playing within the playpen.

Craig and Charlie Reid, The Proclaimers, were interviewed by Andrew Neil on *This Week* recently. They cheerfully explained that Scotland feels as much part of Britain as

Denmark does of Scandinavia and that Scotland can relate to many countries on an equal footing, including England.

The Proclaimers helped to keep a sense of self-motivation alive during the Thatcher years, along with other creative people: writers, musicians, artists, thinkers. Without such self-motivation and the ability to make decisions for ourselves, it is all too easy to become depressed, apathetic, angry, resentful, or sycophantic and self-deprecatory. This applies to societies as much as to individuals.

Scotland is an amalgam of many communities, which is one of its strengths. Even the lack of one overall major city helps this relational, interactive, complementary paradigm. Our capital should perhaps be Perth, rather than Edinburgh, allowing the Highlands east and west to feel less disregarded by the central belt. We need therefore to move our focus to centre on Scotland and then to centre on the centre of Scotland, moving out thence in every direction with equal ardour. We need to find ways in which smaller, scattered communities can feel part of the whole, where the parts relate to each other as well as to the centre. This is beginning to happen with, for instance, the chain of further education colleges now forming the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Our principles of equality and human worth have continued through the vicissitudes and disasters of the years, the civil wars, the Clearances, the industrialisation, the world wars and present-day globalisation. Robert Burns didn't write 'a man's a man for a' that' and 'the man's the gowd for a' that' and 'pith o' sense and pride o' worth' and most importantly of all 'we dare be poor for a' that' in a vacuum. He wrote his poetry out of the culture, both popular and intellectual, in which he lived.

The 18th-century Enlightenment was itself a turning to human values and a belief that civilised society is capable of being governed and organised for the good of all or the commonweal. These ideas and ideals bred in Scotland have travelled and been adopted as human rights and for constitutional democracy in many parts of the world, while at home we have tended to neglect them, expecting others to tell us what and how to think and act.

Patrick Geddes, the turn of the 19th/20th-century practical thinker, international town-planner and polymath, who helped the return to the Old Town in Edinburgh, building Ramsay Gardens and advocating ecological principles, encouraged the importance of relating 'folk, work, and place' in our thinking, as three fundamental aspects of life which need to be in balance. None should be subservient to the other two but the three should be synthetically understood. Indeed, the need for synthetic rather than only analytic thinking is central to all creative thinkers.

When creativity is sought as a solution to problems, it is often thought of as something addable to more 'normal' prosaic approaches. Creativity, however, is a way of life, when thought, form and rhythm are interrelated. It cannot be summoned as a joker in the pack. Neither can it necessarily solve problems. It is better at asking questions, and asking different kinds of question. Therefore we might try forgetting about what Westminster thinks about us in Scotland, or what money it will give us, or what its

priorities are, and think instead about how we can relate to England, Ireland and Wales as equals.

We don't need a pat on the back from the big firms, the big names in the south. We can value our own judgements about ourselves, our representatives, our culture, our future. Again, all roads and railways do not have to lead to airports, nor airports to the south. Energy and food supply – a vital form of energy – do not have to be on a large scale from centralised sources. The more local anything is in its supply and use, the more control we have over it and the less we are at the mercy of impersonal powers and principalities. We could manage our own money without investing in American debt for instance, and we could manage our international relations without nuclear submarines and invasive wars.

One of our 'problems' is our lack of generosity of spirit. We find it hard to be generous to ourselves, to our society and to those among us who 'succeed'. Partly this is because we don't value personal 'success' over service to the community and individual integrity. However, this can lead to a grudging attitude and the driving out of those with vision and energy. It is important that we welcome all who choose to live here and that we encourage our own young people to choose to do so, praising them for it and giving them opportunities to take real responsibility.

Our education and broadcasting should take into account the thoughts, forms and rhythms which express our ideas and our ideals, which are the two main motivators of humankind. Image is not everything. It is superficial without thought and movement. Rhythms are also important: their breathing needs to be allowed space. Our media needs to become truly a 'driving force for the creative and knowledge industries' (as I heard quoted from Blair Jenkins, chair of the current media consultation group) but a force which serves culture and knowledge first and the making of profit second. The other way round is the cart before the horse and has proved disastrous for long enough.

We are wasting our own talent and wealth by neglecting it and dumbing down our communications in every media. We need to see ourselves as agents of our own lives, individually and in our community and nation, conscientiously practising cultural ecology, as well as environmental, in city and countryside, accepting with Jeffrey Sachs, the 2007 Reith Lecturer, that 'life is not a spectator sport'. The cultural and material commonweal, or common good, is the gold to which we can aspire to contribute and on which we can gratefully depend.

'No wealth but life' was John Ruskin's cry against the economics of Victorian Britain. There is no life for a nation without such agency and autopoiesis. This will be a new Scotland, unashamed to excel in its democratic intelligence, its dynamic beauty, its creative energy, its passionate reticence of style; its wit, humour and indignation; its common sense and imagination. Lines of communication will spiral out and return again like dancing a reel, like an eightsome, a handshake-chain, a figure of eight and taking turns at the centre.



# 1320: a Scottish myth

Andrew Hook

2009

Currently Scotland boasts four United Nations-designated world heritage sites: Edinburgh, St Kilda, New Lanark, and Neolithic Orkney. Over the last four years, however, a campaign has been underway to have Arbroath Abbey added to the list of Scottish sites winning such international recognition. In normal circumstances, a campaign of this kind would be based on the importance and architectural beauty of the abbey ruins, but in this instance such is not the case. Instead, the campaign argues it is the abbey's connection with the Declaration of Arbroath that makes it worthy of world heritage status.

As Mike Weir, the SNP MP for Angus puts it: 'The influence of the events that took place at Arbroath on 6 April 1320, and the words of that declaration, is a global one. Democracies around the world can find their founding principles in the Declaration of Arbroath. It is only right that Arbroath Abbey has the opportunity to win full international recognition as a world heritage site'.

The idea that the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath (most historians are less confident than Mike Weir appears to be that it can be precisely dated to 6 April) can be seen as providing a template for the emergence of democracy worldwide is backed up by one, outstanding example: the 1776 American Declaration of Independence. Ever since Trent Lott persuaded the Senate of the United States in 1998 to nominate 6 April as America's National Tartan Day, a relationship between the two declarations has been accepted as an historical fact. The 1998 Senate Resolution flatly asserts that there is a crucial link between Scotland and the US going back to 1320: the Declaration of Independence was modelled, it states, on the Declaration of Arbroath. Given this as it were official ratification, it is hardly surprising that politicians, commentators, leader-writers, and journalists everywhere – but particularly within Scotland – go on accepting this relationship as historically accurate.

Repetition of an idea, however, does not amount to evidence of its accuracy. And when one asks, quite simply, what exactly is the evidence that the framers of the American Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in 1776 had the Arbroath Declaration in mind when drawing up their document, nothing specific emerges. Thomas Jefferson is known to have been the principal author of the American document. Does Jefferson cite the Declaration of Arbroath? No. Had Jefferson read the Arbroath declaration? Did he even know of its existence? There is no hard evidence in favour of a positive answer to either question. Of course, there were two native-born Scots involved in the debates over the wording of the American document – John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian clergyman and president of the College of New Jersey in Princeton, and James Wilson, a lawyer in Philadelphia – and they would become the only Scottish signers of the final version of the

Declaration of Independence. Products of the Scottish universities system, it is perhaps possible that they were at least aware of the letter that the Scottish barons addressed to the pope in 1320. But they make no mention of it in their writings.

In his 2003 book, *For Freedom Alone: The Declaration of Arbroath 1320*, my good friend, Ted Cowan, Professor of Scottish History at Glasgow University, does his very best in a concluding chapter to make the case for the influence of the Scottish declaration on the American one. But I think he would agree that he finds nothing in the way of conclusive evidence. Possibilities, likelihoods, yes – but hard evidence? No. Meanwhile David Armitage, Professor of History at Harvard University, and author of *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*, sees no link between the two documents. In the course of research for my own book, *Scotland and America 1750-1835*, I read widely in American journals and magazines in the later 18th century. I found manifold references to Scottish books and writers; to Scottish philosophy and education; to Scottish history and science. All the leading figures in both the Scottish Enlightenment and Scottish literary romanticism were well-known in America. But references to Arbroath? Not one.

My own view is in fact the reverse of the current orthodoxy. It was the Declaration of Independence that influenced Arbroath. My point is that the 1320 letter insisting on the freedom and independence of the Scottish people, and asking the Pope to recognise the legitimacy of Robert the Bruce's claim to the Scottish throne, only began to be called the Declaration of Arbroath some time in the 20th century. In the brilliant 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, the entry on Arbroath includes reference to the 1320 letter but the phrase 'Declaration of Arbroath' does not appear. The chances then are quite high that the letter from the Scottish nobility became known as the Declaration of Arbroath because of the universal popularity of America's Declaration of Independence.

The even greater irony is that the focus on Arbroath has prevented general recognition that Scotland did indeed make a major contribution to the creation of the Declaration of Independence – not through the romance of its medieval past, but through the Scottish Enlightenment and the learning of several of its 18th-century philosophers, including Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Lord Kames.

# Tribal nation

Walter Humes

2011

One of the challenges facing nationalists, as they try to prepare the ground for the promised referendum on independence, is to project an image of a strong, unified country which would not only survive, but flourish, as a separate nation.

There are many lines of argument that they might advance in support of this claim. A distinctive Scottish identity already exists through the long-established institutions of the law, the church and education. It is not difficult to construct an appealing narrative of struggle and achievement, invoked through reference to the wars of independence, the poetry of Burns, Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith, Scottish contributions to science, medicine and engineering in the 19th century and to the labour movement in the early 20th century.

Moreover, if Scotland has some sporting success between now and the date of the referendum, particularly if it is at the expense of the 'auld enemy', that could be exploited to suggest that other forms of success – economic, technological, political – are equally achievable. Given the perilously weakened state of the opposition parties at Holyrood, a strong SNP Government would be well placed to make the case with confidence and vigour.

But how convincing would such a narrative really be? Scots are rather susceptible to romanticised accounts of their cultural solidarity. In an article I wrote more than 25 years ago, I pointed out the reality of cultural variation and division within Scotland – between Highlands and Lowlands, between Edinburgh and Glasgow, between Catholics and Protestants. I continued: 'Yet despite these differences... there remains a strong temptation in the popular mind to subsume the whole of Scottish life under a standardised and idealised model which, improbably, combines elements of Burns, Hampden, Knox, Red Clydeside and a kailyard version of community life in which the dominie features as a folk hero'.

Many of these divisions remain as potent as ever. The continuing exchanges in *SR* about sectarianism indicate that the Catholic/Protestant divide is very much alive and kicking. It is by no means a phenomenon of the poorly educated underclass. As someone who is interested in religion but not a member of any church, I witnessed at first-hand some of its 'professional' manifestations when I was involved in the merger of the national Catholic college, St Andrew's, and the University of Glasgow. The mutual distrust and suspicion among highly educated people and, in some cases, active attempts to create mischief, were not pleasant to observe.

Language is another source of division. The existence of three native languages –

English, Scots and Gaelic – is indicative of significant cultural diversity. Traditionally, Highlanders have felt marginalised by the sheer weight of numbers of the population in the central belt, though the present government has been supportive of Gaelic and of initiatives to strengthen rural and island communities. Conversely, lowlanders have often perceived what they regard as an aloof cultural superiority on the part of those highlanders who seek to maintain cherished traditions in poetry, music and storytelling in a clannish and exclusive way. Add to the mix an increasing number of migrants, with their own languages and traditions, and the difficulty of maintaining a coherent version of Scottish 'unity' increases.

But, for me, it is the Glasgow/Edinburgh divide that is the most telling because it symbolises the continuing relevance of social class in Scottish society. Class is a concept that all political parties have tried to airbrush out of existence, often through the use of less unsettling phrases such as 'social inclusion'. In the shallow world of spin doctors, replacing a 'negative' term with something more 'positive' is regarded as solving the problem. Such rhetorical dishonesty is now so widespread that the capacity of policymakers to engage with reality has been seriously weakened. That is part of the reason why, despite endless projects, programmes and promises, the position of the poor in the most disadvantaged parts of Glasgow remains largely unaltered.

Edinburgh is not only the capital of Scotland. It is the centre of power, with its interlocking and overlapping networks of politicians, civil servants, senior executives in the financial services sector, well-connected academics, doctors and lawyers, alumni of independent schools, trustees of 'fashionable' charities, and leading figures in the arts world. There is scope for a dark TV sitcom satirising the machinations of these various networks – I offer this suggestion gratis to Creative Scotland in the confident expectation that it will not be taken up for fear of offending potential sponsors.

Class is palpable in Edinburgh. You can hear it in the accents, see it in the shops and restaurants, feel it in the air as you walk along the streets. SNP leaders are no doubt well aware that it would be unwise to alienate those who help to maintain class divisions because support from a significant section of the capital's 'movers and shakers' will be necessary to ensure the success of the independence agenda. It is not hard to imagine the private conversations that are perhaps already taking place in the New Club about post-independence arrangements that might prove beneficial to the parties concerned. These conversations could not be construed as improper, of course, merely prudent planning. To think that post-independence politics will depart significantly from the practices that we have become familiar with at Westminster would be naive.

There are other aspects of a divided Scotland that deserve attention. The role of the landed gentry in perpetuating inequality and encouraging a self-serving view of national identity – so ably documented in the work of Andy Wightman – is an important part of the story. At heart, Scottish society remains tribal. It will take more than a positive vote at the independence referendum to change that.

# THE BANKING CRASH

# A run on the bank

Douglas Wood

2008

During the recent turmoil in financial markets, mention has often been made that there hasn't been a run on a British bank for more than 100 years. Beyond that, there seems to have been little curiosity about what happened before. It's possible the reference could be to the City of Glasgow Bank, whose collapse caused great misfortune in the west of Scotland in the late 19th century, an episode worth recalling. The problem then was not restricted to depositors queuing round the block wanting to withdraw their savings.

Contemporary reports tell of people gathering in Glasgow's Buchanan Street waiting for the first edition of the evening paper for news of what was happening. Earlier that day, the City of Glasgow Bank closed all its branches 'until further notice' amid rumours that it had collapsed. The scenes could have been 2007 but this was in fact October 1878 and the beginning of Glasgow's biggest financial crisis of the 19th century – the failure of the City of Glasgow Bank.

There had been no warning signs, at least none as far as the general public was concerned. Its downfall was unexpected, caused by problems that today have become familiar. Lending far outstripped the sums held on deposit, some loans were very large, a significant amount of the debt was overseas and some of the borrowers had questionable reputations – circumstances we have now come to understand as 'sub-prime'. The directors of the bank had managed to conceal the problems but were eventually driven to make a desperate appeal to the other Scottish banks for help. But the necessary help was not forthcoming and the bank's doors had to close. With a substantial network of branches across Scotland, the fallout from the bank's failure was widespread, but the impact was most severe in Glasgow. Many companies and organisations with deposits went out of business and most of the shareholders, who ultimately held unlimited liability, were financially ruined.

The City of Glasgow Bank came into existence in 1839, one of many local banks established throughout Scotland as trade and commerce developed from the early 19th century. It grew to have a network of 133 branches spread across Scotland as well as four in the Isle of Man. Like many others, it was licensed to print its own bank notes. Banking had a reputable history in Scotland. The banks were trusted and City of Glasgow enjoyed a status in keeping with that reputation. But it seems that within banking circles the collapse was less of a surprise. Many had reservations about how it conducted its business and rumours of difficulties had often circulated in the banking community, but a repetition of them had not aroused particular interest on this occasion. After all, the bank's £100 shares had recently been trading at up to £240 and the dividend to shareholders had been

increasing steadily each year. Only four months before its collapse, the bank had announced a further rise in the dividend to 12%.

What then put it over the edge? Quite simply, it was lending money it didn't have and some very large loans were outstanding. It had been treating bad debts as available assets and didn't have sufficient reserves to cover its notes in circulation. Operations on a large scale had been entered into for produce in India, for wool in Australia, and to support a railroad company in America. It had made large advances to firms in the iron trade and reports of the time refer to reckless support given to builders. For some time, the bank had been secretly purchasing its own shares as a device to maintain the market price and disarm suspicion. But the specific cause of the failure is reported to have been the bank's inability to get bills sold against the shipment of produce from India discounted on the London market. This is what finally led the bank's directors to appeal to the other Scottish banks for help.

A meeting of the general managers of nine of the principal banks took place in the premises of the Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh on the evening of Monday 30 September 1878. According to Robert Rait in his *History of the Union Bank of Scotland*, they 'met to receive a communication from the City of Glasgow Bank'. In this communication, the directors confessed that they had understated the outstanding loans in the annual report of the preceding July, admitted the existence of heavy losses and asked for assistance to meet their obligations.

The managers decided to appoint an accountant, one George Jamieson, to examine the books and report back the following evening. This must have been a considerable challenge for him. However, when they gathered again on the Tuesday evening, they learned from Mr Jamieson that losses were probably approaching £3 million, that £6 million had been lent to four firms and it appeared to him that accounts had been falsified over a period of some years. Faced with this information and the need to protect the integrity of the banking system, the appeal for help was declined. It was after midnight before the decision was conveyed to the deputation from Glasgow. It was clear then that the bank was finished.

So it was on the morning of Wednesday 2nd October 1878 that the directors took the decision to close the doors and cease operating. Meanwhile, back in Edinburgh, the general managers took an immediate decision to act in the public interest and gave notice that they would accept City of Glasgow Bank notes in the ordinary course of business. This at least served to alleviate some of the initial panic. It is interesting who these banks were and how few of them remain today: the Bank of Scotland, the British Linen Company, the Commercial Bank of Scotland, the National Bank of Scotland, the Union Bank of Scotland, the Royal Bank of Scotland, the Clydesdale Banking Company, Aberdeen Town and County Bank, and the North of Scotland Bank.

All that morning, there was a crowd at the closed doors of the City of Glasgow Bank's main office in Virginia Street. The chief constable had instructed policemen in the area to advise that bank notes remained safe in the belief that depositors would ultimately be

settled. But the fundamental problem was that depositors did not have access to their money. Newspapers of the time contain graphic accounts of personal distress. The general hardship was compounded by businesses folding, unable to pay their workers or pay bills. The Glasgow correspondent of *The Times* reported that 'in place of the normal stir and bustle a funereal solemnity prevails... everyone going about on tiptoe and conversations barely above a whisper'.

The shareholders then became the focus of attention as they ultimately had responsibility for the bank's debts, standing at about £10 million. Unlike the limited liability structures of today, at that time shareholders of most of the joint-stock banks had unlimited liability and many faced financial ruin. In order to meet the liabilities, each £100 share had to be met by a payment of £2,750. There were more than 1,200 shareholders. Many were merchants and businessmen, including proprietors of other banks. In addition, a large amount of stock was held in trust for children and for women which meant that some people had unwittingly become personally liable as trustees – possibly in that position merely as a favour for a deceased friend. Many had invested savings of a lifetime attracted by the good dividend payments. The fallout widened considerably as many of the shareholders' own businesses were at risk of collapsing. And so the crisis became a complicated web.

One casualty was the Inverness-based Caledonian Banking Company which held a substantial quantity of City of Glasgow stock as security for an advance and thus ranked as a shareholder. As a consequence, the Caledonian Bank was forced to cease operating in December 1878 and seek voluntary liquidation. Meanwhile, other banks had to withstand widespread withdrawal of deposits as panic spread. As a large number of bank notes of all origins were being exchanged for gold, banks had to send supplies of gold to their branches to meet the demand. With assets transferring from the banks to people's pockets, this was ready fodder for the more light-fingered members of the community who lost no time in trying to take advantage.

The web knew no boundaries. It was a chaotic and devastating situation. A fund of about £400,000 was raised throughout Scotland for the relief of ruined shareholders, while a charitable fund of over £27,000 was raised to help relieve innocent sufferers. The bigger banks also rallied round in an attempt to maintain public confidence. Through their combined efforts, they rescued the Caledonian Bank in Inverness so that it could resume business, they took on many of the staff from the City of Glasgow Bank of whom there were about 750, and made loans available to shareholders to help them meet their obligations. Many of the banks were themselves creditors of the failed bank with over £1 million due to them. In time, all the liabilities of the City of Glasgow Bank were eventually met, but it took about two years and many depositors and shareholders were ruined in the process.

When the dust settled, seven of the bank's directors and officials received prison sentences on charges of fraud. The circumstances served to draw attention to the dangers of unlimited liability and lack of independent audit. At that time the shareholders of only three of the Scottish banks enjoyed limited liability – the Bank of Scotland, the Royal Bank



and the British Linen Company – by act of parliament or by charter. The government addressed this point in the Companies Act of 1879, which enabled joint-stock banks to adopt the principle of limited liability, although that in itself was to cause considerable controversy.

It is quite salutary to realise that, even 130 years ago, the dubious actions of one bank caused untold damage in the community, creating a ripple that gathered momentum as it spread through the banking and business sectors to cause such widespread instability.

# House of cards

Walter Humes

2008

Sociologists use the concept of a 'reference group' to explain how people in positions of authority acquire their views and reach decisions. Instead of weighing the evidence dispassionately and subjecting it to careful analysis, powerful players assess what other key individuals think and frame their own response in terms of what they judge will be acceptable to members of the reference group. A form of 'groupthink' develops where nobody has the courage to dissent or take a stance that puts their status at risk. It is a mutually reinforcing process based on consensus, conformity and calculation.

Some of the current financial crisis can be explained in these terms. Investors, financiers and bankers colluded in an exercise which allowed hard selling of dubious products, reckless lending and property inflation. Instead of a solid edifice, they built a house of cards which was bound to collapse sooner or later. Some of them no doubt knew that this was the likely outcome, but a combination of greed and fear kept them going. Nobody had the courage to call the rules of the game into question. Indeed, the leaders were applauded for their wealth-creating 'vision' and rewarded with obscene bonuses and, in a few cases, a little something in the honours list.

It is no accident that all this has occurred at a time when the relationship between staff in high street banks and ordinary customers has been changed beyond recognition. It has been depersonalised and commodified. This is represented physically in the remodelling of bank interiors where routine transactions (deposits and withdrawals) have been sidelined in favour of the 'real business' of selling new 'goods'. Customers are encouraged to use cash machines and online banking so that the scope for pushing the latest line in bonds or other products is increased. Long-standing clients find themselves dealing with unfamiliar faces who are not interested in everyday pleasantries. All they want is proof of identity and a signature on a form.

Branch bank staff have themselves been downgraded in the brave new world of global finance. They have become merely the frontline workers who are expected to boost sales and reach new targets. The bosses at the top inhabit a different stratosphere, well-insulated from the vulgar concerns of ordinary customers. As they glide smoothly from one boardroom meeting to another, viewing sets of figures skilfully massaged by creative accounting, their grasp on reality fades and they begin to believe they are the masters of the universe. In other words, their reference group has created a fantasy world, an illusion easily maintained as they are ushered from luxury hotel suite to limousine to private jet.

Will the fate of Sir Fred Goodwin and the others serve as a much-needed reality check which will prevent future excesses? I rather doubt it. The lessons of history tell us that new

reference groups will be formed and different versions of groupthink will emerge. There may be a temporary return to more cautious practices, and gestures towards a tighter regulatory system, but the self-interest of the rich and powerful will soon reassert itself. What may change, however, is the language in which their aspirations are expressed. They will seek to disguise their real intent by playing down the discourse of profit, expansion and enterprise, and polishing up their ethical credentials as responsible global citizens. Don't be fooled.

# My evening with Sir Fred

Kenneth Roy

2009

Recently I went for lunch with a man who used to know Fred Goodwin well, socialised with him, held him in high regard. The period of which we talked was long before the fall, a time when Sir Fred was in the ascendancy, not quite master of the universe, his knighthood for services to banking still in the future, but a figure of considerable importance nevertheless.

Naturally I asked my lunch companion the question that anyone in my position would have asked. Was there anything in Fred Goodwin's character, anything in his business methods, hinting at the colossal recklessness to come?

'No,' he replied. 'Absolutely nothing.'

On the contrary, the 'world's worst banker', 'the most hated man in Britain', had once been noted for the steady trajectory of his career and the shrewdness of his judgement. What on earth went wrong? What converted Sir Fred into a modern equivalent of Ibsen's master builder with such terrible consequences for his bank, the UK economy, the reputation of Scotland, and himself?

I should myself have a clue. After all, I am one of the very few journalists ever to have interviewed Fred Goodwin – and a right hash I made of it.

It was a public occasion. The audience consisted mostly of academics, writers and social reformers of various kinds, and as I waited nervously for my first guest of the evening to arrive (for there were several other prominent Scots to follow) I remember thinking that this was not the sort of audience which the chief executive of the Royal Bank of Scotland would find familiar or instinctively sympathetic. There was not a business head among them.

As I say, I waited nervously. Sir Fred and I had not communicated directly before the meeting; all the preliminaries had been handled by his PA. No curiosity about the scope or content of the interview had been expressed. This was unusual. It could have denoted an arrogance on Sir Fred's part or perhaps simply indifference. Either way, it didn't augur well.

Fifteen minutes before the interview was due to begin, he hadn't shown up. One of the organisers frantically phoned his office and was assured he was on his way. He was driving himself, he had left in good time and, worry not, he would be with us at any moment. With barely a minute to spare, he strolled into the meeting room. He was as prompt as the six o'clock news.

Two high stools had been put in place – one for the interviewer, the other for a succession of the great and the good who were to perch upon it. The stools were of a kind you would use to prop up a bar. They were not comfortable for any prolonged period. Sir Fred was not comfortable, but his discomfort had little to do with the informal seating

arrangements. He had the demeanour of someone who was wondering what had possessed him to agree to this engagement, what he was doing there, and how soon he could decently leave.

Two things about him struck me at once. He looked incredibly fit and incredibly young. Indeed, he was positively boyish in appearance for a man in his late 40s, apparently uncareworn by the burdens of running a sprawling, multinational business. As I appraised the face of the banker, it seemed a face unclouded by tragedy or severe anxiety. But nor did it appear happy – well, not at this moment, not with me, not facing this audience of oddballs. Sir Fred's countenance was wary.

Nor was his interviewer happy. I was displeased with myself for failing to prepare for the interview at all thoroughly. Being more interested in the people I was talking to later in the evening, I had ignored the mere financier, who was virtually unknown outside his own circle. And I was displeased with Sir Fred for his obvious lack of interest and displeased to be told that he would not be staying to hear the other speakers or for dinner afterwards.

In this state of mutual unhappiness, we began.

I did what I often did with awkward customers and started by asking him to describe his father. This technique has been known to break down the most stubborn defences; even so monstrous a personality as John Junor succumbed to it. Fred Goodwin, however, was petrified by the question – fixed in amazement. From his expression, one could tell that he had never before been asked to describe his father. He had nothing to say about his father or, if he did have something to say, he was not sharing it with Kenneth Roy and his friends. He had very little to say about his childhood in Paisley either. It had been non-eventful, not worth noting on the balance sheet of his life. They had gone on holiday as a family every summer to Girvan. Well, that was a point of contact. I had once lived in Girvan, in a house facing the beach, where young Fred had played as a child. But he had little to say about that either. He had enjoyed his holidays? Yes, they had been all right. Paisley Grammar School, where he was educated? Dismissed in a few monosyllables. The stonewalling Goodwin was becoming an interviewer's nightmare.

And so the impression formed, in so far as any impression formed, of a public figure almost uniquely costive about his personal hinterland; of someone who had, as the saying goes, risen without trace. We stumbled on, but the interview was going nowhere; it might just as well have sunk into the Girvan sands of his otherwise unrecorded boyhood. Only on the subject of money was he relatively animated. He talked with some eloquence, some pride, about the rise of RBS as a global phenomenon, as well he might. But, as the questions from the floor demonstrated, his listeners on this occasion were not impressed by talk of profits. They wished instead to have the speaker's opinion on business ethics and the contribution of the banks to society. Sir Fred responded with growing unease. Pressed to define RBS's responsibilities to the wider community, he referred to the bank's support of rugby. He was greeted with bemusement. Rugby wasn't hacking it. Sports sponsorship wasn't hacking it. Sir Fred wasn't hacking it.

Finally, the poet Tessa Ransford put a killer question that summed up the prevailing mood. 'Sir Fred,' she asked, 'are banks for people or are people for banks?' There was an embarrassed silence and Sir Fred wriggled a little on his high stool. At last he spoke. 'A bit of both, I suppose,' he said weakly. There was no elaboration. A few months ago, when I reminded Tessa Ransford of the occasion, she said she had been provoked to ask the question because she had been so disturbed by the interview. She could claim to be the first person to have rumbled Sir Fred.

On that strange evening, Fred Goodwin should have received an intimation, an early warning, of his own vulnerability. Exposed, as he so rarely was, to a gathering of people who did not accept at face value all he said, whose vision of a decent society was not motivated by profit and growth, he could have engaged with their scepticism. There could have been a genuine dialogue, however tentative. But there was no engagement, no dialogue. He was like a visitor from a distant planet. Unfailingly polite throughout, he left as soon as the interview was over and was succeeded on the high stool by a woman who had gone to prison for her beliefs. It felt like light relief.

# Assume the worst

Alan McIntyre

2009

There are two competing views of human nature. One is that human nature is fundamentally good. This optimism finds expression in the classical liberal view that if the government just got out of the way then everyone would be richer and happier as a result. The alternative view is that human nature is fundamentally flawed. This pessimism (traditionally associated with the utopian left in politics and the Roman Catholic Church in religion), finds expression in the paternalistic view that we need to be protected from ourselves. The broad role of government is to make us play nice for the common good – or in the case of the Vatican to save our eternal souls.

The bankers of the world are now Exhibit A for the prosecution in the case against the traditional liberal viewpoint. Over the last 20 years we deregulated and globalised the financial services industry and apparently ended up breeding a generation of arrogant bankers who thought they were infallible. The direct consequence has been a financial services industry that has gone to hell in a hand basket, closely followed by the rest of the global economy.

So whose fault was it? By all means take Sir Fred's pension away. Good economic incentives like any good religious morality require heaven and hell to be truly effective. But let's not kid ourselves that we're surprised by the bankers' behaviour. Economic history provides absolute clarity that if you offer most people the opportunity to lawfully accumulate vast wealth, then they are going to jump at the chance. Indeed, if we accept that we want to live in a broadly capitalist economy, then this is exactly what we want them to do. Capitalism relies on profit signals to guide behaviour and as Gordon Gekko famously put it in the movie *Wall Street*, 'greed for want of a better word is good' because it helps ensure efficient resource allocation. The bankers of the last 20 years have simply been lab rats in the maze that governments and regulators have designed for them, figuring out the best way to maximise their personal income and amass power and status.

That selfishness, while maybe distasteful to some, was at least predictable. The true scandal is that banking regulators (and the politicians who appointed them) allowed themselves to be seduced by the liberal view of human nature without realising that in the process they were taking the safety catch off weapons of economic mass destruction. When it comes to banking (and a small number of other pastimes such as nuclear energy generation) we forgot that the default setting must be to assume human frailty. This isn't because bankers are any more flawed than the rest of us, but instead because the banking industry itself is special and that uniqueness demands a different and more cautious approach to oversight and regulation.

Banking is different from other businesses in at least three ways. First, it relies on huge amounts of trust and confidence to function effectively. As a depositor, you give the bank your money and trust they will pay it back when you need it. As a banker, you trust that the vast majority of those you then lend that money to will also pay it back. If you want to understand the role of trust and confidence in banking, just watch Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. He stands behind the savings and loan counter in Bedford Falls stopping a run on the bank by patiently explaining that the angry depositors' money isn't in the vault, instead it's in Bob's house, and Frank's house. Unfortunately, there was no George Bailey to stand behind the counter in every Northern Rock branch, only Alistair Darling standing behind the dispatch box like King Canute.

The second unique aspect of banking is leverage. Banking has historically been about borrowing money to make safe bets. If you had £1 to put on an even-money sure thing in the Grand National you'd double your money if it won. If you instead borrowed £10 from your friend in the pub and added it to your £1 bet then you'd make £11, even after paying the £10 back. The problem is, of course, if you don't win, then you can't expect to have a drink with your friend without the question of the borrowed money coming up. The change over the last 20 years in banking is that rather than borrowing £10 for every £1 of their own money and backing sure things, many of the world's bankers were borrowing anything up to £50 at a time to bet on rank outsiders with a tendency to fall at the first fence.

The final unique and dangerous aspect of banking is its interconnectedness. Money is not only a stand-alone business; it's also the lubricant that greases the wheels of the rest of the economy. Over time, the world of finance has also become far more interconnected as capital flows have become global. The consequence has been that if one bank catches a cold, the rest of the financial industry sneezes and the 'real' economy can end up with pneumonia as the supply of credit dries up and the bankers try to save themselves.

What happened over the last 20 years is that regulators and politicians forgot that banking is special and started to treat it like any other industry. Through their tolerance for loose lending practices, higher and higher leverage, and a reliance on caveat emptor instead of active regulation, they allowed the whole system to over-extend itself to the point where one tug on a loose thread (in this case the US mortgage market) caused an evaporation of trust, a seizing up of the global financial markets and economic collateral damage from Beijing to Reykjavik. In the process, the banker as Captain Mainwaring from *Dad's Army* – pompous but ultimately conservative – has morphed into the banker as Basil Fawlty. The centuries-old reputation of Scottish bankers as canny risk managers has also been destroyed. Only HSBC, a Scottish bank in all but name, will survive this crisis with any semblance of dignity.

The pendulum will now swing back. We'll relearn that banking is special and that it really isn't the right place to be experimenting with unfettered capitalism. But as we reregulate, it's critical that we do so with intelligence and insight and try and avoid cheap



political grandstanding. If you just redesign the maze, the rats will figure it out pretty quickly. We need oversight that keeps pace with financial innovation and recognises systemic risk when it starts to appear. Specifically, we need to accept that – as much as it goes against free market sensibilities – we need to be able to prick asset bubbles like the housing market before they get out of control. We also need to put in effective firewalls that prevent the propagation of the type of panic we've seen over the last couple of years when even the smart regulators miss something (as they inevitably will).

Were the senior bankers of the last 20 years generally arrogant, over compensated, and deluded that their alchemy was creating real wealth? Absolutely. Were they malicious robbers of widows and orphans? Bernie Madoff aside, generally not. They were simply acting rationally and lawfully within the boundaries that had been set for them. The real blame lies with the governments and regulators who forgot that the rules of the game in banking need to be very different and – like the Vatican – the most prudent course is to assume the worst about human nature and act accordingly.

# ARTS AND LITERATURE

# Pilgrim's progress

James Aitchison

1995

The completeness and daring of Edwin Muir's mythology delights me even more than it did eight years ago when I last studied his poems and prose. 'Mythology' and 'myth' are ambiguous words in an agnostic age. Their positive meaning – an account of our existence in the world that is expressed in imaginative, often symbolic, and sometimes abstract or even transcendental terms – implies that the account is a shared belief, the common faith of a culture. That meaning has faded as our sense of community has faded, but as individuals we shall never outgrow the need for myth, either secular or religious, because that is what gives life its coherence.

Muir's myths were insistent preoccupations, so insistent that some of his poems are not ends in themselves but vehicles for the myths of the fall of innocence, conflict, the human journey, a day of judgement, and reconciliation. They form an overlapping, irregular pattern in his poetry and prose, but they have been part of my thinking for so many years that I now see them as concentric: the fate of the individual within the wider myth of the origins and destination of the human race; the evolution of one man's mind and imagination in the wider world of ideas and faiths and clashing ideologies; the journey of one man's life as a small stage in the human journey.

What makes Muir's vision both daring and complete is his willingness to venture to the extremes of experience. From *First Poems* in 1925 to the poems published after his death in 1959, Muir repeatedly went beyond the limits of his imagination into new realms of understanding. Ideas and images normally unthinkable – because of their remoteness: the divergence of a species from brute creaturehood into humanity; or because of their abstraction: the transfiguration of mortal flesh into an immortal soul; or their enormity: the end of the world in a nuclear war – took root in his mind and grew into poems that are fully realised in lucid, deceptively simple, language.

The boundaries of his imagination were constantly extended, and the effect of this process is to show the growth of an imagination and the movement from bewilderment to clarity, intelligence to wisdom. If we read Muir's *An Autobiography* and then the *Collected Poems*, we can see the difference between raw experience and the work of art. These movements were not orderly progressions or one-and-for-all occurrences; only the closed or fanatical mind functions like that. Instead, Muir makes the same discoveries, or rather, he discovers new variations of the same themes, again and again in his work.

I can write these things about experience and imagination from having tried to follow Muir's. I have learned more about the way my mind works, especially the writer's two-in-one function of imagination and memory, from Muir's poetry and prose than I have from

my reading of Freud and Jung and R D Laing. I learned from Muir that the myth of the fall is a universal and everlasting truth because the myth tells of the end of the 'golden age' of unconscious, primitive humanity and the beginning of human consciousness; it tells that consciousness brought the awareness of self, and with that knowledge came our separation from the natural world, from the animals, from the natural or totemic gods, and from each other.

Muir's attitude to the natural world and animals was partly determined by his childhood experience on a small farm on the island of Wyre in Orkney. He was born in 1887 into the centuries-old culture of peasant farming, and he retained a sense of the peasant bond with animals, a mixture of awe and practicality, to the end of his life. His attitude emerges clearly in *An Autobiography* and in the two poems entitled *The Horses*, one from *First Poems* (1925):

*But when at dusk with steaming nostrils home  
They came, they seemed gigantic in the gloam,  
And warm and glowing with mysterious fire  
That lit their smouldering bodies in the mire.*

The other poem of horses is the vision of apocalypse and resurrection in the volume *One Foot in Eden* (1956):

*Barely a twelvemonth after  
The seven days war that put the world to sleep*

From Muir, and from Jung, I learned that the childhood of the individual re-enacts the childhood of the human race in what Jung calls the fall from 'the paradise of unconscious childhood' to consciousness of self and separation. Muir may have been influenced directly by Jung. Maurice Nicoll, the therapist who analysed Muir in 1919, acknowledges his debt to Jung in his, Nicoll's, book, *Dream Psychology*. My own thinking has been influenced both by Muir and by Jung, especially during the period 1969 to 1973, to the extent that I now have difficulty in recalling whose the original ideas are. It was from my reading of Muir and Jung that I learned that a person's identity consists of several selves, that some of them play tricks on each other, that some of them die, or are killed off by other selves over the years, and that a man may reach late middle age without knowing which selves to trust or how to control them.

It was mainly from Muir's writings that I learned how to think about human origins and ends, birth and life and death. Muir's work confirmed for me that progress in our understanding of our own humanity is painfully slow and erratic compared to progress in the development of science and technology. In the essay *The Poetic Imagination*, he writes:

*Every human being has to begin at the beginning, as his forebears did, with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problem of good and evil, the same inward conflict, the same need to learn how to live, the same inclination to ask what life means.*

But Muir's argument in that essay and elsewhere is that it is through this pattern of repetition that we discover our humanity and our common humanity. And Muir's work helped me to see that, even for those of us who believe that death is the end of life, it need not be the end of the meaning of life because there is an earthly succession, a transfusion of humanity, from one generation to another. Imagination, Muir wrote, 'cannot admit that anything that ever happened among the dead is dead for us'.

Muir's prose works, *An Autobiography* and *The Estate of Poetry*, re-directed some of my existing interests and helped me to see more clearly that we live increasingly in a world in which most of our knowledge and experience is secondary, mediated by newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, video recordings, cinema and sound recordings. I believe that these media also affect the way our imaginations work; a medium like television, for example, supplies the visual, audible, kinetic and chromatic images, leaving the viewer to imagine little more than touch and smell. Does it matter that some of these media are used to promote trash culture? My fear is not that we'll be debased by them but that the mediated imagination, the secondary imagination, may cut us off from our past and from the natural world of primary things, leaving us adrift in a clamorous present.

More specifically, in my long apprenticeship as a poet, I learned from Muir that spontaneity in poetry is not the expression of emotion but rather the reconciliation of feeling and thought in an apparently effortless resolution of the subject matter. More recently, as an indirect result of re-reading Muir, I have come to see more clearly what I have vaguely felt for years: that the literary life I once longed for is not enough. Writing may be our profession, that which we most sincerely profess, but it is not enough. As yet, I don't know what more is needed to make a sufficient life. It may be some specific form of faith. And at this point I realise that I can follow Muir only so far.

Muir was a Christian. He believed in the immortality of the soul, not, he wrote, as an idea or a belief, but a state of being. But he was an idiosyncratic, non-doctrinal and anti-Calvinist Christian. Indeed, the only traces of anger in his work are those occasions when he writes about Calvinism, notably in his biography, *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist*, and in the poems, *Scotland 1941* and *The Incarnate One*:

*See there King Calvin with his iron pen,  
And God three angry letters in a book,  
And there the logical hook  
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent  
Into an ideological instrument.*

Muir's faith allowed him to see the ultimate reconciliation of good and evil, of time and eternity, in a harmony so complete that it is a form of mysticism.

I can see none of these things. Reading Muir has made me suspicious of all forms of ideology and most forms of righteousness, but there his religious influence ends. In other ways, I sympathise with his views without being influenced by them. He attached more importance to dreams than I do, possibly in the belief that dreams are to the individual as myths are to the tribe or the race, forms of truth from another order of reality. And although I still have a sense of wonder about people and the natural world, I don't have Muir's sense of the over-arching mystery of experience and the intrinsic mystery of all living things; perhaps because I don't have his religious faith.

How good a writer is Muir? As an autobiographer he is superb. *An Autobiography* (1954) has only one equal in 20th-century Scottish writing: Neil Gunn's *The Atom of Delight* (1956). *An Autobiography*, my first encounter with Muir's work, is one of the few books – others are Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*, both of them translated by Willa and Edwin Muir – that scattered my adolescent ideas about life and art and authorship. I read *An Autobiography* when I was still at school in Falkirk. I borrowed the book from a friend, and I experienced such a disturbance of horror and delight that I insisted on writing my friend's essay. (Yes. I married her.)

As a novelist, Muir is an interesting failure. *The Marionette* (1927), *The Three Brothers* (1931) and *Poor Tom* (1932) fail because they are products of an intelligence rather than an imagination. Perhaps the novels serve a psychological rather than a literary purpose, allowing Muir a form of exorcism by expressing in fiction the horror – the deaths of his parents and two brothers, and the years of clerking in the Greenock boneyard – that was otherwise inadmissible.

As a critic, Muir invites comparison with T S Eliot and the American Lionel Trilling. His best critical work is *The Structure of the Novel, Scot and Scotland, Essays on Literature and Society, The Estate of Poetry*, and *Edwin Muir: Uncollected Scottish Criticism* edited by Andrew Noble. What makes Muir a great critic is the extent to which he goes beyond literary values. His concern is not just the work of art but also the various forces – moral, psychological, political, religious – that shaped the writer and the society from which he wrote.

I didn't begin to read Muir's poetry until 1957 when the same friend gave me Muir's first collected edition. Looking back, I'm slightly surprised that Muir's poetry delighted me so much at a time when my favourite contemporary poets were Dylan Thomas, Cecil Day Lewis and Stephen Spender. Muir has outlasted all of them in my imagination.

As a poet, Muir has always been out of fashion. From the publication of *Journeys and Places* in 1937, until his death in 1959, he was concerned to express the order and wholeness he saw beyond the chaos of the world, and there are occasions when his vision of an ideal order leads to a more rigidly organised statement than the theme requires. His attentiveness to ancestral voices – and perhaps the fact that his own voice, his physical and

metaphorical voice in writing as well as speech, was formed in the early years of the 20th century – leads to archaic diction and imagery. How good a poet, then, is Edwin Muir?

If we apply the tests of sensation and sensuousness, or originality of subject matter, or technical innovation and virtuosity then, although he was the first British poet to tackle the subject of nuclear war and annihilation, Muir trails behind his great contemporaries, Yeats and Eliot and MacDiarmid. But if we consider the range and nature of the themes that underlie the subject matter, and the force and clarity with which these themes are expressed, then Muir must be reckoned a great poet.

His vision ranges from the formation of the cosmos and the creation of the earth in *Ballad of the Soul* (1925), the violent symbolist poem that prefigures some of his mature work, to the destruction of the world in a nuclear holocaust in the late poems, *After a Hypothetical War*, *The Last War* and *The Day Before The Last Day*. In these war poems – and in the poems prompted by the Second World War, *The Good Town* and *The Town Betrayed*, and in the legendary war of *Troy and A Trojan Slave* – and other poems of violent encounters, notably *The Combat*, Muir explores the theme of human conflict more fully than any poet since the First World War.

The surrealism of *The Combat* is a reminder of the fact that Muir was, paradoxically, conscious of his unconscious mind and concerned to bring the underworld of the unconscious into the light through his poetry and *An Autobiography*. I find a fascination in comparing his prose accounts of his dreams with the poems that he fashions from these dreams. In the same way, the account of Muir's geographical journey in *An Autobiography* can be compared with the poems on the theme of the spiritual and psychological journey.

Stephen Spender, in his autobiography *World Within World*, recalls meeting Muir in various places over the years:

*On each occasion I was struck by the integrity of purpose in his work and life, which made him seem a pilgrim from place to place rather than a wanderer like myself.*

Harvey Wood, Muir's colleague in the British Council, said of him in a radio broadcast:

*I came to the conclusion that he never felt, or was, completely at home anywhere, that the most quintessential part of him was always withdrawn and remote.*

In his life and in his art, Muir is an archetypal pilgrim and exile. The myth of the journey – of losing and finding the right path, of enduring tiresome or even terrifying ordeals along the way, of finally crossing the bridge of dread into a kind of freedom – recurs throughout Muir's work and is the theme of one of his greatest poems, *The Journey Back*. In its seven contrasting sections, each of them a variation on the theme, the poem expresses more clearly than any other single poem of Muir's the exceptional range of intensity of his vision; it also shows the range of Muir's technical skills, which are of a higher level than most

critics claim. *The Journey Back* is an outstanding achievement. It does not yield its meaning easily, but it is worth reading, and re-reading, for what it reveals about the power of the imagination, the nature of mind, and the human condition.

Muir is slightly less convincing in his treatment of the abstract subject, time, but in *Variations On A Time Theme* (1934) he comes closer to solving the multiple mystery than any of his contemporaries except Eliot in the *Four Quartets*. And Muir does so by expressing the abstract in ingenious, palpable images, and because he sees time against a background of eternity, life against a background of immortality. A reader doesn't have to share Muir's belief in immortality to appreciate the astonishing achievement of the last collection published in his lifetime; *One Foot In Eden* (1956) is a sublime vision of the reconciliation of the human and the divine.

What makes the appreciation easier is Muir's craftsmanship. He waited until a poem, or the pre-verbal mental activity that prompts the poem, had taken shape in his mind. And when he came to write the poem, he used a deceptively simple technique: a unified rather than a fragmented structure, a rhyming stanza pattern or a rhythmically regular free verse, a recognisable symbolism and imagery, and easily understood diction. Simplicity, to coin another paradox, is a difficult design feature. It is much easier to write obscure poetry than comprehensible poetry, and this illusion of simplicity is a measure of his mastery.

Simplicity, and the parallel illusion of spontaneity, are at their most beguiling in Muir's lyrics. I think of the love poems: *The Annunciation*, *The Confirmation* and *The Commemoration*; of the songs of joy: *A Birthday*, *All We*, *In Love For Long* and *The Days*; and I think of the elegiac lyrics: *The Late Wasp* and *The Late Swallow*. In his lyrics alone he combines awe and delight, the sombre and the felicitous, the incarnate and the numinous, to make a harmony that is unique in 20th-century poetry.



# Darkness into light

Stewart Conn

1997

Years ago, I was approached by a writer friend compiling a book on happiness. It was to contain descriptions of times or instances of outstanding happiness in people's lives. For anyone not in a state of extended bliss, this would presumably mean delving into the past. But things can be filtered or rarefied by the passage of time. How readily could the experience be recaptured – if there was one? Jane Austen's *Emma* wasn't too encouraging: 'Perfect happiness, even in memory, is not common'. It was as if the head had been shoved into a hive of bees. If I were to come up with something, how to do it justice? And what would it have to register on the Richter scale to qualify?

As it turned out, the choice proved remarkably (or unremarkably) easy. I chose a holiday with my wife in Haute Provence, shortly after we married. A remote world of fragrances, of blue skies and white peaks; of lavender-clumps like hassocks of Provencal ladies. As luck had it too, my task was done – in the form of a poem sequence which had as a focal point a tower high on a hill overlooking a chapel. From it could be seen the swerve of the valley, the mountains pink beyond, then the blueness of the sky. Goat bells could be heard chinking in the breeze. And the village clock struck every hour twice. Time held in abeyance; harmony – and oneness – attained. The impenetrable blueness all the more precious for its acknowledged transience.

But what of my friend's anthology? So far as I know, it never bore fruit. Maybe it proved too great a chore. Certainly before finishing it, he was locked in deep depression. Paradoxical, given his raw material was *happiness*. Although maybe all too explicable: was he trying to alleviate, or escape, its grip? Or was the infusion of others' happiness simply too much to bear? A further irony was that the would-be compiler was the playwright Alexander Reid, my conversations with whom were constantly enlivened by his memories of Neil Gunn and his 'atoms of delight'.

Alec's philosophising could be so convoluted as to make pursuit tricky. When he gravitated to Gunn it was like trying to follow a track through a pine forest, with cones whacking you in the face at each turning off. The more I read of Gunn's novels and *The Atom of Delight* itself, and joined in the pursuit of its autobiographical moments of 'cleansing' insight, the more illusory – or elusory – they became. I felt like a child putting out one hand, then cupping the other over it, to catch a moonbeam.

I warm to Gunn's entry into the mind of the growing boy – not least in his recurrent skin-tingling battle with the salmon in the pool; this itself an unforgettable stage in the river of life. There is also his ability to build a picture of our ancestry, of our tribal forebears and the wisdom handed down like a torch which it is up to us to preserve and pass on.

Informing this are his compassion and understanding, and a belief that there is a meaning – an order – behind it all, to sustain us and our affections. And what ultimately validates his 'moments' is their grounding in actuality: in some real experience to which one can relate, yet which 'remains like a radioactive atom at delight's centre'.

On holiday once with his wife, Gunn found a well, its crystal water made invisible by fern-fronds intercepting the light. From this reminder of Gaelic legend stemmed the quest of Peter, a middle-aged academic, which comprises *The Well at the World's End*. The novel, in common with so much of Gunn's fiction, is also a spiritual autobiography. At one point, Peter witnesses a daring sea-rescue. In *Neil M Gunn: A Highland Life*, Ross Hart notes how on holiday in France, and rescued from drowning by a friend, Gunn described the feeling that subsequently came over him: he knew '... that there exists an order of things outside our conception of time... There was nothing at all in the ordinary sense 'religious' about this experience; but what is astonishing, I think, is that there was nothing personal... as I sat down... I was overcome by a devine, a delicious sense of humour'.

Alan Spence, in an article on Gunn, sees this as describing with a beautiful simplicity and directness what Gunn means by his 'timeless moments': that 'sudden awakening to reality, an intuition and a certainty, direct *seeing*, the doors of perception cleansed'. Again, it is Gunn's own character which gives elements, that might otherwise have remained remote, their mellowness; his buoyancy which invests them with human form; his inner strength and serenity, as Spence saw it, which had so profound an impact on the younger writer.

André Breton claimed 'all great prose partakes of the nature of poesie': Gunn seems to me to exemplify this, not simply stylistically but in the sense of bringing light. And of course by *light*, is meant *enlightenment*. The more I read of today's prose, so much of it self-servingly crude, gratuitously violent and morally vacuous, the sadder it seems that those qualities in Gunn which are most vital and which our society most desperately needs, should be among those which make him unfashionable.

It is not that I'd proscribe violence or disapprove any depiction of the brute side of man's nature; but rather than a wallowing in them, I would advocate some transforming principle: a moral insight and vision to counter (as ultimately in Dostoyevsky) the degradation of the pit.

In my mind's eye and consistent with his writings, Gunn remains one of the Old Men of the Tribe, a communal repository for Wisdom. I remember meeting him and his brother John through Alec Reid; and under my own steam visiting him at his home in North Kessock. I clearly recall Neil, head tilted, an amber glint from the glass in his hand, the slight burr of his speech, the dry laugh with volumes behind it. As darkness drew in, the fire glowed; then the light was switched on – thanks to the power brought by the metal pylons I naively said must spoil their view, but which his wife Daisy described as among the most beautiful things she could think of.

On a last visit shortly before his death, he was at a sadly low ebb; his books, if they were in print at all, critically discountenanced. At least by then there had been founded, through

the initiative of the Scottish Arts Council, the Neil Gunn International Fellowship: the two words, he said, which meant more to him than any others. Looking back, I think of those earlier moments as being in some kind of Plato's cave, shadows cast on the wall and the sense of a veil being drawn, the reality as against the image momentarily visible; before the instant had gone, and everything became unreal again.

Of present day Scottish writers, I can at least glimmeringly comprehend (I think) and sense an affinity with how most write as they do, though I couldn't begin to do it myself. The 'secret communities' in Douglas Dunn's stories comprise a world of almost conspiratorial seclusion and torn loyalties; his fictional Scottish townships existing in the present yet immured in the past. The arresting lucidity of Bernard MacLaverty's prose, and the finesse of his insights, are at the same time put at the service of, and the means of capturing, a human trembling. Both writers possess a moral sense which arouses our compassion for the characters in their social and psychological confinement, thereby enhancing our understanding of them and hence of ourselves.

Nor is this exclusive to them, but extends from the pick of Alasdair Gray's exotic cornucopia and James Kelman's dark masterpieces, to the mesmeric mosaic of Iain Crichton Smith's prose and poetry – not the least breathtaking of whose qualities is the alliance of an intuition which can operate with joyous (often near-surrealist) abandon to an affirmative tenacity in the face of 'the dark world in which we walk'. Recent years have seen too the emergence of a refreshing diversity of younger writers – dazzling among them A L Kennedy. Besides challenging and changing our perceptions, she possesses that ability to clothe her characters' insights in a language which stimulates not just the first time round, but when her sentences are re-read and scrutinised.

It is easy to be distracted from (or blinded to) any sense of continuity, in the face of what is new and compelling, at times shocking and contradictory, in the priorities of any generation (or consecutive generations) of writers. Add to this the polarisation of taste and pendulum-swings of fashion; in conjunction with a recurring tendency to discard previous ideologies as sham. Understandably too, part of any writer's urge may be to sever allegiance with a line of tradition by which he or she feels inhibited or overshadowed.

When Alan Spence urges the importance of continuity, what he advocates is neither naive nor linguistically retrograde but 'the continuing striving for the light'. Not surprisingly in that for years now Spence has been practising meditation under the guidance of Indian master Sri Chinmoy, for *light* again read *enlightenment*. But no more for Spence than when it was said dismissively of Gunn does this imply impracticality or any retreat into 'a personal mysticism'. Meditation sharpens rather than etherealises his vision.

I'm confident that Spence (no less, Kennedy and Crichton Smith) adheres equally to Dostoyevsky's dictum, 'compassion is the chief law of human existence': the more crucially when lives are threatened or encompassed by the forces of darkness. With an ear sensitive to everyday speech-rhythms, much more of his work penetrates the pain and potential for hurt of a boy growing up not in Gunn's Highland strath, but in a harsh, often hostile,

Glasgow. Of his stories graphing age, one enters the mind of an old man in the overheated globe of the Kibble Palace: all life, a transition. Though his latest volume, *Stone Garden*, ventures further afield, its pivotal figures remain temporary exiles or escapees from Glasgow; linked to that city as inextricably as Spence seems to be, by a potent umbilical tie.

He reveals a constant desire to be reconciled with the past. But this is seen in the perspective of the present, and what lies ahead. Nor does he falsify or glamourise his moments of epiphany. He may exquisitely recall a candle in whose soft glow 'the things on the table stood illuminated like objects in some strange painting'. But later in the same story the boy is brought back to earth, having omitted to rest the candle-stub on anything: 'In burning right down it had scorched the table-top. It had made a round hole, the formica cracked and buckled round about it, like a volcanic crater.'

That there should be something incorruptible about Spence's fictional world is no surprise. His ultimate concern is with the moral grace notes and continuity of other folks' (and our) lives. As a storyteller, he never severs his link with real emotions and experience or the human heartbeat, no matter how ominous, even alienating, that may be. In his *Nessun Dorma*, a student is asked what he thinks is the finest music in the world. He replies: 'The music of what happens'. This sums up, not only in a social or aesthetic context but within an intuitive and spiritual dimension, Spence's rare gift. And what it all boils down to in the end: 'The music of what happens. Stay tuned!'

# A rum do

Maurice Lindsay

1998

The more you think about it, opera is a pretty rum do. You either like it madly, or you hate it. And even among the category of likers – in this country at any rate, largely drawn from what sociologists call the As and Bs, the professional, mostly wealthy classes – there are sharp divisions of taste: though all of them might agree with Carl Orff, who declared: 'Melody and speech belong together... I reject the idea of pure music'.

Indeed, the association of music and drama is just about as old as civilisation itself. Music was certainly an integral part of popular drama in the Middle Ages, and featured prominently in the entertainments mounted at the Italian courts during the 16th century. Even so, the concept behind opera was a new one. It arose in Florence, and was based on the quite erroneous belief that ancient Greek drama was sung throughout. It could thus be said that opera came into being as the result of an historical misunderstanding. The first real opera, as such, was Rinuccini's *Dafne* by Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi, which appeared in 1597, and got over the problem of keeping the story moving by the invention of sung declamation, of recitativo.

The first great opera – at least, the first to survive on the stage of our own day – was Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, first put on in Florence in 1607. Because of the early connection with classical Greek tragedy, and the then current belief that, on the whole, the gods and goddesses were a noble lot – today, of course, we think them a fairly mediocre bunch, reflecting, as all gods do, the more unpleasant human characteristics – the early operatic tragedies were all based on classical mythology. It wasn't long, though, before comic opera made its first appearance, with *Che soffre, spera* – 'Who suffers, may hope' by Mazzochi and Marazzoli, in 1693. Guess what it featured? Speeded-up recitativo, patter songs and the debunking of serious opera's lofty gods and goddesses.

Perhaps the real surprise is that such a highly contrived concoction as opera should have spread so quickly throughout Europe, developing rigid conventions, undergoing liberation from them at the hands of Gluck and others, taking on social significance with Mozart and, in the 19th century, flowering into the great mythological music dramas of Wagner on the one hand, and the melodious melodramas of Verdi on the other, always to a torrent of ridicule from those who disapproved.

'Opera is a bizarre mixture of poetry and music, when the writer and the composer, equally embarrassed by each other, go to a lot of trouble to create an execrable work', snarled the carnaptious Sieur de Saint-Evremond in 1677. And so on, ad infinitum, from Joseph Addison's crack in 1711 – 'Nothing is capable of being set to music that is not nonsense' – to, in our own day, W H Auden's 'No good opera can be sensible, for people do

not sing when they are feeling sensible', and the American Richard Benchly's trenchant observation, 'Opera is where a guy gets stabbed in the back, and instead of dying, sings'.

Those who love opera easily laugh off such jibes. They know that when they thrill to a good performance of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, they are experiencing a great slice of human life more intensely than mere speech would allow, aspects of the tragi-comedy of human relations so perfectly conceived that the piece transcends the barriers of time; know, too, that in Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, *lacrimae rerum*, 'the tears of things', move them deeply as they see an older woman forced gracefully to relinquish love to the passage of time. Or apprehend, in Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*, with an intensity brought about by Wagner's blend of symbolism and powerful music, the inevitability of the decline of all human systems of government and belief.

Here I am claiming that opera lovers know, or experience, or apprehend these things when they come upon *good* performances of *Figaro*, *Rosenkavalier* or *Twilight of the Gods*. But what, nearing the turn of the century, constitutes a *good* performance of works written somewhere between two centuries and a century ago? Fine singing, top-class orchestral playing? Certainly. What else? We see with our eyes as well as hear with our ears. Addison thought future generations of Englishmen would marvel that intelligent people could sit through a whole evening in the theatre listening to performances in a language of which they understood not a word. He, of course, lived through the cult of Italian opera in Handel's London.

The language argument is almost as old as opera itself, the purists maintaining that perfection is sullied if the sound of the original language set by the composer is divorced from his notes; the nationalists – or perhaps we should call them the rationalists – insisting that you can't get the total impact, especially in comic opera, if you don't understand the jibes and the jokes. Happily, this particular problem has largely been solved by the invention of a moving strip translation crossing the screen above the stage, rather like a television autocue.

Two much more perplexing problems, however, confront the late-20th century opera-goer, neither of which has been solved: the look of the thing whenever operas from the day before yesterday are staged; and whether even the watered-down conventions still necessarily adhered-to by the modern composer can really add any worthwhile dimension to a contemporary situation from which television and the press may have already wrung out the last ounce of exploitable emotion.

First, the look of the thing.

Once upon a time, the composer was the undisputed boss where the production of his own opera was concerned. Then came the age of the all powerful conductor. Now, we are experiencing the cult of production-opera, where producers, often young and inexperienced, see opera not so much as a unified artistic endeavour in which music, words, costume and setting should all speak more or less the same language, as an excuse to allow their visual imaginations full and unbridled rein.

There is, of course, a very real problem to be solved. If, today, we were to see a Mozart or a Verdi opera reproduced exactly as it looked at its premiere, we'd be put off by the in-built fustian inconsistencies. Mozart's view of Ancient Rome, for example, in *The Clemency of Titus*, was an 18th-century one. A beautiful re-creation of such a view, as it happens, is enshrined in the film and video version of this opera by the French producer Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, where the settings are ruined antiquities, the costumes those of 1791. For a variety of reasons, the film probably wouldn't have worked if a similar setting had been used with the costumes updated to 1993, a new and discordant time element having thus been introduced, providing no sort of link with either music or the story.

Yet nowadays, many producers impose surreal settings and costumes on music that speaks 1787, 1856 or even 1921; worse still, sometimes they attempt to impose contemporary political comment on a score where it can have absolutely no relevance.

Some years ago, when Prague was still under communist rule, I was shown the beautiful theatre where Mozart first presented *Don Giovanni* in 1787. The interior of the theatre had been heavily redesigned in the ornate high style of the late 19th century. This ornate elaborate decorative work had been ripped out, and workmen were busily engaged in reinserting it – at enormous cost, no doubt – the original interior as Mozart knew it. Not long after, I saw a travesty of a producer's version of the same opera in the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, featuring, on stage, a coffin and a WC with throughout so much non-stop producer-devised stage business that it was actually quite difficult to listen to the music. I thereupon wrote a short poem, *On Producing Don Giovanni*, which, I think, seems apposite:

*They have torn the nineteenth century interior  
out of the theatre – the plutocratic plush,  
heavy with Hapsburg women, stale cigars,  
velour thread-bared by smug capitalist bums –  
replacing it with replica; as it was  
in 1787; the October evening  
when Mozart stood before the orchestra  
and raised his hands to begin Don Giovanni  
Just as it was – except for electric candles –  
seats, hangings, rococo decoration.*

*Pity they hadn't a reproduction Mozart.*

*Here's this guy, struggling to get the pants off  
an ageing broad his dumb friend plans to marry.  
Irate father rushes to intervene;  
the boyo plugs him straight between the eyes  
with a small machine-gun, masking his escape.*

*He's got women on the brain (and other places).  
Those he's discarded mix with dressed-up cops  
at a kind of fancy ball. They plan to arrest him;  
but what with the champagne and all that singing,  
once again, he escapes. But not from his conscience.  
Thinking he sees the old guy's murdered ghost,  
boyo rushes into the street. They've opened  
a manhole, searching for leaking gas,  
Boyó falls in; a sensational explosion,  
and he quite disappears. A moral lesson.*

*Pity they had to use such old-fashioned music.*

While it's obviously quite impossible to generalise, years of opera going have convinced me that the most acceptable visual arrangements for a production always complement rather than contradict the score. The period details needn't be academically accurate, but the general impression must be one of sympathy, not of strident visual assertion. After all, Wagner has surely left producers with inflated egos plenty of room in which to indulge themselves, since no-one in any audience can have the remotest idea what Valhalla looked like, or how the Nordic gods and goddesses were supposed to have got themselves up!

The fact that so many producers do feel impelled to try visually to update the 20 or so 'regular' operas that constantly hold the stage – once I saw a performance of *Tosca*, for example, where the producer had the unmistakable figure of Mussolini wandering among the crowd, a form of self-effacement that dictator was not in the habit of indulging in – the fact that producers still keep trying it on, so to say, suggests a sort of unease about the future validity of opera itself.

I like to think that however audacious avant-gardists become, there will always be talented designers and producers able to suspend our disbelief with some sort of quasi-period setting that doesn't set our eyes at odds with our ears. After all, most opera-goers, though they might not care to admit it, keep returning to the opera house primarily because of the music – the airs, arias, choruses or other memorable musical moments, not because of the stage appearance – though, conversely, bad productions can keep audiences away. Largely lacking such focused movements, as it does, one therefore wonders if contemporary opera is likely to continue to survive for very long?

Television and the media milk the last emotional ounce out of such newsreel stories as are turned into operas such as *Nixon in China* or *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Where music has to compete with comparatively recent television coverage, somehow it seems to come off second best. There is, too, something slightly absurd in watching and hearing contemporary characters laboriously singing out their problems and dilemmas in the instant age of the news satellite dish and the fax machine.



Contemporary composers who seek to get round this difficulty by setting stories from past ages come up against another problem – the gulf that today separates serious music from the wider public, but which did not exist in previous centuries, thus creating a different kind of arts-related disharmony.

So! Has opera really got much future in the 21st century? Certainly, looking back over the 20th century, very few of the operas it gave rise to have held the stage. Strauss, of course – the last great wizard of musical ecstasy. Puccini, with his compelling *verismo* realism, but a descendant of the Verdi melodramatic school. Janacek, dramatically a Bohemian of Verdian descent, despite his highly original speech-related language. And Britten, the best of him, in my view, his wonderful evocation of Englishness, whether in *Peter Grimes* or, at a lighter level, *Albert Herring*.

Today, popular theatrical escapist fantasy is provided, not by opera, or even operetta, as it once was, but by so-called 'musicals', usually highly derivative of each other and of little inventive or imaginative value; musical journalism, so to say, which, as was the fate of newspapers in less hygienic days, metaphorically, could very well be used to wrap the next day's fish and chips. A Spanish writer, Jose Quintero, thus defines his position: 'I really don't like opera... How can people sing away their troubles? How can they make love to each other singing?' To which may be added Aldous Huxley's version of an Italian proverb: 'Bed is the poor man's opera'.

It makes you wonder. Still, even if such pessimism proves to be justified, 400 years isn't a bad run for an art form which had originally to be subsidised by princely Italian patrons, and to this day has to be heavily supported out of the public purse.

# Road to nowhere

Tom Hubbard

2000

What would John Knox have made of it all, these strange folk with their ploys and vanities, within yards of his house in the Royal Mile? The mid to late 1980s were not markedly propitious for what we used to call culture; yet here it was, burgeoning, in what had only recently been a pretty run-down part of Edinburgh's Old Town. I can recall a certain defiance, a celebratory spirit that doesn't come easily to the Scots, at least in a sustainable mode.

The Netherbow Arts Centre – based in John Knox's home, no less – was vibrant with theatre and exhibitions under the direction of Donald Smith, the son of a former Moderator of the Church of Scotland and a champion of the immediate community and its history. I played a central role in the nurturing of the new Scottish Poetry Library, just opposite the Netherbow, down Tweeddale Court; its founder-director, Tessa Ransford, was a poet who had spent much of her life in the Indian sub-continent, as daughter of an administrator or wife of a missionary. I would meet others who ran cafés, galleries, book and music shops in the area; I felt myself something of a hick from Fife, naïvely marvelling that we seemed an unlikely bunch to be operating as we were. The strangest character of all, though, was the diminutive Italo-Scot who had just made one of the more promising moves in a career of enforced itinerancy. Richard Demarco had transferred his base from one room in Jeffrey Street to several floors of a disused church in Blackfriars Street. The topmost level was a spacious attic marked out with Neo-Gothic arches and windows, an ideal venue for events whose bizarreries were subtly offset by intimations of the sombre. Mephistopheles had come to town.

Yet for all the international ambience of the Demarco movement, it was still very Scottish in its blend of the demonic with the didactic. It took me some time to realise this. At first, I considered Ricky no more than an ingenious showman. Wrenched from its context in Wallace Stevens's poem, there came to mind the line, 'the only emperor is the emperor of ice cream'. Just who did he think he was, this parody Napoleon of the Neapolitans, this one-man *commedia dell'arte scozzese*? At which point he was becoming interesting.

In July 2000, Richard Demarco, son of Edinburgh by way of Monte Cassino, Kelty and Portobello, turns 70. Blackfriars Street and its successor venue, the St Mary's School building down York Lane, have passed into history through a welter of overdue bills and eviction notices. At the time of writing, his damp, dusty offices on Calton Hill are the scene of energies apparently unabated, the projects as overarching in their conception as they are ad hoc in their execution. As usual, his cooler colleagues will attempt to systemise, ring-

fence, insist, all the time anxiously hoping that Ricky will be around when there are cheques to sign and that he will be elsewhere in Europe whenever delicate practicalities must be undertaken without his sudden interventions. Prophecies of his retrieval have been notoriously premature, but realism would suggest that his activities are, at last, winding down. That the prophet has always come back to Scotland is itself no mean achievement, and after almost four decades of his 'Edinburgh Arts' and other ventures, he deserves not sycophantic adulation but the kind of honours so lavished on him by other countries and so begrudged by his own.

When, as a curious neighbour, I first took the short stroll from the Poetry Library, I was not yet aware that the journey was as short intellectually as it was geographically. The Library's developing philosophy had as its core the conviction that poetry was not some precious, self-contained preserve for conventicles content to communicate only with each other. The Library was itself a poem, redolent with its own imagery of metamorphosis and interaction. If there was anything that was authentic in what we meant by the 'Celtic', it was the intricate interlacing that was the major feature of its traditional designs – whether in embroidery, jewellery, the pibroch, verse forms. Tessa Ransford was always eager to incorporate concepts from science; in the course of a paper at Tübingen University she spoke of the necessary integration of diverse 'force-fields' and went on to explain the phenomenon, in mathematics, of *latticing*, 'which gives a layered, multidimensional ordering of events or elements. Lattices are a graphic demonstration of the quantum postulate that there is always at least one alternative between every this and every that'.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Tessa and I discovered and discussed the writings of Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), that remarkable all-rounder who trained as a botanist, went on to pioneer an array of activities including city design, Celtic revival, theatre as spectacle, and much else. Geddes's base had been further up the Royal Mile, in the Outlook Tower, and he was an obvious mentor for those of us attempting to keep the Old Town alive as a cultural milieu. We went on to invoke Hugh MacDiarmid's 'binding the braids' as an image of unity-in-diversity; that poet's 'seamless garment' was anticipated by Geddes's call for a multiplicity of skills to work together, 'throwing athwart the warp of specialism, the flying shuttle of synthesis, so creating a solid fabric both of warp and woof'.

It grew on me – slowly, as it now seems – that the Demarco vision was strikingly similar in the nature of its origins and inspirations. For Patrick Geddes and the Poetry Library, read Joseph Beuys and the Demarco Gallery. Beuys (1921–1986) was a major force in 20th-century arts, especially in their relationship to the environment. A conceptual artist and 'social sculptor', he was one of the founders of the Green Party in his native Germany. Born in Kleve, which he described as an 'enclave' of ancient Celtic settlement, he showed early interest in biology and medicine. In his eventual opting for art, he did not so much abandon his scientific interests as incorporate them into his understanding of the raw materials of his art.

In 1970, Demarco visited Beuys in Düsseldorf and showed him images of Scotland. 'I see

the land of Macbeth', declared Beuys, and accepted his friend's invitation to come over. Later that year, Beuys either installed or performed his Celtic-oriented works at such wildly varied locations as Edinburgh College of Art (not so wild) and Rannoch Moor (rather more so). Two years later, Beuys was fired from his professorship at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. One maverick egged on the other: it was Beuys's example that convinced Demarco that human creativity was not to be contained within the conventional parameters guarded by gallery dealers and art college managers.

As the 1970s progressed, Demarco widened his operations beyond the visual arts *per se* to include theatre, summer schools, concerts, poetry readings and his so-called 'expeditions' – travel conceived not as touristic gawping but as creative process-on-the-move: everyone signing up was obliged to welcome the unforeseen, whether sailing on a galley from the Hebrides to the Cyclades, or engaged in clandestine dialogue with dissident artists in basements and attics anywhere between Poznan and Bucharest.

In his late teens, Demarco had been enthused by the international dimension of the Edinburgh Festival, and he was now demonstrating that not only could he bring the world to Edinburgh, he could bring Edinburgh to the world, freeing the city's cultural workers from their 'nest' while not detracting from the desirability of returning to that nest and its power to nurture. For his part, Joseph Beuys felt that he had a special responsibility, as a German (and ex-Luftwaffe pilot), to foreground and interlink the 'Celtic' and other peripheries of Europe and beyond; accordingly, he undertook major projects in Ireland and Poland as well as in Scotland. As for Demarco, he went on to encourage cultural dialogues not only between east and west, but also between north and south, claiming that his status as an Italo-Scot was symbolically appropriate for the latter.

During 1974, in the wake of his dismissal at Düsseldorf, Beuys co-founded (with the novelist Heinrich Böll) the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, the 'FIU'. Its manifesto calls for people in apparently unrelated fields to engage in lateral (latticed?) thinking and doing: 'Whereas the specialist's insulated point of view places the arts and other kinds of work in sharp opposition, it is in fact crucial that the structural, formal and thematic problems of the various work processes should be constantly compared with one another'. Patrick Geddes would surely have found this text to be enharmonic with his own utterances.

Like Geddes, Beuys believed passionately in the potential wholeness of the human being – an ideal arguably as 'Germanic' as it is 'Celtic', if one considers the legacy of Goethe and Rudolf Steiner, whom Beuys acknowledged as his forebears. Man fragmented, he maintained, was man controllable by the state and other authoritarian institutions, religious, cultural and pedagogic. Beuys was a lapsed Catholic: his friend Demarco, by contrast, retains a quite uncritical attitude to the Church. Certainly his regard for the sacramental origins of Romanian art would render the label 'iconoclast' inappropriate for Demarco; the rituals of arts bureaucracy, however, are another matter, and his importation of Beuysian practices (in alliance with George Wyllie) has encouraged a carnival

irreverence towards the cultural control freaks. For all the fun, though, Demarco has made serious and sustained attempts to emulate the FIU by bringing together people from the humanities and the sciences, thereby challenging the mentality of 'you in your small corner, and I in mine'.

It was in Northern Ireland – a periphery only too familiar with man-fragmented – that Beuys found his image of integration, one that has seemed to me to be the counterpart of the Poetry Library's taste for latticing and weaving. There exists dramatic footage of Beuys striding across the Giant's Causeway, its interlocking hexagons so palpable a metaphor for the unity-in-diversity informing the FIU and its Demarco outposts.

The summer of 1999 found me in the latest of these, working on the printed books collection of the Demarco archive. The adrenaline flowed as I discovered a Polish exhibition catalogue here, an Estonian theatre programme there, not to mention some forgotten document of Scotland's own cultural wealth. Now and then, I would gaze from that dreary room on Calton Hill across to the roofs and gables of the Royal Mile, thinking ruefully of the Demarco phenomenon in his heyday. Had all the fine rhetoric come to this, a depressing dump stacked with riches that were rarely visited, if at all? Had the creative imagination shrunk to a nostalgia trip? Was the Demarco European Art Foundation (DEAF), as it was now grandly titled, living down to its own acronym?

Not necessarily so, if a new generation could be welcomed, even to its much reduced domain. In 1999, the exhibitions and theatre continued, even though the spaces had to be found elsewhere in the town. So, as in previous years, the volunteer brigade of 20-somethings mucked in, freed from the exigencies of degree shows, high on the anarchic buzz. Their sketchbooks filled with designs for an exhibition based on the central European dialogues, they tapped out programme notes for the visiting troupes from Berlin and points east. Yes, by August they would become thoroughly pissed off by the broken promises and avoidable crises. They would learn that if art school bosses had all the structures and no vision, DEAF had all the vision and no structures.

However, it would be a formative experience missed by those of their peers who had heeded warnings to steer clear of Demarco and all his works. Lacking the inhibitory atmosphere of more sensible institutions, the Calton Hill chaos factory was conducive to the spontaneous epiphanies which are necessary if art is to be the result of discovery rather than of prescription. My role at DEAF included briefings, for the young helpers, on the theatre of Tadeusz Kantor – that great Polish-Jewish survivor whose influence on Demarco is matched only by that of Beuys. I was reluctant to offer uninterrupted monologues, but there was no need for such. Our sessions, quite unselfconsciously, became seminars with a difference: off-campus, unofficial, unacademic. The students would be living and recreating Kantor, not writing grade-destined essays on him. Suddenly I realised that, in effect, the Free International University had come alive again in Calton Hill. Yes, it was all on a much smaller scale than Beuys's legendary teach-ins; on the other hand, our encounters were not quite the narrowly focused conventicles of the slim-volume 'poetry' scene. Here was a

group of people, of varying skills, who would not otherwise have met and so communed. I felt privileged to be the agent of what Kantor, Beuys and Demarco had made possible.

The interdisciplinary wing of Demarco's *alma mater*, otherwise known as the Humanities Department of Edinburgh College of Art, was due to be axed at the end of July 2000. (By then Ricky, the new septuagenarian, would still be around – in his fashion.) I was a tutor in that department, and decided to take an opportunity while it was still available to me; accordingly, I was allowed to teach a third-year course on the arts of central Europe. Last January, I took my class on a study visit to Calton Hill. I had mixed feelings: for the students, their encounter could mean new beginnings; as for me, I had the sense of making some extended valedictory gesture. As we entered, it came to me that my melancholy was somewhat misplaced. Demarco was at his best and I could tell from the students' expressions that we had established vibrant lines of communication and continuity.

One of their number, Carolann Alexander, interviewed Demarco a couple of months later. Her transcript offers a useful summing-up of his career. He told her that his mission was to make Edinburgh part of the world parish, on speaking terms with the likes of Kraków and Belgrade; he could not be content that his native city be 'seen simply in relation to Inverness, Glasgow, London or any other part of Britain'. To me, that statement reveals Demarco as the archetypal wandering Scot, a northern Ulysses caught between the compulsion of travel and a yearning for the 'nest', for whom travelling 'hopefully [and homefully?] is a better thing than to arrive'. Demarco would appreciate that famous quote from R L Stevenson, whom he proudly invokes for the benefit of Scots and non-Scots alike.

His own text, *The Road to Meikle Seggie* (1978), is essential for an understanding of his concept of 'the artist as voyager', and is long overdue for reprinting. Illustrated with his line drawings of the Royal Mile, Arthur's Seat, and other stages of his personal pilgrimage in east central Scotland, it is typical of Demarco in its blend of accessibility and ambiguity. Meikle Seggie exists, literally, as a farmyard, a few miles north of Milnathort; Demarco discovered it after deciding not to attend a Mozart opera at nearby Ledlanet. At the time, he wanted 'an alternative to Art... I wanted a road to nowhere, one I could not find on any map'. So the road to Meikle Seggie became a metaphor for a nomadism which involved rather more than the search for yet another all-too-temporary base in the capital.

Much of the foregoing will mean little to many who, over the years, have succumbed briefly to the 'Ricky' personality cult, which he is adept at fostering. His real significance, one hopes, will outlast the groupies, the dahlings, the Edinburgh cosmopolis at its most brittle and bitchy. As with Hugh MacDiarmid – the focus of his 1988 conference-festival at Blackfriars Street – you have to accept Demarco's bombast as the price you pay for his lyricism. This European Scot has demolished many a Berlin-Wall-in-the-head, including my own. *Don Ricardo, cordiali saluti!*

# Found inside a book

Vivian Linacre

2003

The following three letters, which have never before seen the light of day, I discovered inside a book which I had bought from a second-hand bookshop. All are addressed to the great scholar and critic Sir Herbert Grierson (1866-1960), from whose library no doubt the book had originally come.

H J C Grierson, as he was known to generations of EngLit students, was a Shetlander, educated at Aberdeen and Oxford, becoming the first Professor of English at Aberdeen University, where he established the canon of Donne's poetry, before moving to Edinburgh University, where he occupied the chair of rhetoric and English literature until 1935, producing in 1921 his most famous work, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, co-editing the letters of Walter Scott (1932-37), writing his biography (1938), and co-editing *The Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*.

The first and last of them are from Edwin Muir (1887-1959), the poet, novelist, translator and critic, who was, coincidentally, an Orcadian. Beginning in 1930, he and his wife Willa published translations of Kafka's novels, until 1949 when he became director of the British Institute in Rome, thereafter warden of the further education college at Newbattle Abbey near Edinburgh (when I knew him while at Edinburgh University), and finally professor of poetry at Harvard University (1955-56). His *Collected Poems 1921-1958* were published posthumously in 1960.

The one between is from another Scottish literary giant of the early 20th century, John William Mackail (1859-1945), Oxford Professor of Poetry (1906), author of *The Life of William Morris* (1901, republished in *World's Classics* 1950), *Springs of Helicon – the progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton* (1909), and numerous works on Ancient Greek and Latin poetry.

## The First Letter

*From Muir on 15 September 1926 at La Veuille, St Tropez, Var, France:*

Dear Professor Grierson,

Thanks very much for your very kind and appreciative letter. I wished to reply to it at once, but every day I have found myself engrossed and trawled into the writing of my novel [*The Marionette* (1927)], so that my mind has been of little use for anything else. Now the novel is almost finished; I have got over the crisis which I have been working up to all the time, and I am taking a rest, before the small, concluding part is written. When the novel is

published I shall send it to you too, for it is in line with, and takes up in a different way, my poetry.

I can only thank you sincerely for your appreciation of *The Chorus* [*The Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926)], but I should like to take up one or two of the points you make. I do see, on reflection, that some of the passages are obscure, that in places my vision has not been made sufficiently conscious and clear. What I strove for all the time was clarity and concreteness of imagery, which, I feel, are essential in the kind of poetry I write; but I was concerned with really great and, I think, ultimately insoluble issues, and I have not succeeded with the completeness which I desired. As for my intention, it was to give a mystical statement of life, without drawing any conclusion. *The Poet*, coming in after *The Beggar*, *The Idiot* and *The Harlot*, was intended to give some sense of the glory of this world; a sense, also, which certain poets have had, that sometimes we see in this world aspects which seem to take us beyond it and give us a feeling of eternity. In *The Mystic*, this feeling is clearer; the working of the forces of the world is seen like the working of a mechanism, good and evil, matter and motion, etc; but then comes, with the verse beginning,

*But oh those clear angelic hosts*

a sense of presences beyond this process, for whose existence one can only feel thanksgiving. I have never worked this out before; I only feel the power as I wrote it, perhaps I should have seen its implications more strongly as well; but this is what I meant. As against this feeling of eternity, this mystical feeling about things which I know will perish, I had to set the destiny of the world as experience and science tell me that it is. The fact of mortality, the pathos of Time, the disappearance of civilisations and finally of the world itself; without these the mystical view of the world, in which my own conviction is really expressed, would remain in the air, and would be a mere sentimentality.

I do certainly believe that in a profound sense the life we see, and if they could be seen complete after they were ended, our own lives, are illusion; but I believe too, that behind that illusion there is something immense, which in moments we half-comprehend, but which we can never completely comprehend. To myself, my poetry is a poetry of those moments of half-comprehension, and I think this is what makes it sometimes obscure. But I am altogether against the modern poetry of 'vanities of vanities', such as *The Waste Land*, though I feel a sympathy with Eliot's attempt to face the world without optimism. There must be something which links my poetry with his, nevertheless, seeing that we are of the same generation, and this resemblance, if it exists, is an involuntary one and, I feel, if it could be defined, would be an interesting one.

The last chorus is obscure, I see now. But I did not mean to convey in the first verse that every one on the earth had perished.



*Into perpetual evening they are led,  
The earth, her multitudes and all her dead.*

I meant by that, and I condensed my meaning perhaps too much, that the Earth, all those lived on it, and all who had ever lived, all the generations who had passed, were now entering on their last phase. This I think makes the sequence more comprehensible, though not perfectly so.

I hope I have not bored you with this long letter, all about my own work. I don't put it forward as a defence of the faults of the poem, but purely as an explanation which, if the poem had been better, would not have been needed. But also, I cannot help feeling that one reason why it is not so immediately comprehensible, coming from a writer of my generation, is that behind it is a belief in what I can only call, inadequately, the immortality of the soul. I don't know anybody else of my own age, writing at present, who has that belief, and to find it implied in a poem written in the modern spirit is therefore disconcerting. I could not define this belief, but I hold it more strongly than any other belief I have. It has nothing to do with the notion of Heaven or Hell, as it would have had in another generation, and I would not mention it now, if it were not that it might help to make my poem still more comprehensible.

Thanks once more for your generous appreciation. I hope your holiday has been enjoyable and done you good. We are going from here to Menton for the winter, but after that I dearly want to see the North again. If you should write to me again in more than a fortnight, my address will be Villa Soleil, Rue Pietra Scripta, Menton.

With kind regards  
Yours sincerely  
Edwin Muir

### **The Second Letter**

*From Mackail on 3 November 1935 at 6 Pembroke Gardens, Kensington, London:*

Dear Grierson,

I have read your exposition of Henryson [Robert Henryson, died c1508, the 'Scottish Chaucerian'] with great interest and profit; you have half-converted me, at least to the extent of withdrawing what I said 30 years ago about 'the cheap sentiment' of *The Testament* [*The Testament of Cresseid*, which gives an alternative ending to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*]: you concede 'over-elaboration'. As to the 'perfect end' that H puts to the story, I would draw a distinction; it may be more perfect ethically than Chaucer's, but I can't feel that it is nearly so perfect artistically. However, there's room in the house of poets for both.

Of special value is what you say about the shattering break-up of the Reformation and the resulting ignorance or indifference of the mass of the nation to their own history throughout the Middle Ages. That is being slowly remedied; I have just been reading with very great pleasure Miss Mure Mackenzie's *Rise of the Stewarts* [actually *The Rising of the Stewarts* (1935), followed by *The Passing of the Stewarts* (1937)]; I hope it is finding a large public. [Agnes Mure Mackenzie (1891-1955) – she affected 'Mure' in the place of 'Muriel' – was famous in her lifetime for *An Historical Survey of Scottish Literature to 1714* (1933) and numerous other Scottish historical and literary studies and novels, but is now almost forgotten.]

Congratulations on having got out another volume of 'Scott'.

It was very delightful having an hour with you; I hope that either in Edinburgh or here it may soon be repeated. Do you ever come down to London? (You will observe that as a mere piece of good manners I say 'down' not 'up'.)

Yours very truly

J W Mackail

### **The Third Letter**

*From Muir on 27 June 1944 at 8 Blantyre Terrace, Edinburgh*

Dear Grierson,

I was filled with very mixed feelings, too, while I listened to Kingsmill's lecture. [Hugh Kingsmill (1889-1949), born Hugh Kingsmill Lunn, second son of Sir Henry Lunn, the travel agent, was a prolific literary critic and biographer, producing lives (1932-38) of Matthew Arnold, Samuel Johnson, Frank Harris, Charles Dickens and D H Lawrence and achieving notoriety for *The Return of William Shakespeare* (1929) and *An Anthology of Invective and Abuse* (1930), but also now virtually forgotten.] It was quite inadequate on one score, I mean in giving any idea of Dickens' and Balzac's greatness. I had expected something quite different. There were one or two good points, I think: that Dickens had the child's view of the world and Balzac the youth's; but these points should have been the beginning of the argument, not a dead end. Kingsmill should have used the generalisations to throw light on the work of these writers, and he didn't at all. The point was a dead point. He seemed to me to postulate some ideal, quite mature writer as a foil to Dickens and Balzac; but I don't believe myself that any such writer ever existed, each writer, even the greatest, having his peculiar blemishes inextricably bound up with his peculiar virtues and his greatness. If Dickens' imagination was a child's imagination, it had the virtues of that imagination, which the ideal mature writer whom Kingsmill postulates could not have. I have just been thinking how easy it would be to make a comic figure out of Wordsworth, though he is one of our greatest poets.

The truth about Kingsmill, I think, is that he is a man with a certain acute comic talent, but very little more. He has a keen eye for weaknesses and absurdities (and I fancy the comic talent generally has this, along with other qualities which K seems to lack). The result is that he turns Dickens and Balzac into comic figures. When I met him first, about 25 years ago, he was much more generous-minded, a lover of Wordsworth, Blake and Traherne, though with shoots of malice; but not nearly so persistent as now. His sympathies have dried up, I'm afraid. It was absurd to say that Dickens did not care for the poor, quite outrageous, it seems to me. I couldn't help being entertained by some of the lecture, though the entertainment was ill-natured; but it was itself an absurd display, not worth serious attention, and truly exasperating. It came as a complete surprise to me.

With kind regards  
Yours sincerely  
Edwin Muir

# Funny man

Rikki Fulton in conversation with Kenneth Roy

2004

*We republished this 1989 interview with the legendary Scottish comedian Rikki Fulton when he died in January 2004. After its original appearance, Fulton wrote in The Scotsman that it was like no interview he had ever done before: 'I was astonished by what I revealed'.*

When I arrived at Josie's place, Francie was just leaving. 'I want you to be happy,' Josie was saying. Francie, who was carrying a shopping bag, didn't look happy. He rarely does.

For those readers unfamiliar with one of the great double acts of the Scottish variety stage, I should explain that Francie and Josie are Glasgow teddy boys also known as Jack Milroy and Rikki Fulton. William Hunter observed – in *Scottish Theatre* magazine, January 1970 – the essential nature of this comic phenomenon:

*Josie (Rikki Fulton), all sharp, quick, tense, likes the taste of big words in his mouth so long as he is allowed to get them wrong. Francie (Jack Milroy), his face sad and crumpled as an unmade bed, doesn't know any words, especially small ones, like work. How on earth did they team up? They are muckers, that's all, mates, friends. One at a time each would be unbearable. But they make sense by the pair like silly kippers, which they also are. They last better than fish, though, because their patter has a time-resistant batter around it to keep it fresh. But dated, yes: nothing much a man, or even a brace of them, can do about that. They have been pickled in their prime – the time of Elvis and DA hair cuts and thick-soled shoes...*

Twenty years on, the batter is as time-resistant as ever. When the silly kippers made a rare television appearance recently, most of Scotland watched admiringly. And the day I turned up on the doorstep, they were discussing their forthcoming season at the Glasgow King's. Before he was gone, Francie even managed a small, brave smile, possibly at the thought of the advance receipts.

Francie and Josie are pushing it a bit now. Rikki Fulton, the younger of the partners, has just passed his 65th birthday and calls himself a senior citizen. He lives with his second wife, Kate Matheson, in the sort of spacious, comfortable villa that he dreamt of as a child. Unlike Josie, he has come up in the world.

However, Josie would have felt quite at home in his creator's original habitat.

'You're a Glasgow man?'

'I'm an East Ender. Born in Appin Road, Dennistoun – you can't get a more Scottish

name for a street than that. Left there when I was three, and went posh. Up to the Riddrie corporation housing estate.'

'That was posh?'

'Oh, really quite up-market, then.'

'Tell me about Appin Road.'

'Grey tenements. I've a great affection for tenements. Nowadays they're just the most wonderful apartments you can buy. But Appin Road was rather different, because it was a room and kitchen. The curious thing is that, years later, I could remember every detail of the kitchen almost to the last ornament. I was brought into the world in that room – in the kitchen bed – the recess.'

'What do you remember about your mother?'

'I remember her very clearly, although she's been dead a long time. Four feet eleven and a half inches in her shoes. Tiny wee soul. I remember her in the kitchen, standing on the bed – actually on the bed – in a red dressing gown. Quite distraught, really in a very bad way. I think I was responsible for her nervous breakdown.'

'You were a bad baby?'

'No. But I was born when my mother was 40. Highly significant! Here she was, a middle-aged lady, embarrassed at having produced another child and convinced that people were looking at her strangely and whispering to each other. Classic psychosis. She was of a particular generation who did not recognise the existence of the sexual act. My mother never used the word sex. She used the word Men with a capital M. "I don't like men," she would say. We all knew what she meant. And yet she had the greatest sense of humour.'

'She enjoyed a joke?'

'Loved jokes, especially when they were sightly risqué.'

Mr Fulton thought about that, and corrected himself.

'Maybe slightly vulgar would be a better definition.'

'What's the difference?'

'Possibly sexual jokes might come under the heading of risqué. Vulgar jokes have to do with bodily functions. But she, of course, never quite grasped their meaning. The whole family would be laughing uproariously, while my mother was still struggling with the tag. Then, later, there would be a screech from her room and hysterical laughter...'

'The penny had finally dropped?'

'And the whole family would go to my mother's room, and we would enjoy the joke all over again.'

'What does that tell you about the nature of comedy?'

'It underscores the maxim that a joke is not a joke until an audience has laughed at it!'

'It's a question of timing?'

'Basically, yes. But personality is also incredibly important. One of the essential things about making people laugh is that, first of all, you've got to make them like you. If they don't like you, they won't laugh. That's why it's often very difficult for two men to make

their living as a double act and why so many of the great double acts end up at loggerheads. Because there are two of them out there, fighting for the one love – the one adulation.'

This sad but perceptive comment set Mr Fulton speculating about the personal instability of comedians and the curious fact that so many have what he called 'difficulties over relationships'. He reeled off the names of half a dozen celebrated comics with unhappy private lives, and had difficulty naming one (apart from his own partner, Jack Milroy) who has a stable marriage. He finally selected Jimmy Tarbuck.

'Why is this?'

'It's got something to do with what you have to do when you're faced with a career in comedy, when you make your living putting your emotions on the line.'

'It's true, then, that comics are very insecure people? That comedy is a form of self-defence?'

'It certainly was in my case. I was the youngest of three boys – by a long way. Within the family, I was referred to as "the baby", "the kid", or "him". I came into a family that was established, where there was an eight-year-old and a 14-year-old, and a mum and dad who obviously regarded themselves as having finished with that part of their lives. I was an outsider – an interloper. I was 32 before I became absolutely convinced that I was a blood relative of these people.'

'Truly?'

'Oh, I was quite convinced I'd been discovered on a doorstep.'

'What happened when you were 32?'

'I suppose I'd matured as much as I was going to, and had thought it through. And facially, I was beginning to resemble my elder brother.'

It occurred to me that throughout a long, detailed and vivid recollection of his early life, Rikki Fulton had not once mentioned his father. When I expressed some surprise about this, he invited me to draw the obvious conclusion.

'My father,' he said, 'was the quietest man I've ever known in my life. He never spoke to me, except to tell me to stop playing the piano, and that in somewhat colourful terms'.

'What did he do?'

'He was in Singer's. A very clever locksmith. He could open any door. Then he became a shopkeeper.'

'It was a typical Glasgow family, then?'

'Yes, a matriarchal society. She was the ruler. She made the decisions. It was my mother who took me to the hospital when I was near death – I had a tubercular gland which just about did for me. My mother who went up to the school and told the teachers to lay off her child.'

'You didn't get on well at school?'

'If only I'd had the thirst for knowledge that I gained after leaving school, if only I'd had the audacity – the bottle – to say, "Excuse me, sir, I don't understand that, would you be good enough to explain that again?," I think I would have got on a lot better. English I sailed through. And I once got 100% for art.'

At the start of our meeting, Kate Fulton had asked hospitably when it might be suitable to bring tea. After an hour, perhaps? Yes, an hour sounded fine. By then, I judged, we would be nearing the end of the interview – via her husband's first professional engagement with the BBC in Glasgow, his many pantomimes, his *Five Past Eight* seasons, his *Scotch and Wry* television series, his film appearances, his recollection of people and events.

The charming Kate arrived on cue with a glorious afternoon tea served from a tiered cake stand. But our interview had not gone according to plan. We had still not progressed from Mr Fulton's fascinating childhood. We were spiritually stuck in Appin Road.

'When did you leave school?'

'When I was 15. I got a job in a builder's merchant's office at 134 St Vincent Street. A one-man business with a double office and a name on the door. I've often dreamt about that office. Always with the name on the door. Some special attachment. Something to do with identity. It seemed to say what you are... who you are...'

'Is that still important to you?'

'Yes. I adore letterheads, for example. I'm a stationery freak.'

Mr Fulton's own letterhead has his address in ornate lettering across the full length of a finely woven A-4 sheet.

'You have a problem about your identity,' I suggested obviously.

'I do?'

He sounded surprised and intrigued, though not displeased. We had with some relish already devoured the more mouth-watering contents of the lowest tier of the cakestand, and were now eyeing the various dainties above.

I persisted: 'Well, yes. Lonely child. Brothers much older than yourself, uncommunicative father, dominant mother...'

'I think that's right,' he said, warming to the theme. 'But what I discovered was that when I made the family laugh, I felt secure. That was fine. But when they were not laughing, I was quite insecure. And really rather afraid.'

'And that remained true, did it – when you became a comedian?'

'It's a long, long time since I faced a hostile audience of any kind. But I did once have difficulty getting across to an audience – I think because of my own personal circumstances at the time. They were not laughing. What they were saying to me was, "We don't like you".'

'You were unhappy then?'

'Well, my first marriage was up the spout. Yes, a difficult time.'

'We're jumping ahead. What happened after the builders' merchants with the name on the door?'

'I became a customs clerk. Loved that, except it was a stressful situation in one way. If you made a mistake, it was almost considered to be criminal – and they fined you! There was a woman called Miss Flynn. She sat behind an old-fashioned high desk. Probably the ugliest woman I ever saw in my life. Very red face, a great beak, glasses, hair scraped back. And next to her, this man – equally unpleasant, Germanic looking, with as pale a face as

hers was red. I think they were having a sort of... well, I'm going to use the word affair. But that has the wrong connotations.'

'Miss Flynn and you didn't get on?'

'She was like a really awful headmistress. She would rant and rave. "Stupid boy!" She would cry. It was hands behind the back time. Literally.'

The appalling Miss Flynn was not the only source of adolescent dread. When Chamberlain returned from Munich with his meaningless bit of paper, at least one inhabitant of the Riddrie corporation housing estate felt a tingle of fear.

'When the war started, it seemed that everybody I knew was going into Fighter Command, and making noises like aeroplanes. I must be honest, I couldn't understand that. I just didn't want to know about war. There was nothing heroic about me at all. Suddenly, a wee girl I fancied very much – all the girls were absolutely enthralled at the thought of these boys going to fight for king and country – this wee girl said to me, "What are you going to do?" I felt I couldn't say, "I'm not going to go. I'm a conscientious objector". Well, I don't suppose I was anyhow. With me, it was just cowardice.'

'So what did you say to her?'

'Out came this voice with an explanation I'd never heard before. I was going to join the Navy. "Why?" she said. "Well," I said, "I'm in a shipping office, and I know all about shipping". Strangest reason!'

He promptly volunteered, and joined up on his 18th birthday. His experiences in the Navy, though harrowing, proved rewarding in later life. They provided the inspiration for one of the richest themes in his work: the caricature of the Scottish working-class lad hopelessly aping southern manners.

'I remember when I was commissioned. The first question they asked was what your father did. Then education. On guard duty one night, the guy next to me suddenly wanted to know what school I'd been to. "Whitehill," I said – deliberately disguising the fact that it was just a Glasgow secondary. I became terribly conscious of background – social standing. In some cases, they even taught you how to use a knife and fork. Sent you away to learn manners!'

But there was nothing in the school of Navy etiquette to prepare him for the moment when his ship was torpedoed. He spent five hours in the waters of North America before he was picked up. He saw his skipper dead on the deck.

'It wasn't the sight of his body that upset me, but the fact I'd seen his wife with him just a few weeks before. She must have boarded at Greenock or somewhere. That's what I find so obscene about death. It's not the dying or the being dead. It's the wrenching apart...'

'Are you a religious man?'

'A couple of years ago, I went into hospital for a simple operation and the doctors found something they didn't know was there – this tumour. I could have bled to death on the operating table. Both Katy and I were atheists, I suppose, but because of what happened to me, we both took another look at it. I saw an opportunity perhaps to return to a faith, and be happier for it.'



'Where did that lead you?'

'Katy's taken it a good deal further. But then she's a very special lady. She's how I see the Christian – goes out of her way to help people, feels for them, cares for them in a way that frankly I don't. We became members of the church, and I found I liked going to church. Enjoyed it. Liked being with people who believed. And I read and read all sorts of books, and talked to some very interesting people. Oh, the debate is wonderful. I adore the debate.'

'But you haven't reached a conclusion?'

'Yes, I have.'

'What is it?'

'I just can't accept. Or – if there is an alternative – that it's just too difficult. And the Church of Scotland message is pretty downward-looking, I think.'

'In what sense?'

'Well,' he said regretfully, 'you don't really get a sense of joy and good news, do you?'

At which I thought inevitably of the annual Hogmanay ritual on our television screens: of the doom-laden Scottish minister created by Mr Fulton, who hilariously fills the fag end of the year with his deeply lugubrious reflections on Life.

'Ah,' I announced triumphantly. 'You're talking about the Reverend I M Jolly!'

But Rikki Fulton wasn't laughing.

# The man who kissed the Primavera

Magnus Linklater

2006

It is not often you get the opportunity to stand in front of a great painting and know that a little bit of your DNA clings to the canvas. When that genetic trace is the result of a kiss, then what you have is more than a story, it is a romance.

This summer, my wife and I made a pilgrimage to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and headed for the room which houses the masterpieces of the 15th century. In the middle of it, surrounded as always by a reverential crowd, was a picture that is the crowning achievement of the Renaissance – Botticelli's *Primavera*. It is a strange and elaborate painting, celebrating the arrival of spring and the banishment of winter. A half-clad god – Mercury, possibly – stands on the left, his arm raised in salute or warning; three graces, clad in diaphanous silk, dance together, while Cupid hovers above them; the principal figure in the centre is a pregnant woman on the right of the canvas who captures our attention. This is spring, the Primavera herself, stepping barefoot through the trees, a shimmering gown, decorated with flowers, clinging to her curves. Around her bare neck is a garland. Gathering up the folds of her dress as she walks, she seems to bear all the promise of a new season. But it is her face that captivates. It is the only one that looks straight out at us, and it has an expression that is hard to define, half-longing, half-teasing, full of anticipation. It is a face of singular beauty.

Sixty-one years ago, my father, Eric Linklater, kissed the *Primavera* on the lips. Exactly how and exactly where this happened, I shall explain. But as I gazed up at her this summer, I thought I caught a glance of shared recollection in her face, and I remembered what my father had written at the time in his book, *The Art of Adventure*: 'Some day I shall see you again, aloft and remote on your proper wall in the Uffizi, and while with a decently hidden condescension I listen to the remarks of my fellow tourists, I shall regard you with a certain intimacy; with a lonely, proud, and wistful memory'.

The story goes back to July 1944, and the steady advance of the Eighth Army north through Italy. The Germans have been holding up the British and American forces at every point – from the beaches of Anzio to the heights of Monte Cassino, and now they are fighting in the streets of Florence, where all the bridges over the Arno, except for the Ponte Vecchio, have been blown up.

My father is having the time of his life. He is 45, a major in the Royal Engineers, and he is on assignment for the War Office, where his boss is Sir Walter Elliot, former Secretary of State for Scotland, and a man with a keen eye for a good writer. Elliott has commissioned my father to write the official history of the Eighth Army campaign, and since this has involved lengthy conversations with various generals, including the Eighth Army's

commander, General Alexander, for whom he has acquired a great liking, he has gathered much valuable material. But he has an eye for rather more than the monotony of company dispositions and troop manoeuvres, and he has hitched a lift with the colourful BBC reporter, Wynford Vaughan Thomas, to try and get as close to the retreating Germans as he can. Overtaking the crawling tanks and tank-transporters of the British Army in their dusty jeep, they head north from Siena and, on July 30, arrive at a 16th-century Tuscan castle, 30 miles outside Florence. They are about 2,000 yards from the Germans' forward position.

The building in which they found themselves was the Castello di Montegufoni, the property of Sir Osbert Sitwell, novelist, landowner, and centre of a literary set that included his celebrated sister Edith, T S Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and D H Lawrence. For now, however, the Sitwells had gone, and the Castello had become the headquarters of the Mahratta Light Infantry, an Indian battalion that had occupied the castle in the wake of the Germans who had just pulled out.

The battalion's commanding officer was asleep, so my father and Vaughan Thomas took a stroll around the castle. In one courtyard, they noticed, to their surprise, three or four pictures popped up against a wall. They seemed old, with dark paint on wooden panels and some tarnished gold. There was a virgin and child, a painted crucifix, but whether they were genuine or copies was hard to say. Then, in a room off the courtyard, they found more pictures, some in wooden cases, others in brown paper, or simply removed from their frames and leaning against the walls. Suddenly, Vaughan Thomas, who had been exploring deeper into the castle recesses, came rushing back. 'The whole house is full of pictures,' he said, 'and some of the cases are labelled. They've come from the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace!' My father followed him back. There, stacked against the wall, were pictures in their hundreds, and some they began to recognise. 'But that must be...' And 'Do you think it is...' they said to each other. Then, pointing to a magnificent battle scene, Vaughan Thomas shouted: 'Uccello!' and in the same instant my father spotted a tragic Madonna in dark robe and golden background. 'Giotto!' he cried out.

My father takes up the story: Now Vaughan Thomas is a Welshman, more volatile than I, quicker off the mark, swifter in movement, and while I remained, in a pleasant stupefaction, before the gaunt virgin and the broad-bottomed cavalry, he was off in search of other treasures... a helpful Italian took down the shutters from the far end and let in more light. Then I heard a sudden clamour of voices, a yell of shrill delight, and Vaughan Thomas shouting 'Botticelli!' as if he were a fox-hunter on a hill. I ran to see what they had found, and came to a halt before the Primavera.

'I do not believe that Stout Corte, when he first saw the Pacific, stood silent on a peak in Darien. I believe he shouted in wordless joy, and his men with waving arms made about him a chorus of babbling congratulation. We, before the Primavera, were certainly not mute...'

At this point, a little man in grey tweed knickerbockers suit appeared. This was Professor Cesare Fasola of the Uffizi Gallery, and this was the first time he had managed to see his

beloved pictures since the Germans had left. He explained that they had been taken from the Uffizi, the Pitti palace, the Accademia, and other collections, in case of bombardment. Some had gone to neighbouring castles, but the cream of the collection had come to Montegufoni. Luckily, so far as he could see, they had survived intact.

My father and Vaughan Thomas went to rouse the commanding officer, Colonel Leeming, and explained to him the value of the pictures and the importance of protecting them. He understood at once, and placed sentries on the doors, while my father and Vaughan Thomas drove to the headquarters of the Indian Division to reinforce the message.

Next morning they returned. My father, I have always known, was a romantic at heart. While Vaughan Thomas was excited by the scoop, and had spent the previous evening filling a story on their momentous discovery for the BBC, my father was moved by something deeper. He slipped away and went back to the big room where Botticelli's masterpiece stood. 'I was alone with his enchanting ladies, and standing tiptoe I was tall enough. I kissed the pregnant Venus, the Flowery Girl, and the loveliest of the Graces: her on the right. I was tempted to salute them all, but feared to be caught in vulgar promiscuity...'

The Flowery Girl – the Primavera – was the one he always talked about, and it was she we had really come to see. But in order to get to the heart of the story, we felt we had to go back to Montegufoni itself, and here we discovered rather more than my father had ever told us, or perhaps had ever known.

Twenty-seven years after the war, in 1972, the Sitwell family sold Montegufoni, and at that point a building that had been caught up in Florentine history for close on 700 years might well have floundered. It is a massive place, large enough for more than 600 refugees to shelter there during the war. Its walls and ceilings are decorated with frescoes and mouldings, its chapel is home to priceless reliquaries, its gardens were laid out by a cardinal. Maintaining it would be a drain on even the richest purse. But it had the good fortune to acquire new owners, the Posarelli family, builders from Florence, who understood the importance of conserving it, but equally saw its potential for tourists. Working with the Monuments and Fine Arts Office, Sergio Posarelli and his sons converted it into holiday apartments while maintaining all the castle's original features.

Today, you may stay at Montegufoni in conditions which, while not luxurious, are certainly more comfortable than those in which the officers of the Mahratta Light Infantry were housed. And you will sleep beneath a frescoed ceiling and gilded plasterwork. We went there on the recommendation of a Sitwell – Susanna, the widow of Francis, Osbert's son – who told us about Montegufoni, but who also presented us with a document, about which we had known nothing. It was a photocopy of the Sitwell visitors' book, and it contained the names of the glittering visitors who came to stay at Montegufoni in the 1920s and 1930s. There were royalty, Princess Alice of Greece and the young Prince Philip; literary figures like D H Lawrence and Baroness Orczy; aristocrats of a previous vintage, like Sybil Colefax and 'Fruity' Metcalfe; and the cream of Florentine society. But it was the

inscription on the first page that caught my eye: 'Officers present serving with the 1st Bn 5th Mahratta L.I. on 30th July 1944, upon which day this book, the property of the late Sir George Sitwell, was presented as a trophy to the Bn by Major Eric Linklater R.E. – Castle of Montegufoni, Florence'. My father had taken it upon himself to acquire the book as a spoil of war and had presented it to the Indians.

Quite how this was viewed by the Sitwells themselves was to emerge later. But Susanna told us that, in the course of a visit to Bombay, she had been entertained in the officers' mess of the battalion in their hill station above Bombay, and was told that the visitors' book was regarded by them as one of their most treasured possessions. At that point I realised, first, that we must visit Montegufoni for ourselves, and second that I should at the very least take a photocopy of the visitors' book, given to us by Susanna, back to the castello to present it to the Posarellis.

We went in September this year. Montegufoni is a majestic castle close by the village of Baccaiano, set on a hill above the Via Volterrana, the road which runs into Florence from Livorno on the west coast, and overlooking a valley of olive trees and tall cypresses. It can sleep upwards of 100 people in 30 apartments, of which the most magnificent is the 'galleria', which boasts a vast, frescoed drawing room, paintings, mouldings and chandeliers. We were given 'Il Giardino', a delightful one-bedroomed apartment with high vaulted rooms, overlooking the cardinal's garden. Cosimo Posarelli, whose father, Sergio, first acquired the castle, greeted us warmly, accepted with great excitement the gift of the photocopy and an extract from *The Art of Adventure*, and listened intently as I explained my father's war-time role. Then he took us down to the rooms where the Primavera and other treasures had been stored.

It was, for me, a moment of high drama. This, after all, was a place which had loomed large in the story we had heard so often as children. We had often pictured the scene as my father and Vaughan Thomas pulled back those lofty pictures from the walls and began to identify them. The reality did not disappoint. There, in room after room, were the great wine vats which Sir George Sitwell, Osbert's father, who purchased the castle in 1910, had installed. Deeper down the stairs were several cavernous rooms, with shelves of ancient round-bottomed bottles, the kind that would have been used in the 18th century, some of them still holding ink-dark wine. I asked Cosimo whether they had ever tried tasting it. 'Undrinkable, alas,' he said. Beyond the wine shelves there were other rooms with empty walls, and it was here that the great pictures had been stored. I tried to imagine my father creeping down here to kiss the Primavera. I tried, and I succeeded, for the place was full of history, redolent of the past.

Cosimo told us that there was a vast network of underground cellars and passages, built deep beneath the castle, leading to the hill behind it, providing the castle's water supply. They had been closed off after a small boy became lost in this subterranean maze. His body had never been found. This struck a chill into us, as did one small and sinister room, pock-marked with what looked like bullet-holes – a German execution chamber, perhaps.

It was after we had emerged and talked about the German occupation of the castle that we learned more about what had happened during the war – and what emerged was how close these priceless works of art had come to being destroyed. Conditioned as we are to peacetime, we somehow assume that any occupying force, however barbaric, would recognise and immediately respect a masterpiece as lovely and priceless as a Botticelli. In war, however, a soldier's eye is on other things, such as his own survival, and a piece of painted canvas may only be of interest as booty, as firewood, or just an inconvenience.

Montegufoni's treasures, 261 of them, had been transported from Florence in November 1942. They included the Botticelli, *Uccello's Battle of San Romano*, Cimabue's *Enthroned Virgin with angels and prophets*, the Uffizi's most precious *Madonnas*, by Giotto and Raphael, and the fabulous tondo by Ghirlandaio portraying the *Adoration of the Magi*. The transportation took a week, and was carefully supervised by the Uffizi's leading experts. As war came closer, Montegufoni was used by almost 600 refugees from the surrounding areas, some of whom slept next to the pictures. The castle and its contents were looked after by Sir George Sitwell's right-hand man, Guido Masti, who was to become the hero of Montegufoni. Described as 'the real Lord of the Castle', he supervised the refugees, liaised with the art experts, and ensured that the pictures remained in pristine state.

Guido's greatest challenge came in the spring of 1944, when an SS division stopped off at the castle and, on the orders of their officer, carried out a rapid inspection. Guido's grandson, Andrea, who has written the history of Montegufoni, takes up the tale: 'My grandfather, who had immediately made himself available to the undesirable visitors, was told to clear everything out of the rooms, as they needed that space for their lodgings. The officer also added in a tyrannical tone that if they were in a hurry, he would lend a few of his men to help the farm hands carry all the useless paintings into their inner courtyard of the building to be burnt. However, my grandfather, who was a full-blooded type, not lacking in a good dose of courage and rashness, opposed these orders, explaining in a loud voice and the same tone as the Nazi's, that the "useless" paintings represented a heritage of considerable artistic value and therefore belonged to the whole world, as well as to the "Great Germany". Woe betide anyone who touched them!'

It was touch and go. Guido had, in his possession, a written order from Field Marshal Kesselring forbidding the use of the castle for military purposes, but, with Italy collapsing, Kesselring's star had fallen, and the order was brushed aside. Guido immediately changed tack and took it upon himself to transfer the refugees out of the ground floor rooms, thus placing them at the Germans' disposition, and leaving the rooms with the pictures untouched. He then ushered the German soldiers out of the atrium, where this discussion was taking place, and took them into the next-door dining-room, where he proceeded to uncork several bottles of the excellent local Chianti. Almost against his will, the SS officer found himself accepting the situation. Guido had saved the day.

He was not, however, able to protect the great Ghirlandaio tondo, which struck the German officers as an excellent dining table. He watched in horror as they spilt their wine

on it, and at one stage stuck a knife through it. But it survived, and no-one inspecting it today in the Uffizi – as we did – could detect the faintest flaw in its immaculate surface.

The danger was not quite over. On 23 July, as the front line came ever closer to Montegufoni, the Germans received orders to leave with their tanks, and next day a new lot turned up, this time a heavy artillery division, which, if it had opened up, would have attracted allied fire, and possibly brought about the destruction of the castle. The Germans forced the castle's inhabitants, including Guido, to dig holes for their cannon on the hill to the north of the castle. Guido escaped the digging party and crept back to the castle to keep an eye on its contents. The Germans searched for him in vain, at one stage shining a torch into the room where he was hiding beneath a bed where some of the refugee children were sleeping.

Next day, however, 25 July, the artillery pulled out, and though another German company appeared outside the castle, and a running battle with partisans took place within sight of its walls, the allies now had the upper hand. The next troops to drive up to the great front door of Montegufoni were a company of New Zealanders, who were welcomed with loud cheers. They were succeeded by the Mahratta Light Infantry, and, on 30 July by my father.

That, in a sense, brings my father's story of Montegufoni full circle. But there was one more twist. On our return to Edinburgh, we had a visit from Susanna Sitwell, who brought with her friends who told us that one of the Indian officers who had been at Montegufoni when my father arrived was alive and well and living in Bombay. Thus it was that I found myself in contact with General Eustace D'Souza, now in his 80s, and sometime historian of the Mahratta Light Infantry.

'Dear Magnus,' he wrote, 'I am pulling age by addressing you by your first name because I had the pleasure of meeting your late father the noted Eric Linklater, at Castel di Montegufoni in July 1944.' He went on to give me his version of the painting he referred to as 'the Botticelli Venus':

*After a very hard fight against the retreating Germans, our battalion reached the South Bank of the Arno. We were then given a short break. While looking for a suitable place to locate our battalion HQ, we came across the Sitwell property. So we decided to bed down there after locating a fairly comfortable room for our Old Man Lt Col DWH Leeming, DSO. I was then ordered to check the sentries which I did. As I approached one of them I heard him giggling and asked him what was so funny. He turned all the colours of red and led me down to the basement where we saw Venus in all her undraped glory in one of the rooms with all these art treasures stacked there. The Old Man was informed and a guard placed on the room.*

*We then met an Old Professor who told us that these were from the Uffizi Gallery and had been stored here by the Germans but he decided to stick his neck out to keep an eye on them. It was then that we learnt that the Germans had also occupied this residence; some of the Jerries had even scrubbed their signatures in the Sitwell Visitors' Book. Once the news was*

*flashed over the wire services, your Father and party landed up and could not believe what they saw. He thanked the Colonel profusely for placing a guard to protect these priceless treasures. It is more than likely that the plan was to move these pieces to Germany. Wynford Vaughan Thomas arrived later and wrote a piece about it that I have reproduced in the History of the 1st Bn written by me in 1993. This whole historic incident has been recorded for posterity in that History and copies of this, A Saga of Service: The History of the 1st Battalion The Mahratta Light Infantry: 1786 to 1993, are available at the Imperial War and National Army Museums in London, the RMA Sandhurst and the School of Infantry Warminster; in fact in many other parts of the world including West Point, Italy and even Japan and China. What is noteworthy is that 'my' version of this incident in this History has never ever been challenged by even those ex British Officers who were present then.*

*As a token of his appreciation your father presented the Sitwell family's visitors' book to the battalion, and his handwritten inscription is still identifiable. Every 9 April on the occasion of the anniversary of the Battle of the Senio River where we won our First Victoria Cross, all Officers present in the Unit sign it. I last signed it this year when I attended the Senio Day Celebrations in Bangalore. The Book is kept in a special casket in the Officers Mess. But that is not all. Your late father even suggested that when the Venus was restored to the Uffizi Gallery in Firenze, that room should be named the Mahratta Room. Unfortunately, there was none then to follow up this proposal to its logical conclusion.*

*A few years ago one of the relatives of the Sitwell family who learnt that this book was with the 1st Battalion, demanded its return on the plea that it was the rightful property of the family. The matter was referred to me as the Colonel of the Regiment and unofficial historian of the Regiment. I flatly refused pointing out that it was a legitimate war trophy presented by none other than Eric Linklater and there was an inscription in his own hand to this effect in the book. During one of my annual visits to London, a meeting was arranged at the country manor owned by the family. I took the precaution of Xeroxing the relevant pages and so off I went. I was well received and it enabled me to explain why it could not be returned. I then presented the Xerox copy of the relevant pages and there the matter was amicably settled.*

My father, who loved India and generals with equal enthusiasm, would have been delighted that his story has been rounded off by an Indian general who speaks and writes like a true pukka British officer, even if his version differs slightly. But for me, it finds its proper ending elsewhere: in the galleries of the Uffizi, and the wistful smile on the face of the Primavera.



# Iain Cuthbertson stole my dad

Liz Taylor

2009

News of the death of actor Iain Cuthbertson made me start searching the internet for pictures of him as Charlie Endell in the series *Budgie* which made him a national name.

My link with *Budgie* is very personal because I believe that Cuthbertson based his wonderful characterisation of Endell, a Glasgow crook, on my father Archie Pennie. Not everyone, I suppose, would be happy to claim Charlie as a portrait of their parent, but it delights me and I know it would have delighted Archie too for he often said 'It doesn't matter what people call you as long as they're talking about you'.

I first came across Iain Cuthbertson at Aberdeen University in the 1950s where I used to see him in the quad or the library but he was studying a different subject and was a couple of years ahead of me and we were never friends, though we knew each other. In fact, he intimidated me for he was not only very tall but very lordly.

To my surprise, a few years later I spotted him sitting in the cocktail bar of my father's pub, the Berkeley in Lothian Road, Edinburgh. He was alone, minding his own business it seemed, and, still intimidated, I did not speak to him.

Several times after that he showed up in the bar and I could see that he was watching my father who was a very flamboyant character. When *Budgie* appeared in 1971, I realised for certain what had brought Iain Cuthbertson into the Berkeley. He'd been storing up Archie's behaviour and mannerisms in case they could be useful some time in the future, as indeed they proved to be.

Charlie's cynicism and grandiose ways were Archie's too. Though we never had a 'Roller', Archie shared Charlie's weakness for flashy cars and natty clothes, preferring double breasted suits which he wore with bow ties – preferably red – and horn-rimmed spectacles.

Like Charlie, he was totally indifferent to others' opinion of him and cynical about their motives – 'every man has his price' was another of his maxims and I used to long for him to be proved wrong, but he never was. A queue, any queue, was a challenge to him and he always strode to the top, handing out five pound notes like bus tickets – and always getting in first. It was hell following in his wake.

He presided over the Berkeley like an emperor, and was not above taking an instant dislike to some innocent customer and chucking him out without explanation. Some daring risk-takers patronised the pub to see how long they could escape his wrath. They usually ended up being frog-marched onto the pavement because although he was not as tall as Cuthbertson, Archie was square-built and fearless.

He was a man of contradictions – an amoral moralist, a cynical sentimentalist, a hard-edged soft touch. Before he bought his Edinburgh pub, he owned a hotel in a small Border

town and I have been told that he always handed out sixpences to children from certain poor families whenever he met them on the street. His family knew nothing of this distribution of largesse which was remembered by the recipients for years afterwards.

Though in *Budgie* Charlie was shown as being against the law in all his dealings, Archie allied himself with the police and had his own 'protection' from them. No crooks demanding protection money ever got a foot over his door for he cultivated good relations with the Edinburgh force. Every working night he sent a carton of cigarettes up to the police box on the corner opposite the Usher Hall, and that was only the beginning of a sliding scale of sweeteners.

When he went to the races – as he did very frequently – he was driven by an off-duty speed cop who also taught me to drive and insisted that I learn how to get the car up to 100 mph on the Maybury Road. Archie was a terrible driver who believed that any speed limit was for lesser people, and that white lines were painted down the middle of the road so he could drive with his wheels on both sides of it. When stopped by a policeman who did not know him, he would roll down his window and announce, 'I was driving a car when you were in your cradle, son'. Getting a ticket did not bother him because he knew he could have it stopped.

Like Charlie, he thought that certain laws were only to be observed by lesser mortals and, like Al Capone, he had a particular war with the income tax authorities. As a child, I used to watch him doing his accounts and admired the fact that the last total on his column of figures was always written in red ink. It looked so pretty.

He also always travelled with a huge wad of notes stuffed into his back pocket and it was an anxiety to him if he could not spend it all as soon as possible. Sundays were his day off and he liked nothing better than driving his family to Gleneagles Hotel and splashing-out for my mother in the expensive boutiques before treating us all to dinner.

Gambling was his passion, especially on horses, and after he bought the Berkeley he was able to buy himself racehorses, two of which won a large number of races, but he could not content himself with them only and went on buying more till in the end he was on the edge of ruin. Then, in the nick of time, he died.

*Budgie* appeared a couple of years later but I wish very much that Archie could have known that he was about to be immortalised on television. Thank you Iain, for bringing my father back to me.

# Naked Edinburgh

Andrew Hook on the Edinburgh Festival

2009

Last Sunday's coverage of the Edinburgh Festival in *The Observer* included this comment on the international book festival: 'While every other festival venue is on a crazy Darwinian mission to expand, reinvent, colonise, the book fest stays politely as it should, a civilised little blue and green planet parked in Charlotte Square'.

This image of the book festival as a centre of decorous calm surrounded by the publicity-seeking alarums and excursions of the rest of the Fringe gave me instant pause. Lifting my coffee cup in a kind of salute, I remembered the different world in which for the first time the Edinburgh International Festival was persuaded to extend its coverage of contemporary arts by venturing into the world of books.

The year was 1962. As the most junior of junior lecturers in Edinburgh University's English department, I happened to become involved in the organisation of what became known as the 'Writers' Conference' – an official event in that year's festival programme. The idea of staging such an event had been initially dreamed up by Jim Haynes, that colourful and kenspeckle American who had arrived in Edinburgh a few years earlier, studied briefly at the university, and then bought out a junk shop in Charles Street to establish the first paperback bookshop in Scotland.

Not far from George Square, in the area that in subsequent years the university in its wisdom would convert into a shabby wasteland, the shop soon became a focus for everything that was lively and progressive and avant-garde in Edinburgh's cultural life. Jim pursued the idea of a writers' conference with John Calder, the Scottish (but London-based) publisher of Samuel Beckett and other key modernist writers. Calder brought on board Sonia Orwell, widow of George. And Lord Harewood, then the festival director, finally gave his consent.

Everything had to be organised in no time at all. Sonia Orwell was probably the key figure. She seemed to know everyone and the writers she approached seemed always willing to take part. So, remarkably, the conference duly took place in the McEwan Hall between the 20th and 24th of August 1962. There were sessions on such topics as censorship, the future of the novel, and contemporary Scottish writing.

The line-up of writers was pretty impressive – Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, Hugh MacDiarmid, David Daiches, Angus Wilson, and many more. Inevitably there were some no-shows, but all in all the whole event was regarded as a major success, giving the Edinburgh Festival a whole new dimension. So much so that in the following year Haynes and the others were allowed to organise a Drama Conference. Same location, same style. But this time disaster struck.

On the last day of the conference, a theatrical 'happening' was staged in the McEwan Hall. It ended with a naked model being wheeled across the hall's organ loft. Bourgeois Edinburgh was outraged. The city fathers made it clear to the festival's organisers that such morally offensive events would not be tolerated. There would be no more writers' conferences.

Despite his crucial involvement in the creation of the original Traverse Theatre, Jim Haynes would soon leave Edinburgh for London and a wider world. Today, of course, a naked model on the Fringe would hardly be worth a comment. And the occasional controversies stirred by writers' remarks at the book festival are rarely much more than storms in teacups. Life and letters, I feel, were very different – and perhaps more engaging – in the Edinburgh of the early 1960s.

# Boys still rule

Andrew Hook

2010

These days it's not only charities that bombard us with 'free gifts' in order to persuade us – or should that be blackmail us – into supporting them. Very frequently now newspapers too try to boost their sales by accompanying each copy with a free something or other. Normally, I find these freebies have little appeal but recently *The Guardian* had on offer something I found irresistible.

On seven successive days the paper was sold along with a contribution to a pamphlet-style series called *The Romantic Poets*. Each little publication consisted of a short introduction to that day's poet by a well-known contemporary writer – Andrew Motion, Margaret Drabble, Germaine Grier, for example – followed by a selection of poems and extracts from poems, rounded off by some form of autobiographical comment by the poet in question.

What interested me most about the series was not its contents – the selection of poetic material included – but just who the 'Romantic poets' were deemed to be. Here they are in the order in which they appeared: Keats, Byron, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Blake.

Most readers of *The Guardian* – and of the *Scottish Review* – will find nothing surprising in that list. Nor do I. Nonetheless, it did set me thinking. What if *The Guardian's* sister paper *The Observer* had published a similar series not in 2010 but in 1810 – when the Romantic movement was sweeping all before it in Western culture. Would the names have been the same? I think not.

By 1810, Blake had produced most of his best work but he remained virtually unknown: it would be late in the 19th century before his importance as a Romantic poet would begin to be recognised. By 1810, Wordsworth and Coleridge too had produced the best of their poetry, but their status and popularity were distinctly limited. They would not have made an appearance. Keats and Shelley, of course, were too young in 1810 to be included – but even if their later work had been available, I don't think they'd have made the list. As compared with 2010's series, in 1810 only Burns and Byron – just launching his hugely successful poetic career – would have been sure to appear.

Who else? 2010 is in fact the bicentenary of *The Lady of the Lake* – a poem that proved even more successful than Scott's earlier narrative poems. Scott would undoubtedly have been there. A fourth Scot would probably have appeared: Thomas Campbell, author of *The Pleasures of Hope*, *Gertrude of Wyoming*, and immensely popular war-songs and ballads. Only one Englishman would have been sure of appearing; the hugely successful Samuel Rogers, author of *The Pleasures of Memory*, a work which went into four editions in its first

year. So Byron, Burns, Scott, Campbell, and Rogers would have been the newspaper's choice in 1810 – with the Irishmen Tom Moore and James Montgomery possibly also appearing.

What if we move on 100 years to 1910? The answer then is clear. The 'Romantic poets' had become the famous five: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats and Shelley. No-one else really mattered. Blake was still a somewhat eccentric poetic figure, and Burns had disappeared into the Scottish ghetto where he would remain stranded for several generations. (A year or two back, Professor Murray Pittock delivered a British Academy lecture in which he demonstrated just how far Burns had disappeared from conventional accounts of British Romanticism.)

So one's first reaction to today's *Guardian* series of *The Romantic poets* is to applaud the inclusion of the former outsiders: Blake and Burns. Whatever the shortcomings of the year of Homecoming and the Gathering, the bicentenary celebrations of Burns's birth – including nine international conferences on his work – should be seen as an unqualified success. Burns is back.

One's second response to *The Guardian* list is more equivocal. For many of us today what is the most striking thing about the Romantic roll call of Keats, Byron, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Blake? Surely the fact that the Romantic poets remain exclusively male. For well over a generation now a host of literary critics and scholars have argued the case for a revision of the traditional literary canon of major English writers. Why? Because the canon is the creation of a dead, white, middle-class, male, world. Minorities have never stood a chance of admission, and the biggest minority of all is that composed of women. So in the case of the Romantic period, enormous efforts have been made to rediscover and re-evaluate a range of women Romantic poets. Anthologies of their work have been published; databases and websites have been established; catalogues and electronic text collections and editions compiled; critical studies produced.

No literary historian today, writing about British Romanticism, would fail to acknowledge the importance of Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Joanna Baillie, Mrs Barbauld, Hannah More etc. Growing up in Wick, I remember my grandfather reciting *The boy stood on the burning deck* by Felicia Hemans: today Mrs Hemans is the subject of serious scholarly study. But has all this academic investment and endeavour in redefining the Romantic poets delivered the longed-for change? *The Guardian's* choice of an all-male cast of the famous five plus two has to suggest that the answer is no. The boys still rule okay?

# Literary stalkers

Lorn Macintyre

2011

The season of goodwill to all is almost upon us. Here in St Andrews the festive lights strung across the streets have not yet been switched on in Andrew Lang's 'little city, worn and grey', but illumination of a kind was provided recently when the Conservative Association of the University of St Andrews burned an effigy of Barack Obama on the West Sands.

Approaching its 600th anniversary and hoping to raise millions in America and elsewhere, Scotland's oldest university very quickly condemned the bonfire of the president as 'crass'. There is, however, a historical precedent: outside St Salvator's Chapel the initials PH inset in the cobbles mark where Patrick Hamilton, first martyr of the Scottish Reformation, was burned.

St Andrews, sometimes called the 'northern Oxford' because disappointed applicants to that seat of learning head north, is referred to as having some of the most affluent students in Scotland. Perhaps that is why the university's 600th anniversary shop on Market Street is displaying Hunter wellingtons in various shades, with buckles and the university's crest emblazoned on the side, at £90.

Evidently you need to be very careful about what you write about St Andrews University. Earlier this year, I published a contemporary novel, *Adoring Venus*, about a 61-year-old professor of art history at St Andrews who has an affair with an 18-year-old student, with disastrous consequences. The writer and critic Alan Taylor wrote: 'In *Adoring Venus* the two principal characters are beautifully and sympathetically drawn, as is the claustrophobic atmosphere of St Andrews, which is a character in its own right. It has, moreover, great narrative drive and raw emotional depth which so many novels lack these days'.

This was not intended to be a sexual or sensationalist novel. I wanted to deal with the following themes: the anguish of bereavement; the gap between the generations; and the fact that, whereas academic staff age, students seem to remain forever young because they graduate and are replaced by new ones. There is hardly any sex in the novel, and I hope that it is tasteful.

Almost as soon as *Adoring Venus* appeared on Amazon there was a posting from an anonymous contributor, warning prospective purchasers not to buy this novel, pointing out that the only good thing about it was the cover photograph of a student in scarlet gown in the cloisters of St Salvator's Chapel. I suspected that the contributor was a student, and that he or she hadn't read the novel, but was outraged by the blurb because I was bringing the beloved university into disrepute by alleging that a professor would have an affair with a student – and vice versa. *Adoring Venus* had only been published a week when three early readers, retired academics, stopped me on the street at different times and said

conspiratorially: 'we know who you had in mind for your male character'. In fact, I had nobody in mind.

I handed in a copy of the novel for review to the student newspaper *The Saint*. In the issue of 13 October, the reviewer wrote:

'... St Andrews deserves to be the setting of a university novel, but one that achieves verisimilitude in depicting the cultural idiosyncrasies of the historic town, rather than untrue and offensive stereotypes. It deserves a novel that is more interested in dramatising the real-life goings-on of the students and academics, rather than indulging in lurid delusions. This novel, I fear, will not enjoy the orgiastic success the author desires. It is, quite frankly, dreadful.'

When I read this diatribe, the phrases 'untrue and offensive stereotypes' and 'lurid delusions' seemed to me to go beyond constructive literary criticism, and to be the fulminations of a student offended by my portrayal of their university. I have lived in St Andrews for 26 years, and have written extensively about the town and university in articles, and in a highly successful illustrated book *St Andrews: Portrait of a City* with the university's former photographer Peter Adamson. St Andrews academics, retired and still serving, have told me how much they admired *Adoring Venus*.

I have had hostile reviews before, and shrugged off the one in *The Saint*. It may in fact have had the opposite effect to the one intended, since sales of *Adoring Venus* have been excellent, and I have even had a message from a young academic wanting to translate it in Russian.

I would not have written this piece for *Scottish Review* had I not opened my Facebook page several evenings ago and found that the copy of *The Saint* had been placed there, clearly a spoiler for any of my online friends and acquaintances thinking of buying *Adoring Venus*. Am I being stalked in a literary sense because I am perceived to have denigrated the student body in a 'salacious fantasy'? It's an uncomfortable feeling. What next? Will my effigy be blazing on the West Sands as my detractors of whatever political persuasion tramp round it in their £90 crested Hunter wellingtons?



# The real Braveheart

David Weinczok

2013

Who was this Braveheart chap that all the Royal Mile tourists are on about, anyway? While we seem to have forgiven the conspicuous absence of Stirling Bridge in Mel Gibson's depiction of the eponymous battle of 1297, surely they at least bothered to pin the right label on its protagonist.

As a North American immigrant, I can assure you that 'William Wallace = Braveheart' marks the beginning and end of what the vast majority of folk on that side of the pond know about the title and the man behind it. Of course, as is so often the case with Scottish history, the truth weaves a far more intoxicating tale.

Technically speaking, Braveheart was a dried up heart inside a silver casket, hung around the neck of Sir James Douglas and baking in the Spanish sun circa 1330. This was not just any heart though – it was nothing less than the heart of the recently deceased Robert de Bruce, King of Scots and champion of the early Wars of Independence. When Bruce felt his final hours approaching, he asked his closest peers to nominate a man among them to carry his heart to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on crusade. Douglas was the unanimous outcry, and no wonder. The English even had a bogeyman rhyme about him for the kids, and the man was still walking about:

*Hush ye, hush ye, little pet ye,  
Hush ye, hush ye, do not fret ye,  
The Black Douglas shall not get ye*

After all, Douglas had been wreaking havoc with Bruce since nearly the beginning. He stood with Bruce during the dark days of Methven and Dalrigh in 1306, orchestrated the famous 'Douglas Larder' raid to recapture Douglas Castle, waged a terrifically effective campaign of raids into Northumbria and Cumbria, and stood triumphant at Bannockburn in 1314. Not a bad CV.

Douglas couldn't make it to Jerusalem, so instead he sailed with a retinue of hand-picked Scots to assist Alfonso XI of Castile in the crusade against the Moors. They met the Moorish army near the Castillo della Estrada between Seville and Granada, with the famous Scot leading a contingent. Fatefully, a command got lost in translation and Douglas led his men into the thick of the Moorish infantry line before the rest of the crusaders could arrange themselves to support them. Pushing through to safety, Douglas became hemmed in and was without hope of escape.

This is where things get too good to be true. Removing the silver casket containing the heart of his king and old friend from his neck, Douglas – presumably raising the visor of his helm for dramatic effect – cast it into the advancing enemy and let cry, 'Go forward, brave heart, and I will follow or die!' When the Scots scoured the field after the battle, they found Douglas' tattered body encircled by a ring of dead Moors, with the casket underneath. Someone phone Gerard Butler, I have a script for him.

The specifics vary depending on who you ask – mention of the 'brave heart' incident is made in Barbour's *The Brus* in 1375, but it seems to be added by a later hand. Walter Scott reinforced the romantic image of Douglas and the heart in his *Tales of a Grandfather* (if there was ever the Romantic equivalent of a Midas Touch, Scott possessed it). But that's okay, I've learned to take my Scottish folk heroes with a pinch of salt – like their porridge, would they have had it any other way?

Even if it never happened, the throwing of the heart is, for me, really about the extraordinary camaraderie and commitment that these individuals would have developed in their struggle to free their nation and protect the ones they loved. As in the case of Robert the Bruce, whose brothers were executed and whose wife, two sisters and daughter were locked in cages by Edward I, the latter of these goals often had tragic results that would have reinforced his and his followers' stake in each other. As far as I'm concerned, even if Douglas never threw the heart, he didn't have to; he had been following it into peril since the first, if not always quite so poetically.

I first encountered Sir James while researching castles in South Lanarkshire, having until then failed to muster the courage to start tackling the byzantine histories of Scotland's noble families. Bothwell Castle, a scant 10 miles from the centre of Glasgow on the banks of the Clyde, is an illuminating illustration of those histories. While the four-storey donjon and inner courtyard give a sense of awe, the real treat is round the back.

I had just finished reading David Ross's *On the Trail of Robert the Bruce* and was captivated by the story of Douglas bearing Bruce's heart; seeing the Douglas heart emblazoned above the postern gate on the outer wall with undeniable pride was just enough to make me feel a part of it.

Having been to more than 50 castles and fortifications, all of which are fantastic in their own right, I can nonetheless count on one hand the number of moments where I've got shivers up my spine from sheer inspiration – catching first sight of incomparable Dunnottar on its rocky promontory, standing atop the vertigo-inducing height of Tantallon's curtain wall (another Douglas stronghold), watching Duart come into view from the deck of the Oban to Craginure ferry – and this one ranks with the best of them. Have a read about Douglas' Andalucian adventure in the postscript of Ross's book (the rest is quite good, too), take the trip to south Lanarkshire, and find the heart – I cannot think of a better way for an amateur historian to spend a day.

So who, after all that, is Braveheart? It's certainly not William Wallace, deceased 24 years

before Bruce's own passing. That leaves Bruce himself, the inspiration for such devotion, and Good Sir Douglas, whose last moments inspired the creativity of later writers. For that matter, you could say that Braveheart is actually the intellectual product of John Barbour or Walter Scott, minters of the moniker. My money's on Douglas, how about yours?

# How movies break up relationships

Richard Craig

2013

Boy meets girl, boy fancies girl, boy fails to get with girl, boy gets with girl, boy accidentally ruins relationship, boy makes grand gesture to win girl back, boy and girl live happily ever after.

Sound familiar? It should do, it's the basis for an entire genre of films that many boyfriends have been dutifully sitting through for many years to prove their commitment and willingness to compromise whilst thinking they would rather be watching something with explosions in it.

That's right, it's the romantic comedy: first choice for many girls when it comes to movie selection. But are we as men potentially ruining our relationships, not helping them, by watching *The Notebook* for the fifth time? Should we be imposing our will and putting something with Jason Statham on instead? If scientists are to be believed, then yes – we are. A survey in Australia in 2010 revealed that almost half of people felt that romantic comedies, with their inevitable happy endings, have ruined their view of an ideal relationship. One in four were now expected to know what their partner was thinking and one in five said it made their partner expect gifts – just because.

And it's not just Australians who seem to have this problem. A study by Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh found that fans of romantic comedies often fail to communicate with their partners effectively, with many holding the view that if somebody is meant to be with you, they should know what you want without you needing to tell them.

So what are the issues that this type of film raises that we as boyfriends are forced to contend with?

*I'm psychic.* Ever been confronted with the phrase 'I shouldn't have to tell you what's wrong, you should know?' This is a product of the film *What Women Want*, where Mel Gibson is able to adapt to the needs of the women in his life automatically. The reason he can do this and you can't? He can actually read their minds.

But how common is telepathy in real life? Scientific studies have failed to show conclusively that it exists in any form of controlled environment, let alone in the comfort of your front room, so the truth is that we as men are never going to understand what is going on inside the minds of women.

*I'm secretly really rich.* Ever seen the look of disappointment in your partner's eyes when you unveil that your romantic trip abroad involves a 3am flight with EasyJet to Benidorm rather than a quick trip in the private jet to Monaco to stay in your family's summer retreat? This is because many girls are secretly hoping that you are rich and maybe even a prince, but are just keeping it under wraps until you know they love you for you rather than

your money. The reason for this? *The Prince and Me*. Girl meets boy, girl falls for boy, boy turns out to be the Prince of Denmark.

But how likely is this to happen? The good news is that there are five single princes of Denmark out there. The bad news? The oldest of them is 14, so it will be 2017 at the earliest before this fantasy could become reality for any aspiring princesses out there.

*The grand gesture*. You return home from a weekend away from your girlfriend only to have your flowers from the petrol station thrown away and find you've been relegated to sleeping on the sofa. Why? Because a text a day didn't show that you loved her enough.

Whose fault is this? *The Notebook*, in which the male lead writes 365 letters to the love of his life without a response. I suspect that explaining that in the UK the legal definition of stalking involves an action only having to be taken twice for it to be considered harassment won't get you off that sofa any quicker.

*I'll take you away from everything*. You turn up at your girlfriend's work unannounced to take her for a quick pint and burger at the local pub for lunch, but when she greets you there's an impression that she was looking for something a bit more dramatic. The reason? Thank *An Officer and a Gentleman*. She's secretly imagining you were Richard Gere in full dress uniform, coming to pick her up from her desk, literally sweeping her off her feet and taking her away from everything. Possibly the most likely of all the scenarios I've mentioned. With 35,000 people in the Navy – if they matched the demographics of the rest of the country – roughly 7,000 of them would be single men. Therefore, with approximately seven million single men in the country, it works out as a mere one in 1,000 chance that your man will have the dress uniform to make this dream come true. Unfortunately, however, the odds of him looking like Richard Gere in his heyday are slightly longer.

*So what are we as men to do?* Start the revolution, I say! Throw out the *Sex in the City* boxsets, say no to watching *Love Actually* again, or the repeat of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. In fact, ban anything with Hugh Grant in it. Take back Friday nights for fast cars, explosions, girls in bikinis and Steven Segal.

And what will I be doing the next time a girl wants me to watch a rom-com? Well... I'll get the popcorn and the tissues and settle in to watch *Shaun of the Dead*. Why? Well that's okay, it's a zom-rom-com.

# A celebrity list of Scotland's 'best' novels

Walter Humes

2013

I once asked quite a well-known (Scottish) author to name his favourite Scottish novel of all time. I suppose I expected him to choose something by Scott or Stevenson, or possibly James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* or Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*.

He somewhat surprised me by naming *The House with the Green Shutters* by George Douglas Brown, a novel published in 1901 as a reaction against the kailyard school of rural sentimentality which had been dominant in the late 19th century. I remember reading it with enjoyment as an undergraduate, but even then was struck by its melodramatic style and its over-ambitious attempt to draw parallels with Greek tragedy.

However, one of the key themes was the narrow-mindedness of a small Scottish town, whose inhabitants were quick to pass judgement and take pleasure in others' misfortunes: I wondered if my respondent, who had been brought up in a rural community, had himself been subject to similar resentments and jealousies. As I did not know the man well, I felt it would be intrusive to probe further.

This exchange came to mind when I discovered that, as part of Book Week Scotland, which starts on 25 November, the Scottish Book Trust is inviting readers to vote for their favourite Scottish novel of the last 50 years. A shortlist of 50 has been compiled by Stuart Kelly, himself an author, reviewer and judge of the Man Booker Prize. He has said that choosing the books was 'never going to be uncontroversial'. Judging by comments on the website, his remark was fully justified. The shortlist of 50, from which the top 10 will be announced during the Book Week event, has come in for a fair amount of criticism.

The Dorothy Dunnett fan club was first off the mark, complaining that the omission of this popular historical novelist was a grave error. By contrast, the inclusion of the highly successful Alexander McCall Smith provoked one contributor into saying 'rarely have I read a more tedious author'. The absence of Gaelic fiction offended another reader. And there were quibbles about the particular novels chosen to represent individual authors. The selection of *The Bridge* rather than *The Crow Road* to exemplify the non-SF work of Iain Banks did not please everyone. Muriel Spark's best-known novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, does not feature, but that is because it was published in 1961, two years before the start of the census period. Her entry is *Loitering with Intent* (1981), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

There is strong representation of crime writing, including works by Ian Rankin, Val McDermid and Denise Mina. Crime fiction is immensely popular and there are undoubtedly some excellent Scottish exponents of the genre ('tartan noir' has become a distinct category) but its conventions tend to set limits to the exploration of the human condition which it can offer.

Novels which have tried to take fiction in new directions, whether in terms of subject matter or style, are reflected in the works of Alasdair Gray, James Kelman and Irvine Welsh. A very good writer, Ronald Frame, a personal favourite of mine, does not make it onto the list. I suspect part of the reason is that his work will be regarded as too 'conventional' by the literary establishment in Scotland, which tends to favour gritty urban 'realism' often combined, ironically enough, with a form of sentimentality that is felt to be 'authentic'.

Part of the problem is the loose criteria used for inclusion. All that is required is that the book should have been written in Scotland, or written by someone born or currently living in Scotland. No explicit consideration appears to have been given to the relative weight of a range of features that might help to distinguish outstanding novels from those that are merely entertaining and popular; these include narrative power, structural integrity, linguistic command, emotional appeal and thematic depth. There is, of course, no single set of criteria that would enable a definitive list to be drawn up, but clearer guidelines would have reduced the chances of some entries appearing fairly arbitrary.

My own choice of the best Scottish novel of the last 50 years is also absent from the shortlist. James Robertson is included but the choice of *Joseph Knight* might be questioned: it is fine novel, but many would argue that its achievement is not on the scale of *And the Land Lay Still*, which was named the Saltire Society Book of the Year for 2010. The latter is hugely ambitious in scope (the paperback edition runs to 671 pages), with a large cast of fascinating characters set against the changing social, cultural and political context of modern Scotland. Robertson's command of a range of styles and subjects is impressive: he is equally at home writing about urban or rural Scotland, about political intrigue or artistic expression, about personal ambition or intense relationships. It is a novel that will stand the test of time, not only for its compelling narrative but also for its coverage of a significant period in recent Scottish history.

If the survey encourages more people to read and enjoy a wider range of books it is surely to be welcomed, but the exercise does seem to be following the celebrity trend of compiling 'top 10s' of virtually everything. Add to that the growth of 'literary festivals' featuring nomadic bands of writers, established and up-and-coming, descending on towns across Scotland and offering pearls of wisdom to the locals, and the commercialisation of creative endeavour proceeds apace.

This is hardly surprising since the days when publishing companies were owned by people who were actually interested in books have virtually disappeared. As with so much else, most are now run by remote corporate organisations which are only interested in the bottom line. That is part of the reason why there is such a growth in online self-publishing.

# Irvine Welsh has lost the power to shock

Andrew Hook

2013

Irvine Welsh's first novel *Trainspotting* has recently been named Scotland's most popular novel of the last 50 years. I thought it might be interesting to go back and re-read it – now 20 years after its first appearance. I remember reading it then without subscribing to the wild enthusiasm with which in many circles it was being greeted.

Perhaps I was over-influenced by my colleague Philip Hobsbaum – a leading figure, as many readers will recall, in helping the emergence of what has become known as the Glasgow novel. Philip was pretty dismissive of Welsh's book – and not because it was set in Edinburgh.

Twenty years ago *Trainspotting*'s huge, popular success was undoubtedly due to its wild, excessive, and shockingly untraditional language and subject matter. Its apparent celebration of the world of drug and alcohol abuse, of totally amoral, uninhibited sexual freedom, and above all its constant, unlimited, page after page, reiteration of a demotic language of relentless obscenity, seemed to prove that it was giving voice to a class of people previously denied any kind of even fictional life. This at last, it seemed, was the real thing – the truth beneath the façade of routine, dull, dreary, conventional, middle-class life. Conventional, middle-class Scottish life in particular.

When I ask American students – as I regularly do both at home and abroad – what and where they have learned about Scotland, *Trainspotting* always comes up, though admittedly it's the film they have seen (along with *Braveheart*) rather than the book they've read. But I suspect the reference to the film is fair enough. The 50-year accolade is at least in part to be explained by the enduring popularity of Danny Boyle's film which caught quite a lot of the book's demotic energy. A vote for the book may well have been really a vote for the film.

But what was the outcome of my own re-read? Nothing particularly surprising. Twenty years ago, I was already too old to have been part of Welsh's anticipated audience. And the passing of the years has hardly changed that. As I've said, the success Welsh's book undoubtedly had owed everything to its shock effect. Now take that away and not much is left. There's very little here in the way of story. There is no plot to unwind, indeed no narrative energy of any kind. And the railway line between Edinburgh and London is hardly enough to impose any kind of meaningful structure upon the random events of the novel.

Interviewed after his success, Irvine Welsh (in Chicago) stressed the importance of his characters. Renton, Begbie and Sick Boy were archetypes whom every reader would recognise. Really? Archetypes of what exactly? In fact, for most of the novel it is difficult to tell them apart, because they choose to speak in the same relentlessly offensive demotic



language. And when Renton, the student who has dropped out of his history course at Aberdeen University, chooses in court to show off his ability to debate the finer points of existentialism in a very different kind of discourse, what kind of archetype has he become?

In the course of his interview, Welsh paid tribute to other Scottish writers including Alasdair Gray and James Kelman. Well he might. Without Kelman's example, would Welsh have been able to write *Trainspotting*? I doubt it. But the difference is that Kelman does not use the demotic language of *How Late It Was, How Late* simply to shock. That language is an integral part of the essential, convincing, and moving human reality that Kelman creates – at a level far beyond anything Irvine Welsh can reach.

Finally there's no denying that for better or worse things have moved on since 1993. What was shocking then is less so now. How many people still believe that *Trainspotting* deserves to sell more copies than the Bible? In today's art world, a recurring emphasis on pain, suffering, violence and horror has moved centre stage. Novels struggle to compete with art forms that have a more immediate sensory impact. Read any group of reviews of recent films and you will come across warnings that filmgoers must be prepared to watch scenes – in one film or another – of horrifying pain and torture.

I know nothing of the world of computer games, which apparently so many of us now buy into, but the adverts I see appear to involve nothing but endless scenes of violence, mayhem and murder. In, say, the films of Lars Von Trier, or the exhibitions of the smugly self-satisfied Chapman brothers (see their current one in London's Serpentine Gallery), there seems to be a kind of competition in seeing how far one can go in the name of so-called art. As far as you choose seems to be the answer – because there will always be those willing to go along with the curators of the Chapmans' show when they assure us that it compels us 'to confront the nagging fears that lie at the dark heart of the Western psyche'.

I don't buy it. 'The Western psyche'? So the Chinese have nothing to be afraid of? It's just too glib. Real suffering and real pain lie in the world outside art galleries, and outside the pages of novels. Readers won't be surprised to hear that I'm not proposing to pay up to see the film of Irvine Welsh's *Filth*.

# Our strange fascination with Nordic noir

Barbara Millar

2014

Last Sunday, celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall set off to Scandinavia to visit a Volvo factory, forage in a forest, sing karaoke Abba songs, and investigate the oft-perpetuated claims that those living in the Nordic lands are the 'happiest people on earth'.

At roughly the same time, at the old Truman Brewery in East London, some 2,500 fans were packing away their souvenir T-shirts, open sandwiches, bottles of vodka and DVDs after their weekend at Nordicana, a Scandinavian drama appreciation festival, now in its second year.

The fans at the festival had just watched the final two harrowing episodes of BBC4's *The Bridge* (the eponymous star of the series being the Oresund Bridge, linking Denmark and Sweden) and had the opportunity to chat with its stars, Sofia Helin (who plays Swedish detective Saga Noren) and Kim Bodnia (her Danish counterpart, Martin Rohde).

*The Bridge*, also in its second season, is a dark, gripping, multi-layered, colour-drained Scandinavian crime thriller, and its female lead is a cop-with-a-difference. Saga displays relentless logic, keeps her emotional distance, doesn't observe social niceties, or see the point of common courtesies. Her stares are direct and intense, she makes misjudged attempts at small talk, has no embarrassment about her body or sex, and no perception about how other people react to her.

Helin herself says: 'Saga is so strange. I could feel my brain changing as I played her. I am her complete opposite, ruled by my emotions'. Saga is somewhere on the autistic spectrum – she probably has Aspergers syndrome, although this is never directly referenced in the series, and chief writer Hans Rosenfeldt has steered clear of any labelling.

In a live web chat after Saturday's finale, Rosenfeldt explained that Saga had never been given a diagnosis 'because we want to be totally free with the character. If we state she has Aspergers we have to be more careful with what we can, or cannot do, in order not to offend, or do it wrong'. But he acknowledged that Sofia Helin had researched Aspergers 'as a way to get into the character'. Helin also spoke to a policeman about Saga 'because I could not understand how you could be a good cop, when you are like this'.

'Actually, he told me, her skills are just what I am looking for when I employ people.' 'But,' he also admitted: 'She would be a problem in a social group'. And Rosenfeldt adds that 'in the real world', despite her devastating deduction skills, Saga would probably not have travelled so far up the ranks. 'There has also been some discussion in Sweden about whether she would even have got through police academy,' he reveals. 'It's just something you have to accept in the little world we have created.'

Danish detective Martin is also deeply damaged in series two. His son, August, was

murdered in series one, his marriage to Mette is on the rocks as a result, and he is intent on seeking revenge on the now jailed murderer, a former police colleague and close friend. Into this fraught, highly emotional mix, the writers add still another unusual dramatic element.

Nikolaj, a younger child of Martin and Mette, becomes seriously ill, and ends up in hospital. It transpires that his adoring nanny, Anna-Dea, is suffering from Munchausen by proxy, and is tampering with his drinks to keep him ill and dependent on her. And it is Saga who works this out – her mother had the same illness, which focused on her sister, Jennifer. Rosenfeldt was asked why the writers arrived at Munchausen's as a key element. 'It is a very rare and strange disorder I find fascinating,' he replied.

In an interview at the Nordicana festival, Bodnia was asked why, when Denmark was regularly voted the happiest country on earth, did *The Bridge*, and its predecessor, *The Killing*, have such an unrelentingly bleak focus. 'We are caught up in the darkness. We are caught up in the paranoid shit,' he replied. 'Darkness, misery, evil – we do them best.'

When Helin was told that, in the UK, Sweden is held up as a benchmark for equality, she swept the notion aside. 'Sweden is very segregated,' she said. 'It has become a much harder country in the last 10 years. Everything is about how much money you have in your wallet. It is no paradise on earth. The Swedish system is becoming less and less secure, and more and more people are having harder and harder lives.'

According to long-time Danish resident Michael Booth, in a recent *Guardian* article, the current belief in a Nordic utopia is very much misplaced. Denmark may have topped the 'Eurobarometer' table of well-being and happiness ever since 1973 but, says Booth, it is second only to Iceland in the use of anti-depressants (is this why they think they are happy, all those SSRIs?), the country has the highest level of private debt-to-income in the Western world (sixth highest wages, but highest taxes in the world, with a basic rate of 42%), its schools lag behind the UK, its health service is crumbling (it was suggested to Booth that he made an appointment to be seen in A&E) and its cancer rates are the highest in the world, its people are 'excessively jingoistic', economic equality is decreasing, its prime-time TV shows involve endless re-runs of *Midsomer Murders* and documentaries on pig welfare, and it has the fourth largest per-capita ecological footprint in the world, larger even than the US.

Neutral Sweden, he adds, is one of the world's largest arms exporters; youth unemployment is higher than in the UK and higher than the EU average, and integration is an ongoing challenge, with Swedes highly adept at insulating themselves. They will do anything even to avoid sharing a lift with a stranger, writes Booth.

So, despite Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's current Scandi-euphoria, and in spite of the apparent equality, social justice and liberalism of the Nordic model, there remains something 'rotten in the state of Denmark' (and Sweden), which is reflected in the TV/film/literary genre of Nordic noir. As Danish writer (of political thriller *Borgen*), Adam Price, concludes: 'We have a darkness in our landscape that comes through in our writing, our directing and our acting'. Long may it continue. I can't wait until *The Bridge* series three is back on our screens.

# Anybody here ever heard of a Margo MacDonald?

David Black

2014

Culture is not what it was, at least in the world of politics. The appointment of a banker, Sajid Javid, as successor to the alarmingly culture-free Maria Miller, has failed to impress the author Michael Rosen, who vented his spleen on the matter in an open letter to *The Guardian*. We like to think things aren't quite so bad in Scotland, despite the stooshie over the arts quango which a number of persistent offenders still insist on calling 'Cremative Scotland'.

Fiona Hyslop seems to have a decent working knowledge of her portfolio, though the SNP's culture spokesman at Westminster, Pete Wishart, doesn't win too many brownie points with his campaign to demolish B-listed Beaux-Arts Perth City Hall.

Our literary accomplishments remain a bit of a three-legged stool, with Scott, Stevenson, and Burns having been replaced by Ian Rankin, Alexander McCall Smith, and J K Rowling – ask the average punter to cite other Scottish authors and you end up in a variation of the 'name 10 famous Belgians' parlour game, and of course J K Rowling only gets in because she somehow ended up in Edinburgh. I was heartened when a bookseller I was chatting to put Alasdair Gray and James Kelman in his Scottish top three, but that was in Greenwich Village, New York, where things are different.

In Scotland, we are often wishful thinkers with a talent for self-delusion. The Museum of Scotland is a case in point. There are times it could be called the Museum of Anywhere-But-Scotland, notwithstanding which James Robinson, writing in *The Scotsman*, suggests that institutions elsewhere in the world envy its 'truly encyclopaedic' character, and thereby neatly overlooks the problems of a 'national' museum doubling up as an 'international' museum.

Here's a litmus test of institutional Scottishness. Some years ago, I was shown a fanlight which had been discovered in an Edinburgh New Town attic. This original Adam period object was in mint condition, apart from a missing section of crown glass, while the delicate neoclassical leadwork looked as good as the day it had been created, sometime around 1780. The owner asked what might be done with it, and since this was at a time when the new Museum of Scotland was being built, I offered to take it to Chambers Street. For several months it was passed around departments, then I was asked to take it away, since it was of no interest.

I could relate a similarly dismal story about the shameful failure of the National Gallery of Scotland to purchase the entire archive of 3,000 watercolours of Jemima Blackburn – described by John Ruskin as 'the best artist I know' – but that would take all day. Suffice to say Timothy Clifford was thinking about it when the chance came up to purchase Canova's

*Three Graces* at just over £1 million per buttock, and Jemima ended up being scattered to the four winds, courtesy of Christie's.

But back to our 'encyclopaedic' Museum of Scotland, and scroll forward a year – a professor of architectural history from South Carolina contacted me about the Adam material in that same institution. He could scarcely believe it when I told him that as far as I knew the only object in that category in the collection was a fragment of an Adam-designed balcony which I myself (as a callow schoolboy) had rescued from demolished East Register Street. Since the Adam brothers had exerted a seminal effect on the development of an American 'national style' during the federal period, he was both disappointed and astonished. I could only apologise on behalf of my philistine nation. If you want to learn anything about the Adam brothers, you'd best just go to the Metropolitan Museum and the V&A, apparently.

I have no idea if this lacuna has since been corrected. A historian of engineering has since informed me that Thomas Telford, like the Adams, has also been excluded. Presumably celebrating such Scots in the museum of their native country is viewed as much too parochial by some. Let's not forget this is happening in a capital city in which the the main local library chooses to celebrate 'City of Literature' status in a referendum year by closing down its Scottish Library for an entire year and putting its books into storage while various inscrutable and unnecessary improvement works are supposedly being carried out.

The wooden spoon for doltishness in this hotly contested field of institutional ignorance must go to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, however. I happened to be there to attend a lecture on the National Galleries' last Scots-born director, Stanley Cursiter (he resigned in 1948) and took a detour to the information desk on the way out. This was simply out of my curiosity to find out if the gallery had a portrait of the late Margo MacDonald on display. Most people would agree, whatever they think of the lady's political views, that she was about as high as you can get in the name-recognition stakes, so I didn't really expect the response my simple inquiry elicited.

'Can you tell me what that person is famous for?' asked the woman behind the desk. Does one laugh, cry, or just emigrate?

# Crockett and the fleeting nature of literary fame

Catherine Czerkawska

2014

Last week, we spent a couple of days down in Galloway, celebrating the life and the republishing of a collection of the Galloway novels of S R Crockett. The trees are just coming into leaf down there, as here in Ayrshire, there is blackthorn in all the hedges and dazzling whins. Spring is all green and gold with touches of blue.

Last Wednesday, there was a moving ceremony on a breezy day at the granite Crockett monument in Laurieston near Castle Douglas. Publisher and writer Cally Phillips spoke about Crockett and read a little of his work on the 100th anniversary of his death, on 16 April 1914. I suspect the man himself would have approved of the simple ceremony. The memorial is, as Cally pointed out, quite low-key by the monumental standards of the time, but its plain, massive quality seems very fitting for Crockett who seems to have been a fairly massive, plain and unadorned kind of man.

Never heard of him? I'm always surprised by how few people know anything at all about this writer who was, in his time, a massively popular bestseller. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his books were sold. He produced a vast body of work which included some 32 books set in and about Galloway and its thrilling, romantic and at times violent history.

Crockett was born at Balmaghie, in Galloway, and graduated from Edinburgh University in 1879. He became a minister of the Kirk at Penicuik in Midlothian but later abandoned the ministry when his writing became successful. He was a bestseller of his day, a vastly popular writer with people eagerly anticipating his next publication.

I've been aware of Crockett for many years, because my father, a great hillwalker, unearthed a couple of Crockett novels in our local library: *The Raiders* (perhaps his best known novel) and *The Grey Man*, which tends to be better known in this part of Carrick, containing as it does many references to weel-kent places and local traditions. Dad favoured *The Raiders* and would set off on various expeditions to discover the places mentioned in the novel. I still remember him gleefully poring over his Ordnance Survey maps and making notes.

So why has Crockett been so neglected? Is there anything intrinsically wrong with his work? Or is his relative obscurity a salutary lesson for all writers on the fleeting quality of fame? You've only to look at his (short and far from sweet) Wikipedia entry: 'Crockett made considerable sums of money from his writing... but his later work has been criticised as being over-prolific and feebly sentimental'.

Crockett might have been more readily admitted to the literary canon if he had written a handful of difficult and dystopian novels that made him no money at all. If he had died in misery and penury, so much the better. This kind of attitude is, if anything, even more prevalent nowadays when a place in the canon is often denied to those who are 'overly

prolific' and who make 'considerable sums' from their writing. The 'feebly sentimental' is harder to challenge but I haven't found any feeble sentiment in the novels and stories I've read. Many of them, however, are deeply rural and that makes them easier to dismiss as 'kailyard literature'.

In fact, the label 'kailyard' seems to encapsulate a particular prejudice against much rural Scottish fiction, as though the Gothic intensity of *The House With Green Shutters* is intrinsically more 'real' than the work of Barrie or Crockett. There is certainly an element of truth in the evocation of parochial misery in that overheated bundle of misery, but it is no more representative of the whole of lowland Scottish rural life than any other single work of fiction.

In short, Crockett wrote a plethora of good, adventurous, humorous and exciting stories. The problem – as far as posterity is concerned – was that times and literary fashions had undergone a drastic change after the 1914-18 war and Crockett's popularity went into a decline as the century progressed, although his books could still be found, and often loved, on many Galloway and Ayrshire bookshelves.

One other reason for his relative fall into obscurity – as Cally Phillips points out – is that if the books are not easily available, then nobody can read them. She has set out to remedy that. A former Dumfries and Galloway writer in residence, she now lives in equally rural surroundings in Turriff. Having set up Ayton Publishing ('republishing the past for a digital future') her first massive project was to reprint, with critical introductions, Crockett's 32 'Galloway Novels' in time for the 100th anniversary of Crockett's death. The whole collection is now available in eBook and in paperback form, properly edited and published for the first time in a very long time.

On Friday, we met up at Clatteringshaws Loch for a celebratory picnic. This is surely one of the most beautiful parts of a beautiful region. The cuckoo was repeating itself in a nearby wood. The loch was utterly still and quiet with only birdsong to disturb the stillness. We ate our lunch, walked as far as Bruce's stone, found last year's dried bog myrtle, still pungent and fresh when rolled between the fingers. And we thought about Crockett and talked about his work.

In his preface to the quirky and ironic miscellany, *Bog Myrtle and Peat*, Crockett writes: 'Once I wrote a book, every word of it, in the open air. It was full of the sweet things of the country. I saw the hens nestle sleepily in the holes of the bank-side where the dry dust is and so I wrote it down. I heard the rain drum on the broad leaves over my head and I wrote that down also'. But essentially, this preface is about something all writers know, the eternal anticipation of the book of your imagination that remains just tantalisingly out of reach except in dreams.

Crockett calls it 'The Book Sealed', fairy gold that may, if exposed to the cold light of day, become a few dead leaves. Well, I'm inclined to think that most of Crockett's work still constitutes gold, the real thing, not the illusion. But at least now you can have the chance to make up your own mind.

# John Buchan and a world of Scottish extremism

Andrew Hook

2014

As an eager young reader growing up in Wick, I began to collect the *Best of the Best Books* published in the once popular Nelson Classics series. Each volume cost two shillings and sixpence, and recently I was pleased to see that still sitting on my bookshelf was a Nelson Classics' edition of *Prester John* by John Buchan.

My pleasure in the acquisition is made clear by the neatly written inscription on the volume's fly-leaf: 'Bought by Andrew Hook, on the 10th day of November 1944' (when I was 11 years old).

Whether I enjoyed reading *Prester John* as much as or more than the second Nelson Classic title I acquired on that very same 10th of November in 1944 – *Rob Roy* by Sir Walter Scott – or for that matter the R L Stevenson titles in the series I bought in Glasgow in April, 1945 – *Treasure Island*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* – I'm afraid I really can't remember.

What I do know is that as a student and teacher of English literature, I stopped thinking of John Buchan – if I thought of him at all – as a 'classic' author. Rather, I came to think of him in what I suppose came to be the standard, or taken for granted, manner of recent years. He was the popular author of a great many adventure stories, entertaining and easy to read, but regrettably celebrating a time – now deeply unfashionable – when the values of a still imperial, establishment Britain were accepted without criticism of any kind.

Aware of Buchan's Scottish background, I nonetheless would never have thought of him as a Scottish writer. Rather than emerging from any Scottish literary tradition, his many novels seemed to align him with other contemporary writers of popular adventure stories such as Rider Haggard, A E W Mason, or fellow-Scots, Andrew Lang and Conan Doyle.

Scottish landscapes may have occurred in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and other stories, but that was the extent of their Scottishness. With Scott and Stevenson there is indeed a Scottish tradition of fiction involving travel and adventure, but Buchan had chosen not to follow it – or so I thought.

In fact, I was entirely wrong. Like many others I suspect, the problem was I had not read the right novels. Early in his career, Buchan wrote a historical novel *A Lost Lady of Old Years*. Published in 1899, it was written when he was scarcely 23 years old – the same age as Scott Fitzgerald when he launched his career with *This Side of Paradise*. The American's novel was an instant success – clearly much more so than *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (the somewhat clumsy title comes from a poem by Browning).

But Buchan's attempt at writing a historical novel is full of interest. Set in the years of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, and including a persuasive account of the inevitable defeat at



Culloden, the novel's most striking feature is the characterisation of its protagonist – Francis Birkenshaw.

Birkenshaw is an early example of what we would call an anti-hero. He is a deeply flawed character, violent, impetuous, selfish, and uncaring. Almost from moment to moment, his emotions swing wildly from hope to despair. His behaviour is unpredictable and irrational. Neither a Jacobite nor a Hanoverian, he seems to be without principles or beliefs. He struggles only to survive in a stricken Scotland – literally, in impressive passages in which Buchan describes his solitary trek through the Scottish Highlands at their most hostile, desolate and forbidding. Perhaps it is a step too far to see in the conflicted and ambiguous, but finally conformist Birkenshaw, an image of mid-18th-century Scotland itself, yet even to suggest as much is to point to the quality and promise of this early tale.

That promise was emphatically realised in 1927, when Buchan published what he himself came to regard as his finest novel: *Witchwood*, another Scottish historical novel, set this time in the mid-17th century. The Scottish historical figure for whom Buchan appears to have had the highest regard was James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose: so much so that he published two biographical studies of a man he saw as a truly heroic figure. The first appeared in 1913, the second, a revised and more mature study, appeared in 1928. In other words, Buchan was writing *Witchwood* almost exactly at the time when he was back at work on Montrose. It is then no surprise to find Montrose actually appearing briefly in the novel.

In *A Lost Lady of Old Years*, Buchan chooses not to become involved in providing any kind of analysis of the issues at stake in the 1745 Jacobite rising. The focus of the novel is very much on Birkenshaw's adventures, and his complex relationship with the doomed Jacobite leader Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat – and, as we have seen, Birkenshaw's motivations have little or nothing to do with religious or political beliefs. The historical context of the civil wars involving Scotland and England in the 1640s is more fully addressed in *Witchwood*, but even here the main focus is not on an historical event. In fact, the central theme of *Witchwood* is one that links it to another major tradition of Scottish historical fiction: Calvinist extremism as a feature of Scottish religious, political and social experience.

In the debate surrounding the recent referendum, questions were frequently asked about the role of Scottish literature in relation to nationalism and the union. Where, one historian asked, was the great novel about 1707 and its consequences? For me the answer – if there is one – has to be Scott's *Waverley*, published exactly 200 years ago in 1814. Its closing powerful image of the magically restored estate of Tully-Veolan – devastated in the conflict of the '45 – points to the reconciliation and unification achieved 'sixty years since'. But it is true that the era of the union has proved less amenable to the Scottish novelists' imagination than has the religious strife and violence of the decades that preceded it.

Calvinism has, in one way or another, stimulated some of the most admired works in Scottish fiction: Scott's *Old Mortality*, Hogg's *Justified Sinner*. Galt's *Ringan Gilhaize*, and more recently, James Robertson's *The Fanatic* and his *The Testament of Gideon Mack*. Buchan's *Witchwood*, however, should certainly be added to this list.

The protagonist of *Witchwood* is David Sempill, a young, idealistic Presbyterian minister in the Scottish borders, who finds himself locked in a bitter confrontation with leading members of his congregation whose Calvinist extremism, he comes to suspect, coexists with a secret commitment to the practices of an ancient pagan world. This social and religious confrontation in the parish of Woodilee is set in the context of the Scotland-wide political and religious strife of the 1640s. Montrose, originally a supporter of the National Covenant and the Presbyterian party in the early years of the English Civil War, having become disillusioned by the behaviour of the leaders of the Kirk, switches to the Royalist side. Initially successful at the battles of Inverlochy and Kilsyth, Montrose is finally defeated at Philiphaugh.

This background is foregrounded when Montrose and a few followers briefly pass through Woodilee. But Buchan's interest in Montrose remains the true source of his novel's power. Writing his Montrose biography, Buchan had immersed himself in 17th-century sources. As a result, he is able brilliantly to catch the biblical-rich rhetorical language and style in which the contemporary religious debates were conducted. Equally fine (and equally surprising) is his use of Scottish vernacular speech – the young minister's housekeeper, and a range of other local characters, speak a Scots of such density and richness that most readers, including Scottish ones, will frequently be checking a glossary or reaching for a dictionary of Scots.

Finally, Montrose is crucial for another reason. As I have indicated, Buchan admired Montrose and sympathised with his attempt to remain a supporter of the Covenant while repudiating the politics of the Presbyterian party. The historical figure makes only two brief appearances in the text of the novel, but the impression Montrose makes on David Sempill proves unforgettable. Ultimately, I would suggest that Buchan finds a way of keeping Montrose, and crucially the values he stands for, in his novel, by creating Mark Riddel, a companion-soldier, who is effectively Montrose's double.

It is the voice of Mark that Buchan deploys to confront and demolish the attitudes and arguments of Calvinist extremism. In a great chapter called 'The Witch Hunt', it is Mark Riddel who dramatically defeats a 'pricker's' cruel attempt to identify an old woman as a witch, and it is Riddel who is Sempill's key defender against his Calvinist critics in the novel's dramatic closing scene.

Buchan seems to have written thrillers ('shockers', he called them), with consummate ease. With *Witchwood* he wrote what deserves to be better known as a major Scottish novel.

# Scotland's history boys

Christopher Harvie

2014

## I

Knighted Scots historians are like buses. You wait for years and then two turn up. We now have a balanced ticket in Sir Hew Strachan and Sir Tom Devine. Strachan's K is technically 'for services to the Ministry of Defence' but obviously rests on the massive structure of his *The First World War*, whose opening volume *To Arms!* came out in 2001. Armageddon's two master-historians – John Buchan and Strachan – come from the unpeopled tranquillity of Broughton parish, Peeblesshire.

Motherwell-born Devine's K is more intriguing politically. With many a book, conference and edited series to his credit, he has served well to win his honour – not just as an historian but politically as the first lay leader of Scots Catholicism, as its clerical leadership falters and its politics shift.

Back in 1997, the Celtfest he organised expertly at Strathclyde University on 19 September centred on Seamus Heaney, was much more than a fitting wrap-up to the devolution moment (in Wales we had – if only just – voted Yes the day before). It created confidence for the egg-dance of the Good Friday negotiations over power-sharing in Northern Ireland in 1998. Only Glasgow could have taken that lead and, thanks to Devine, it did so.

Last year after a Llafur meeting, a Welsh socialist friend marvelled at the nobility on the platform of the 'People's History Society': Sir Deian Hopkin, Lord Elis-Thomas, Lord Merfyn-Jones, Lord Morgan of Aberdyfi. But a century ago saw Sir John Rhys, Sir John Edward Lloyd and Sir John Morris Jones preside over Welsh academic history's birth. The London establishment showed a tactful patronage, less visible in Ireland: Carlyle's 'Young Ireland' friend Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, 1816-1903, wrote valuably about 19th-century Irish culture and politics, but his KCMG came from being premier of Victoria, 1871-80.

Scotland is catching up, with Sir Tom as a Paris-figure judging the politicians (he came out for independence). Troy wasn't burned but maybe Catholic Scotland, Rome's 'special daughter', got another chance. He really seems to be 'first of that ilk'. Sir Denis Brogan, 1900-74, made an academic mark for Scots Catholics. Knighted in 1964, he was equally adept in American and French history, but Scotland? No.

Before Brogan there was Sir Robert Rait, 1874-1936, K 1933, whose Scottish history chair had been financed by Glasgow's 1911 exhibition. He wrote up the pre-1707 parliaments and co-authored *Thoughts on the Union* (1920) with the partly-Scots Prof A V Dicey. But Rait, like Dicey a unionist, was born in the English Midlands and went to Oxford.

As to Sir William Fraser, 1816-98, whose memorial chair Sir Tom occupied at

Edinburgh, could he be defined as an historian? Salisbury knighted him for sorting out the Scottish State Papers over the years and he ran a lucrative sideline in books on family and clan history: his *Red Remnants* massive enough to outlast the libraries of long-vanished Victorian-baronial piles by William Burn and David Bryce. There was even another Sir William Fraser, Baronet of Ledclune, Inverness-shire, a near-contemporary Tory toff publishing on Wellington and Disraeli.

## II

Evelyn Waugh wanted to be descended from a peer. Somebody told him he was:

'Your great-grandfather was Lord Cockburn.'

'Yes, but he was a useful peer, a law lord. I want to be descended from a useless peer.'

Scots law lords were so useful they never went to Westminster. The title was equivalent to a knighthood, as was the quaintly plebeian English 'Mr Justice'. A baronetcy was hereditary, usually possessed of land: even if the last inheritor of a new one was Sir Mark Thatcher.

Benjamin Disraeli was a Walter Scott fan, but mocked baronets, creating Sir Vavasour Firebrace in *Sybil*, 1845, droning away about his order's claim to sit in the Lords. He had even less time for Scots dukes, noting of one: 'If I gave that man the Thistle, he'd probably eat it'.

Some Scottish Tory baronets wrote history like Sir Herbert Maxwell, 1845-1937, and Hugh MacDiarmid wished they wouldn't.

Knights were useful. Military knighthoods rewarded soldiers for courage as well as competence, until the universal Victoria Cross 'for bravery' came in to rescue the generally catastrophic Crimean War, 1854-6; 'Treasury' knighthoods compensated mandarins for modest salaries: Thackeray and Trollope might laugh at Knights Commander of the Bath, but they were important in the colonies. A title went down well among local notables, known by function rather than by family.

## III

The Scots gentry had started writing further back. But after the mid-18th century, with Britain headed for top nation, statistical or legal professionals got their foot in the door. They reinforced Principal William Robertson's and David Hume's essentially commercial history-publishing (Hume memorably bowing out on the great line: 'Too lazy, too fat, too old and too rich') with the accessible statistics and information provided by Edinburgh's *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1769): notably Sir John Sinclair Bt's immense *Statistical Account of the 1790s*: the 'Great Northern Bore' establishing – through a horde of parish ministers by main force – how the country was changing.

Sir John Malcolm, 1769-1833, KCB 1815, took similar care of Eastern India. Coming from the same wilds as Thomas Telford, Westerkirk between Lockerbie and Langholm, he joined the Honourable Company at 12, conquered Persian, Urdu and Hindi, became

general, diplomat, governor. His histories of Persia (1815), Central India (1823), and Clive's career (1836) remained standard for a century: 'a man of real intellectual genius' in M E Yapp's recent revisionist account. It would be nice to claim Sir William Napier's famous *The War in the Peninsula, 1828-40*, as Scots. The name sounds right, but he and his even more dramatic brother Charles were of the Irish branch.

Similar effort at uniting imagination, literacy and law got Sir Walter Scott, Bt, 1771-1832, an equivalent reward in 1820: a down-payment for fixing the 'Royal Jaunt' to Holyrood in 1822. Scott's history was more innovative than romantic, depending on the discovery and close reading of documents, handling oral evidence, knowing French and German.

Leave the long poems and Waverley Novels aside, his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1805) was part of a remarkable co-operative advance in folklore research, aided by the gifted team of James Hogg, John Leyden of Denholm, and Henry Weber, and in 1812 it became a model for the Grimm brothers, and other author-philologists who made nations. Scott's eight-volume *Napoleon* (1827) didn't just pioneer 'contemporary history', it reflected Scott's own national dominance and his rescue of the British monarchy for – and from – George IV.

Other knights cropped up in the professions and industry, busy creating their own histories, explaining how distinct sectors had developed. Sir James Caird, 1816-92, KCB in 1882, was the ideologue of 'high farming' and emigration in his agricultural studies. British India, and how it was to be governed, dominated the juridical history – 'from status to contract' – of Sir Henry Maine, 1822-88, son of a Kelso doctor. Maine's *Ancient Law*, 1861, contested Lord Macaulay's utilitarianism. If the 'Civilians' survived the climate, treatise and knighthood – in Maine's case KCSI: Knight Commander of the Star of India, 1871 – often followed.

#### IV

This element of what Sir David Cannadine has called 'ornamentalism' changed traditionally-honoured professions. No-one could imagine Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832, being knighted (though his innovative admiral brother Samuel was). Engels's 'absolute bourgeois' had himself stuffed as an 'auto-icon' to inspire London university meetings: an approach that didn't catch on.

Sir Henry Maine would have many successors, among them the earnest Liberal Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff, MP, 1829-1906, Governor of Madras, GCSI 1887, who annually lectured the folk of the Elgin Burghs on European politics, had correspondents ranging from Friedrich Engels to Princess Victoria of Prussia, and perhaps even coined the term 'Victorian'.

Administrative and economic history tended to be leery of the calculus of Benthamism and keener on, well, history. A laird like Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, Bt, 1784-1848, didn't illuminate the Waverlike novel, but his studies of Highland natural history – of forest and *The Great Floods in Morayshire*, 1829 – forbode Chris Smout in our own anxious day.

Honours for literature helped squeeze more out of the professionals, like the mighty Orcadian Sir James David Marwick, 1826-1908, who as town clerk ran Edinburgh and then Glasgow, and edited their charters and papers. Knighted in 1888, JDM had a son, also James, who went to New York and founded Peat Marwick, one of accountancy's Big Four in the days when accountants were 'boarrring'. This was the favourite word of my boss and friend Arthur Marwick of the Open University. He came from the Quaker side of the family and was the life-force personified in 'distance-learning', dominating a time in the 1970s when film was used honestly in history studies. He would have liked to be a useful peer like his friend Asa Briggs, but 'People either rave about him, or change the subject'. No K or coronet for him, then.

## V

'Germanism' marked the explosive oeuvre of Thomas Carlyle, 1795-1881. He was arguably a third hand at work in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. In 1841, his *Heroes and Hero-Worship* was 'a blast of Annandale Grapeshot' against historical mechanism and what he saw as the Whig arrogance of Lord Macaulay. The latter was a best-seller though only after 1857 a peer. He never spoke in the Lords. Carlyle lived on to take a 'Blue Max' Pour le Merite from Bismarck and turn down a baronetcy from Disraeli, just when Theodore Martin, 1816-1909, became Sir Theodore, KCB 1880, and arguably the first Scots 'official' contemporary historian.

He wrote *The Life of the Prince Consort* (5 volumes, 1875-1880). Influenced by Scott's circle, Martin was a Blackwoods-man, and in tackling Albert the German, a Fraserburgh background came in handy, the place being run by Germans dealing in herring. He died a 'British' celeb, settled in north-west Wales, married to a famous West End actress, Helen Faucit, with a small locomotive named after him.

Meanwhile, not far away in Shropshire, Sir John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, Bt, 1834-1902, had studied in, rather than at, Edinburgh in the late 1840s (as a Catholic he was barred from Oxford) but Gladstone gave him a political peerage in 1869. Acton owned 40,000 books, wrote very few, but before he died in 1902 he had planned the monumental *Cambridge Modern History*. He was building on the work of two other Liberals, Sir Leslie Stephen, 1832-1904, KCB 1902, family from Kincardineshire, who sired Virginia Woolf, and Denholm's other philologist Sir James A H Murray, 1837-1915, K. 1908. They became editors respectively of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* after 1879.

Acton's and Stephen's friend James Bryce, 1838-1922, cut a similar proto-Europhile career with a famous Oxford prize essay on *The Holy Roman Empire*, 1864, though he only went to the Lords in 1913, after five years as Washington Ambassador. The American Commonwealth (1889) was still a standard work in the Harvard of Jack Kennedy; Bryce's fluent federalism is sorely missed in today's Europe.

## VI

The Scots history knight needed scope and good health. A heart-attack at only 59 deprived Colin Matthew of recognition for his Gladstone scholarship, and the huge task of replacing Leslie Stephen's DNB with the *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1990-99: many of his own near-800 entries and revisions featured Scots: 'Great news for dead Scottish women novelists' was Isobel Murray's admiring if ironic summing-up. He wouldn't have been backed by Thatcher, as he helped ensure she didn't get her honorary Oxford degree. A solid Labour man, we toasted in straight malts the end of the Tories on Oxford Borough Council – 'the Last Enchantment' – in May 1998.

One of Colin's Scots was John Buchan, who missed out on his K despite working for intelligence and propaganda and editing *Nelson's History of the Great War*. It rankled. Buchan, awesomely productive, fastidious, progressive, was rewarded in October 1935 with 'Lord Tweedsmuir' and 'Go out and govern Canada!'

His term accomplished much of the Empire-into-Commonwealth transit, but the ritual parades and speeches, wining-and-dining must have been physical torture for a sick man weighing scarcely eight stone, not much more than 'the competition' – the tiny Mohandas Gandhi.

A cheerier tale was that of Sir John Alexander Hammerton, 1871-1949, K 1933. He started out as a monumental mason in Glasgow, grew up in the entourage of Sir J M Barrie, and churned out Harmsworth's best-selling reference works, aided by the tenth-to-twelfth editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His *Daily Mail History of the Great War* was blatant propaganda, but he revisited it in 1934 in an accessible rewrite that brought in 'revisionists' such as Basil Liddell Hart, assessed the human costs and appreciated the comprehensive nature of the tragedy. Have 'TV historians' – Niall Fergusons and Jeremy Paxmen – improved on it? No.

'Sandy' Hammerton didn't do rankle. He owned a 'superb' Lagonda, and raced it round the south coast with glamorous actresses aboard. 'Lucky sod' said Arthur Marwick.

## VII

Two last knights, and a more worrying view. Sir Angus Wilson, 1913-91, K 1980, was of Scots South-African background, out of the Devine diaspora. All professions need a novel, and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, 1955, remains a classic take on the academic historians Wilson surveyed from the dais of the issue-desk of the British Museum Reading Room, picking their way through the crater left by a saucy medieval relic – in fact an Edwardian spoof. One of his characters Rose Lorimer, a Scots-sounding name, was said to be based on the eccentric late-medievalist Dame Frances Yates; her father was for a few years a Clyde engineer.

Dame Rosalind Mitchison? Never happened. Chris Smout's DNB entry records that when the grand-daughter of the Canadian historian George McKinnon Wrong turned up in 1950s Edinburgh, one possible employer told her to take up schoolteaching. Rowy

fought on, defining the issue itself in the Saltire Society's first *Why Scottish History Matters*, 1991. Though she was the sole woman among nine authors, she had breached the wall of Scottish economic history. Many came after her, from Marinell Ash to Jenny Wormald. Twelve out of 36 contributors to Devine and Wormald, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History*, 2013, are women – at least parity with the Holyrood figures.

They have had to fight all the way. 'No Gods and Precious Few Women?' I know, and hang my head. There shall be a woman First Minister but there's – still – nothing like a Scottish history Dame ... though we had until that other 18 September referendum at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club – crazy name, crazy place? – our own Planet of the Chimps, waggling their club ties at the barred principal of St Andrews University, Louise Richardson.

But whae kens Sir Hamilton Gibb? 1895-1971, K 1954, educated at Royal High and Edinburgh and London Universities, Gibb became in 1937-55 the doyen of Arab studies, at Oxford and later at Harvard. According to Professor Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1971), Gibb's deep structure of Old Testament scholarship, derived from such Free Churchmen as Robertson Smith and Duncan Black MacDonald – whose Scots Calvinism the Arab Anglican said never really got to terms with – contributed to the dogmatism of American 'orientalism'.

Embedded in 'area studies', its extensive and expensive political influence in the years since Said wrote, in the hands of Mossad or the CIA, was implicated in Yom Kippur, Lebanon, Gaza, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq...

We have to live, or maybe die, with that.



# The ruthless literary Scots

Kenneth Roy

2016

It must have felt like a good idea at the time. Many years ago, I was one of the organisers of an event held in honour of Scottish luminaries, in each case the award being made in the name of someone recently dead. The award for literature, named after Iain Crichton Smith, went to his fellow novelist William McIlvanney, himself now recently dead. The patrons of the scheme asked no more of its recipients than that they brought along a short piece for delivery and subsequent publication: a sort of acceptance speech including a few kind words about – in this case – Iain Crichton Smith.

Out of a fairly large group, the only award-winner who didn't bring along a script was the one professional writer. At the door of the hotel afterwards, where McIlvanney was having a smoke, he said with a smile: 'So you'll still be expecting me to write something?' It was the last I ever heard from him.

I forgave, though never quite forgot, this minor breach of faith. You had to forgive anyone who wrote as well as he did. But the unanimity of the posthumous adulation is astonishing. There seems to be a ritual of modern lament which starts with the early morning Tweet from the First Minister, in or out of her wellington boots, and is then dutifully followed by a stream of hagiography testifying to the near-sainthood of this national treasure or that. Consensus has become a vital part – maybe even a weapon – of romantic nationalism; any dissent from that consensus is bad form if not actually treacherous.

An alternative view of McIlvanney, however, feels almost like a civic duty – if only in the interests of critical discussion. He was a terrific essayist, especially in his influential political commentaries for the (Glasgow) *Herald* in the 1980s and 90s, and as a chronicler of our hard man culture he had many fans. But the claim, routinely made, never more eloquently than in this magazine last week, that he faithfully represented in his novels the Scottish working class, and its flipside the criminal underclass, bears only an approximate resemblance to the reality of either.

While McIlvanney, a decade older than myself, was a school-teacher and facing nothing more menacing than the first years at Kilmarnock Academy, I was watching the hairs grow on the backs of the necks of the real hard men in late 1960s Glasgow. The press box in the High Court – my daily habitat – was located immediately behind the dock, so the reporters were in the closest physical proximity to a succession of the most notorious criminals in Scotland. It may disappoint the readers of *Tartan Noir*, the sub-genre credited to William McIlvanney, to learn that the accused were almost without exception extremely boring people. Their violence made them no more interesting, simply more repellent. Nor was

there anything fascinating about their opposite numbers, the police witnesses, from whom, as professional liars, they were barely distinguishable.

I found the lawyers more intriguing. Nicholas Fairbairn, who defended the worst of the villains, exuded a sleaziness almost visceral in its impact, while the more brutish judges derived an obvious and unwholesome pleasure from the power they wielded. I imagine a few must have privately regretted the passing of the death penalty. Satirical novels based on such grotesqueries as Fairbairn and the judicial sadists might have told us things about this small society that we needed to know and didn't know already. But the Scottish middle class escaped – then as now – the detailed scrutiny of the literati, who went for easier, more familiar targets.

McIlvanney's fictionalising of the working class, though insightful and sympathetic as far as it went, was not wholly reliable either. It told us half a story – essentially that of the Scottish male and Scottish maleness, the sort he so handsomely personified. It told us far less about the story of Scottish women, many of whom were victims of abuse, mental or physical or both, at the hands of that noble savage, the Scottish male. Much of the story of post-war Scotland – the story of its women – has never been told. Male novelists are the last people who would wish to tell it. The results might be all too self-revealing.

As it happens, the only Scottish-born creative writers I have known socially were two women who struggled for acceptance in our aggressively male culture. Joan Ure (Elizabeth Clark was her real name) wrote short plays and stories which are out of print, if indeed they survive in any form. She was starved by the neglect of the men who ran the show. She wondered whether, in Scotland, there was anything in it for Ophelia and converted this thought into the title of a play; but, of course, she knew the answer. There was nothing in it for Ophelia. And even if a Scottish Ophelia wanted to share the story of her life, the tough guys down the pub – the ones immortalised in our literature – were unlikely to want to hear it. When Billy Connolly jokes on stage that 'I know a Scottish guy who loved his wife so much he actually told her one day,' he goes beyond humorous observation into darker territory. It is territory we prefer not to explore too deeply.

My second writer friend, Ena Lamont Stewart, viewed Scottish malehood with cold-eyed detachment, producing from her experiences as a young woman working in a Glasgow hospital a painful critique of the male-female relationship in a working-class household. She called her play *Men Should Weep*. Although written 70 years ago, its themes are universal; and the injunction in the title, from a Scottish perspective, is as pertinent as ever. The fact that the play looks likely to live on is a miracle; the Scots had buried it until an Englishman, John McGrath, rediscovered it and Ena was rescued from obscurity late in life, an Ophelia for whom there was ultimately something in it – one of the very few.

The sub-text of the critical acclaim for William McIlvanney was once encapsulated by the critic Philip French in a single phrase. French lavished high praise on modern Scottish literature for its quality of 'unsentimental ruthlessness'. This must have referred to McIlvanney among others. It certainly would not have referred to the work of Joan Ure or

Ena Lamont Stewart (or, for that matter, Iain Crichton Smith, whose memory was commemorated in the award to McIlvanney).

*Unsentimental ruthlessness...* I remember how much I loathed the phrase. It described a Scotland whose existence I longed to be able to deny because it evoked so chillingly the nature of our culture, yet I sensed that it was no longer possible to deny it and that the gentler, more sceptical Scotland of my imagination had gone, if it ever existed. So I have the ruthless literary Scots to thank – for the shattering of personal illusions, if for precious little else.

# A better kind of noise

Katie Grant

2016

When I picture my mother, I picture her on a horse, questing for old packhorse routes buried beneath the moorland squelch. She had more success than that other great questor, Don Quixote, of whom she created a lively clay sculpture, stolen by some bastard when, after my mother's death, my father opened the garden under the National Gardens Scheme. I harbour dark thoughts about that thief. But let's return to picturing my mother. Where do you picture yours? And where do you imagine your children picture you?

I hope that mine picture me at the piano. It's my favourite place, so it's unsurprising that the closing down sale of the Edinburgh Piano Company caught my eye. Ninety pianos went under the hammer, some grand and Grand, some less so. I knew none of them. I don't think I ever set foot in the Joppa Road warehouse. Yet all day I felt the loss because sometimes, waiting for an appointment or early for a train, I while away odd half hours in piano stores, no doubt irritating the staff when it's reasonably clear, despite my fibs, that I'm not a potential buyer. Harrods has been a favourite. What choice! My greatest thrill, however, was 10 minutes on a legendary Fazioli at Jacques Samuels on London's Edgware Road. 'Do you like it?' asked the salesman. I effused, but in truth, so overcome was I by the Fazioli name, I might have been playing a table-top.

And anyway, 'like' isn't what I feel about pianos. It's more visceral than that. Pianos without stools, or shut away in chilly parlours like Aunt Maud in her coffin, upset me. Percussive and silken, solid and fluid, pedestrian and magic, pianos are mechanical miracles, and beautiful or ugly, expensive or cheap, they need playing. Ah, you'll think, she's going off on one about the value of music, and how she wishes to pass that onto her children. I could, but that's only half the story. The real value of a piano is that even if music's not your thing, the act of playing helps make sense of the world, and if ever humanity needed perspective and sense, it's now.

Getting anywhere with the piano requires not just the traditional trio of practice, discipline and dedication; it requires patience, humility, and a crash course in frustration management. The piano is a complicated instrument. It's tiring to translate the printed score onto the keys, to work out fingering, to change fingering according to experience, to hear yourself repeat the same mistake time and again. But there's nothing – not pills, not gin, not Netflix – that more effectively pares away the grubby fuzziness of the day. Not even running. Running leaves your mind free. But for as long as you sit at the piano, open to the instrument and the music you're trying to play; so long as you forbid yourself the cheating sustaining pedal; so long as you accept exposure of every smudged note, clunky phrase and misjudged touch, you're fully engaged: body, mind and soul.

The engagement is so profound that when you get up, you're changed. Not mystically unless, perhaps, you're a piano-maestro. Fumbling amateurs like me simply find themselves cleansed of Brussels Tartuffery, Holyrood Pecksniffery, Westminster bombast and the rest of the modern era's unrelenting and purposeless noise. The piano, of course, makes a noise too, but even when loud, it's noise with purpose and nuance. Poor playing may be painful but it's still a better kind of noise.

Incidentally, this is why, over the EU referendum, whilst hugely enjoying the priceless comedy of the SNP directly contradicting themselves as they urge us to vote for, er, union, I shall listen most carefully to William Hague. Ousted from the Tory leadership in 2001, he took up the piano, and with brief gaps for the pressures of high office, has been working at it ever since. A politician who practises the piano has the right instincts even if those instincts don't always prevail – I stick in that proviso quickly because Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State to President Bush at the time of the Iraq War, is a very fine pianist, and mistakes, she made a few, and not just at the piano. That she admits to error, though, may be connected with her piano playing. Playing the piano is the antidote to smugness. You're never satisfied with what you've done.

Yet alongside the dissatisfaction, the piano is benignly addictive. If you practise you will get better. Yesterday, I couldn't play this bar hands together, that bar without stumbling, and muttered 'impossible' when I saw what lay in store over the page. Today, I've made a go of hands together, the stumble is less stumbly and after a bit of teasing out, the impossible downgrades to difficult. Tomorrow, I'll build on those small steps, and I'll not just be better at finding the notes, I'll understand better the musical nuts and bolts. At the end of the year, I'll celebrate my snail-like improvement and wonder anew at the astonishing marriage of engineering and emotion that is the piano's heart.

Naturally, those who've taken up other instruments will be hottering. What about the violin, the flute, the drums? Wonderful instruments, all. But the piano steals a march because of its almost unique self-sufficiency. You can play alone your whole life, and although playing with others is delightful, it's not essential. With a piano, you'll never be lonely.

Perhaps that last thought is key. Perhaps I always picture my mother questing on her horse because that was where she was at her happiest, most rewarded, most complete best. I don't have a horse and my own quest is not for packhorse routes but to experience, under my fingers, music well mastered and well understood. It doesn't seem silly, then, to hope that my children remember me sitting at the piano – not for my playing which, thanks to the marvellous invention of the silencer, they hardly ever hear, but for what the instrument has given me: happy purpose, reward for work, clarity in a fuzzy world and a daily, life-affirming dose of meaningful noise.

# I weep for my maze

Allan Shiach

2018

It took over 25 years to grow to full height and consisted of several thousand yew bushes, lovingly tended, trimmed and fed until those bushes became a single yew hedge and a full part of what was almost certainly the largest hedge maze in Scotland, a robust competitor to the famous Hampton Court Maze in London. It was laid out in a field just a hundred metres from a large, fine Edwardian mansion house and flanked by a beech hedge, touching the edge of one of the oldest forests in Scotland.

I know all this because my wife and I commissioned the maze, planted each of its thousands of individual bushes upon the chalk-marked ground, where the design swirled in multiple directions around unknowable obstacles. We then reared it with uncommon pride over the past 30 years. The span of a young man's life. Our children grew from looking over it to looking up at it over three decades. It was situated on ground in a private property near Forres, upon the flat area of a hillside which looked west with views for 30 miles over the Moray Firth and the hills of the Black Isle and beyond Inverness.

The maze was in the shape of a ziggurat laid flat upon the earth. A ziggurat, like the one erected 1,000 years ago in Babylon, was a massive structure built with diminishing steps as it reached upwards. The design and planting was made and supervised by Britain's premier designer of hedge mazes, Randoll Coate, whose other labyrinths enhance half a dozen European castles as well as Combermere Abbey, Blenheim Palace, Longleat in Wiltshire and diverse installations in distant places like his maze tribute to Borges in South America.

His mazes invariably consist of multiple symbolic designs interlinked by the simple fun of a short (or, in the Morayshire case, quite a long) stroll through nature. Among the multiplicity of his designs is the formal and elegant Marlborough Maze at Blenheim Palace, his Beatles maze in Liverpool featuring a yellow submarine, his Garden of Eden maze in Falconberg, Sweden, where men enter through one gate and women through another, each following their own swirling paths until they meet up in Adam's rib near the centre of the maze.

His parterre maze at Grey's Court, known as the Archbishop's Maze, is a work of simple elegance. The maze he designed and installed in an important chateau in Belgium is multi-dimensional as the centre of the rectangle on which it is sited rises higher than the sides. This gives to a pyramid-shaped garden of greenery.

The ziggurat labyrinth in Moray was designed to provide a walk of about a kilometre if no errors were made. The central objective was a circular fountain with a bronze statue of Icarus, plunging into the water. In Greek legend, Icarus's father, Daedalus, was the first creator of the maze.

Coate was a man of immense culture. His mazes encompass every aspect of his personality: wit, artistic knowledge, elegance and profundity. He fully merits the description given to him by a recent article in *Country Life* as 'the father of the modern maze.' The ziggurat maze was among the last of his designs. He died in 2005 at the age of 96. War hero, linguist, diplomat and – for the concluding 30 years of his life – designer of symbolic labyrinths.

Our maze was planted in the 1980s, an immense labour which involved preparing the acreage, tilling and fertilising the unyielding ground, laying out the design over the prepared surface and planting the thousands of individual yew bushes which would eventually coalesce into a single, intricate hedge. Coate had designed a maze for a property we owned before, one in Gloucestershire, laid out in the shape of a giant's footprint, the longest toe assigned a small island of its own in the river. This property was sold in the 1980s and subsequent owners have maintained it immaculately.

Yew grows very slowly and the climate of Moray does not encourage it to grow any faster. It took more than 25 years for those bushes to reach maturity and provide a dazzling maze, sprawling intricately over the landscape, pruned, trimmed and fertilised each year, its pathways of bright green lawn between the dark green of the hedge. The maze is filled with symbolism, references to Greek myth as well as to the Highlands which gave it birth.

Photographs give no good idea of the pleasures of a labyrinth. The voluptuous feel of closely trimmed hedges, the mild surprise of a dead end path, the awe-inspiring achievement of reaching its heart, the delight of training a dog to lead you in and out, the sense of abandonment given by becoming confused about which direction to take. An aerial photo shows only a geometric form laid out on a field.

The labyrinth was grown in yew because yew is one of the few things in nature which is almost eternal. Yew grows and renews itself slowly. Yew trees can last between 200 and 400 years. As they sense their end, their branches rise and then drop into the rotting centre of themselves and become the roots of the next generation. Yew is the perfect plant for a maze intended to outlast generations of owners.

To decimate something as carefully considered and beautiful is, in the absence of good cause, a brutal act. It is, I suppose, my fault that this agonisingly realised and beautiful installation no longer exists. I should have invited those who care for Scotland's landscapes to offer it official protection. I neglected to do that because I couldn't imagine why anyone might one day wish its destruction.

This maze was nurtured on private ground which, although open to the public on occasion in the past, was nonetheless entirely in the ownership of private people on a private estate. When the property changed hands, no entailment required owners to maintain it or to cherish it. And the current owners chose not to. So no complaint can be held against them. It was theirs to do with as they pleased and it pleased them to remove it from the face of the land.

They chose to demolish the maze, I am told, because they favoured a vegetable garden.

Or they thought the pathways which seared into the patterns of the ziggurat were too narrow. Or... well, who knows why people destroy things that others have taken decades to create? The maze is gone.

I am sad because of the wasted time, expense and affection which over the years went into creating something utterly unique. A significant feature of Moray, built to endure through generations, capable of handing pleasure down through the decades, is now gone. The house, I see, is now offered as a bed and breakfast property. Their guests will have no idea of what once lay behind that beech hedge unless a few fragments remain. But those fragments will not have purpose, nor design, nor elegance. After 30 years of loving care, watching our children and grandchildren romp between the narrow hedges and splash in the fountain, there are now (or will be soon) vegetables. So I am told. I cling to the hope that I have been misinformed.

But I know otherwise. It is hard not to weep.



# Attlee, the forgotten man

Bill Paterson

2018

I'm not given much to conspiracy theories but I know a lot of people who are. Particularly those who haunt the tortured realms of Facebook and Twitter and dive into the rabbit holes that entice them with warped suspicions of how everything on the planet is run by 11 mysterious people. However, one recent theory has caught me short. Some dear friends are now telling me that Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk* and Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour* have a narrative that supported Brexit. That they are deliberate propaganda.

The inspiring tales of how our 'plucky little island' stood against the big beast of Nazi Germany are a metaphor for our stand against the Dark State (sic) of today's EU, and Britain, or more specifically England, should not flinch from standing alone once again. With that respected film critic Nigel Farage telling us that both films are essential viewing and should be screened in schools, perhaps this is one conspiracy theory that might just be worth examining. Then I think about it.

Both films, particularly the earlier *Dunkirk*, must have been in the writing and pre-production process long before the Brexit referendum was a gleam in David Cameron's eye. Film-making is a tortuous process and the two or three months of actual filming are only the tip of the iceberg. So I personally don't see a planned conspiracy in either film. What I do see though, is a dumbing down of facts and a longing for simple black and white that is very much the way we look at things in 2018.

On Sunday, Gary Oldman won his well-deserved Oscar for Best Actor for his transformation, indeed reincarnation, as Churchill. Watching it on a big screen, I would have gone through a list of a dozen actors before I would settled on the wiry, hip, youthful Gary as the actor so superbly inhabiting the PM's jowly baby face. Aside from that superb performance, the film gives a real sense of the tensions in those crucial days of May and June 1940. Production values are high, the supporting cast of politicians and military top brass really look as if they belong to the period and even the King, for once, actually seems just like the man on our stamps when I was a boy.

Then, just when you think *Darkest Hour* can do no wrong, a torpedo smashes it amidships. For reasons best known to the diversity unit, the film takes our beleaguered Prime Minister down to the District Line to canvass the views of 'ordinary' Londoners on accepting peace terms with Germany. Much has been made of how fictional this episode is, and it's generally admitted as a load of tosh, but much more important is the truth that it takes the place of.

The only appearance of Clement Attlee in the film is right at the start, as he uncharacteristically and stridently harangues Chamberlain to resign. Then he disappears

from sight. Rather than be one of the strongest voices supporting Churchill in his refusal to do a peace deal with Mussolini and Hitler, he is treated to oblivion by our film-makers. The truth is much too mundane, so let it literally go down the tube.

Here I must declare an interest. I played Attlee to Brendan Gleeson's Churchill in *Into The Storm* for ITV. I lost myself in Attlee's political life and came to an enormous respect for this quietly dedicated yet wily man who changed Britain's life just as thoroughly as Churchill. He was the nuts and bolts of the War Cabinet. Churchill acknowledged this and the Labour contribution to victory.

*Darkest Hour* completely ignored it and that might just be enough to call the film a conspiracy. Perhaps it's time for a biopic of Attlee. I'm pretty sure Oldman could do it.

# Set in Scotland, a tale for all time

Marcy Leavitt Bourne

2018

Nominated again for the 2018 Saturn Awards for best fantasy television series, which it won in 2016 and 2017, the Scotland-based series *Outlander* may have at last tapped into the zeitgeist; a world where women are speaking up and men are listening. If Ursula Le Guin can write a fairy tale to address the issue of abortion, then Diana Gabaldon – in her 25-million book sales series – can certainly be said to have used fantasy to tackle the reality of how men and women struggle to maintain their individuality within intimate relationships. My training as an art historian taught me to look at the language being used to describe or criticise a work of art, as much as for what is not said as for what is actually written.

It seems to me that attempts to define and to review *Outlander* are looking at it through a prism of language that relates to more easily defined genres, and therefore they fall back on definitions that tell us more about what it is not rather than what it actually is. For instance, that it is not really *Game of Thrones* in kilts; that it is not really feminist 'enough'; that it is not quite sci fi nor really about fantasy. Instead, I think it is too extraordinary to be pigeon-holed. Amazing direction, superb acting, wonderful costumes, brilliant dialogue and based on a series of books that are loved by millions, there is more to *Outlander* than immediately meets the eye. Not to mention the fact that Laura Donnelly (as Jenny in the series) has just won the Olivier Award for Best Actress for *The Ferryman*, and Tobias Menzies has just been turned into Prince Philip in *The Crown*.

To me, one of the great strengths of *Outlander* is that it avoids a narrow definition. It is truly a tale for all time. Holding that thought in mind, I wondered if its underlying power comes from the timelessness of myth and fairy tale, and whether or not it shared some of their enduring appeal. First of all, however, it has to be said that it is a wonderful adventure, full of twists and turns and suspense, terrific characters, and much interaction between them. It creates a whole world, especially in Scotland. But one needs more than that to engender such devotion among readers and viewers; and what is that?

Like fairy tales – which come down to us over hundreds of years – there are elements that stand out and provide the deep bones of the story. Three aspects in particular are ones I want to set out here. I want to look at it as a kind of archaeological exploration of a tale that resonates psychologically.

A fairy story often involves children, one or two, sometimes siblings, but less often includes the parents. Children must search, hope to find, and fend for themselves, occasionally in harrowing circumstances. What they are really in search of is some aspect of themselves, so that they may be whole, and carry on into adulthood successfully. They may save another, sacrifice themselves, do down a terrible threat and be redeemed.

When we meet the two main characters, Claire and Jamie, they are orphans. I think this is important, even though they are in their 20s. Claire lost her parents when young, suddenly and together; Jamie lost his mother early on, and his father later, a death for which he feels partly responsible (as children would). Loss and separation are issues that never leave us, no matter how old we grow. We are ill-advised to ignore this, for much of life is spent searching for a relationship that will help us to deal with it. Claire has become a nurse, where she can care for others; Jamie, in a different way, takes on responsibility for others also (such as his group of desolate Highlanders in prison after Culloden).

Both of them are drawn to children and are able to relate to them in the most natural manner, such as with Fergus or with Jenny's children. Not everyone knows how to do this. To me, all of this suggests that they come together as a couple looking to rescue and repair each other. One can be competent, large, strong and capable, and still be in need of repair.

In our own 21st-century culture there is a feeling that to be 'strong' is to not admit to emotional needs. That somehow self-protection involves denying that there is fear. This is particularly true of how men are expected to see themselves, that their power and pride are taken from them, and instead of turning to women in partnership, they see equality as threatening, or, perhaps, we construct our culture in this way in order to perpetuate it. The obvious point here is that a relationship between a man and a woman (or any combination) does not work well when treated as a competition or power play.

The whole 'Time's Up' and 'Me Too' movements are witness to the struggle that is going on today. There are varying degrees of taking responsibility. Jamie and Claire help each other. They each exhibit strength in acts of humanity. Sometimes it is obvious (as in a rescue from being burned as a witch, or a medical emergency of being stitched up) but often it is the more obscure psychological wounds that they deal with. Jamie trusts Claire with his flogging scars because he says that she does not show pity, but accepts it. He doesn't need or want pity, he just wants acceptance.

The acceptance of each other is one of the great strengths of the story. And it is a strength of any relationship. It is the failure of the relationship with Frank, the first husband. We know from the beginning that it will not work, because Frank says, as Claire leaves on the train to go to the war-front, something like 'this isn't the right way around'. His sense of manhood is threatened by Claire going off. He doesn't really accept who she is. And though there was a kind of love there, there is not that much-needed sense of understanding who the other truly is.

In *Voyager* this comes true, as Frank is unfaithful (fair enough, she got married while time-travelling) but is also vindictive in his desire to try to hang onto 'his' daughter. (And what a tour de force of acting both his roles are by Tobias Menzies.) So, Claire and Jamie. One of the best scenes of how each accepts the other, especially Jamie of Claire, is telling him where she comes from. Unfazed, he just says it might have been easier if she'd been a witch. This is a fairy tale element, but its underlying truth is a reality. Each of us has an

inner self which, when we tell someone about it, we hope will be believed and understood. Jamie accepts the most improbable story, and lives with it.

As well as this acceptance of the other in a relationship, for it to succeed over time (and I am speaking here of positive relationships, not collusive damaging ones) there needs to be trust and fidelity. Claire and Jamie have this in spades, and I would be surprised if this is not why Diana Gabaldon fans find the relationship most inspiring, and one which they turn to as an exemplar. This couple grows up together. Sam Heughan radiates a boyish enthusiasm early in season one, and although Claire was married and saw the horrors of war, Caitriona Balfe imbues Claire with a great sense of humour. Their devotion to each other grows and so does trust and fidelity. One does not doubt this, which is unusual in a modern story (not forgetting that these books were begun in the 1990s).

As each helps the other to grow, they are confronted with the giants and ogres of life. Only their mutual trust will keep them from going under. I would suggest that there is a universal meaning to two situations that are astonishingly well dealt with here, which test trust. One is the rape of Jamie by his British nemesis and his resulting loss of sense of self. Claire is ready to sacrifice her life to hold on to what they have together. Both, in their way, persevere to bring their relationship back from the brink of loss. She insists that he speak. More relationships have foundered over one or the other hoping that understanding will spring from guesswork and silence than can be counted. He meets her halfway.

Then there is the childlessness question, followed by grief at the death of their child. These are quagmires for story-telling for a so-called popular audience without being unredeemably tragic. What keeps this story afloat is the love of the central characters every time. They face it together, and they look ahead, not in an overly romantic way, but just that they must go on to survive. What *Outlander* does is what every great story can do, it assists us in comprehending life, which includes death. Within the confines of a fairy tale, this is what children understand unconsciously. Within the series of *Outlander*, the relationship is written as a drama – a fantasy for adults that is based on reality.

There is one scene among many that shows how Claire and Jamie almost read each other's minds. They are not afraid to exchange what we traditionally accept as male/female roles between them. It is funny – with brilliant comic timing from both stars – and clever. When we first meet the rather bedraggled John Grey, trying ineffectually to cut Jamie's throat, there is an act within an act that is outstanding. As Jamie threatens the hapless teenager with a red-hot dagger, Claire appears. She takes in the scene, pauses, expresses anger at the situation and goes into a damsel in distress act.

Jamie takes only a second to see that her idea is better and seizes on a scene of ravishing Claire that takes in the innocent John Grey, who, after all, is a gentleman. Even the kick that Claire gives her husband is acted out as if given in earnest (and probably was) with a wonderful fleeting look on Jamie's face. There is such mutual understanding and cooperation in this scene that it could stand as an example in drama schools. And later, looking at the male:female power-sharing ratio, Jamie is not afraid to thank her. Previous to

this scene, she had put herself in his hands when her own terrors were too much for her. And so it goes, back and forth, with trust and fidelity. These giants of loss, fear, and the remnants of former nightmares are mutually shared.

Another way in which *Outlander* is a story for our time is its approach to sex. For fairy tales, the sex comes later. Beauty and the Beast go off into the sunset, and so do Cinderella and her prince. Nevertheless, it is understood that there is something more. Happily ever after implies an unknown but rewarding future. In 21st-century culture, sex has been hijacked by an industry that distorts and diminishes sex and sexual love. Young people are presented with a distorted and damaging view of sexuality. The *Outlander* books were enthusiastically read by many in their early 20s in the United States, and these readers are now great fans of the television series. That generation is lucky to have had these books.

It would be hugely beneficial to today's teenagers to be shown a large part of *The Wedding* episode in schools, as an antidote to the porn that the boys, particularly, and the girls have access to. I don't want to get into the argument about how Claire is 'forced' into this (both of them in fact are pushed into the marriage) because I think that many young people feel 'forced' into having sex, by their peers, by porn, by general gossip. And curiosity. So one could say that *The Wedding* metaphorically could stand in for any young person's first sexual encounter (okay, Claire is experienced, but she is still frightened).

There are young girls who are led to believe that it is 'all about the boys'; there are boys who are led to believe that it is all about them, and are surprised that it is not like the porn episodes they have been watching, and make their girlfriends watch so they will make the 'correct' noises. This outstanding *Outlander* episode is tender, awkward and very funny at times. Well, sex can be like that. That's not to say that I have ever seen anything like it on television. Astonished hardly describes it. How successfully these two brilliant actors depict the insecurities of their characters, yet build the action to a mutual appreciation of each other as individuals, and amusingly portray the admiration of each other's bodies.

To return to the characters as young people who have suffered early loss; the moment Jamie gives Claire his mother's pearls is significant. He is transferring his love and trust to his wife, I believe, in this action. He says as much. He has bravely taken on that fear – which we all have who love others – that he has something to lose. He knows in this moment that he has found the person who is able, if you will, to restore him. He is 'manly' in doing so, but it is a kind of manliness that many men do not know how to do.

In the 21st century, we are presented with examples such as the relationship in *La La Land*. Yes, a charming film, in its way. Beautiful to look at. However, the relationship is positively toxic (with dancing), yet reviewed as if it were romanticism at its best. There is the inexplicable callousness, the selfishness, the lack of being able to talk to each other, and, in the end, it seems to lead to unhappiness for both. The relationships that pass for love in film and television are often shallow and far from celebratory. There is plenty of sex, but where I think *Outlander* is very different is that the sex comes from a genuine psychological magnetism; it isn't peripheral or intrusive. It's all part of the tale.

To return to the idea of fairy tales – stories that stand the test of time because they speak to us at a deeper level, while carrying us along with their stories – location also enters into this. Scotland has a quality of unspoiled beauty, a place of nature in which a kind of magic is possible, a secret garden where a lonely soul could be nurtured into full growth.

In *Outlander* there is loss, loyalty and reconciliation. There is also, as in all good myths, exile (20 years' worth) leading to renewal. In this case, it is exile from each other, but, equally, it could represent a marriage that wakes up after 20 years and must reshape itself. Who is to say that all of these elements from fairy tales are just for children, and not needed by adults who are in the midst of the vicissitudes of life.

Through her characters of Claire and Jamie, Diana Gabaldon has created just such a story, and this is why *Outlander* is difficult to categorise and write about, and most importantly of all why it is timeless. Reviewed as 'fantasy', which is fine, but perhaps we have reached the point where we can accept and applaud the idea that fantasy can be a very effective vehicle for explaining reality.

# The next act: what should follow Creative Scotland?

Gerry Hassan

2018

Festival time is upon us again in Edinburgh. The yearly jamboree of the various festivals and Fringe take over our capital city, bring a select part of the world to our shores, and give a platform which presents a vibrant, dynamic Scotland on an international stage.

At the same time, all is not well in the official world of culture in Scotland. Two weeks ago, the publicly-funded body, Creative Scotland, lost its second head, Janet Archer, in its relatively short history. Archer resigned after a troublesome year. There was controversy in January when Creative Scotland announced its long-term funding of arts and cultural bodies, jettisoning 20 major arts companies from its regular support list, reducing it in others, and then, when pressurised, engaging in a hasty U-turn reinstating funding for five bodies, and finding more monies to ease some of the losers. It all seemed back of an envelope stuff.

The respective companies were confused. Staff at Creative Scotland were left bemused and without a clear line. And politicians, Culture Minister Fiona Hyslop included, showed their dismay.

A body such as Creative Scotland is in a bind in such funding situations. Losers make noise. Many can still remember over two decades ago when the then Scottish Arts Council pulled funding from the once left-wing firebrand theatre company Wildcat Stage Productions. The truth was that their best work was long in the past, with the banner of heresy and dissent passed on to a new generation.

Such funding processes have to involve winners and losers, otherwise there is no point in the process. Imagine if every organisation who had previously won funding had it protected and guaranteed forever. That would be a recipe for complacency, even more of an insider class, and would erect an even bigger barrier against new cultural entrants. Thus, change and some controversy is endemic to this walk of life.

Allowing for this, there was still something jarring about this year's announcements. It was more than poor communication both externally and internally. It was more than the mini-U-turn by Creative Scotland, or Janet Archer's inadequate expression of 'regret' before parliamentarians. It was even more that some of the casualties who had all their funding pulled, such as NVA, were trailblazers held in respect here and the world over, or that subsequently, NVA and Culture Republic, the arts audience development company, announced that they would shut up shop.

The longer backstory to all of this is the strange story of Creative Scotland and what it was established to do and represent. It was set up to situate arts and culture in the terrain of the creative industries and creative class, which is fundamentally about arts and culture as



part of government policy, from economic development to social justice, diversity, inclusion, and nearly any other area you care to add on. Art and culture as public policy, tourism, consumption, and, of course, being monetised and reduced to business speak and logic.

Some will shrug their shoulders and say that arts and culture have to be pragmatic, go with the flow of political fashion, and that this is the price to be paid for a seat at the top table. But something more was at work.

Creative Scotland's genesis as an idea at the turn of the century wasn't a home-grown eureka moment. Instead, it was directly imported from the height of New Labour and the Westminster Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) when all was abuzz with talk of 'the knowledge economy' and 'Cool Britannia'.

Creative Scotland came north aided by triumphalists and cultural consultant blowhards selling their wares, and being bought by a succession of Labour ministers here – Mike Watson and Patricia Ferguson being particularly relevant. Creative Scotland was and is a simulacrum as an idea: a poor copy of a New Labour/DCMS flawed idea – one which was about the economy and its winners, about diversity and inclusion in a narrow sense, and pseudo-business speak and logic. The implication of this was a depressing one for Scotland: namely, that we had no original ideas about how to cherish, celebrate and platform arts and culture in our own country, instead importing a threadbare set of ideas with a questionable worldview.

An undercurrent flows from this of how the SNP, 10 years into office, think and see culture, which seems to amount to little more than a steady as she goes, don't frighten the horses, and do as little change as possible, approach. It is this flawed idea which has never had any widespread affection, love or buy-in from artists, cultural figures and administrators, which informs the stramashes of recent times.

When controversies like the January funding debacle take place, Creative Scotland, to use the language it itself invokes, has little or no cultural capital to draw on, and hence, the shit hits the fan.

There is a recurring pattern. When Creative Scotland was set up in 2010, its first chief executive, Andrew Dixon, became embroiled in a major national controversy about how the organisation did its business. This entailed a significant part of the arts and cultural world saying that it was unhappy with CS, but most of this focused on administrative processes and over-bureaucratized form-filling, rather than the body's values and purpose. Eventually Dixon had to go, along with the controversial Venu Dhupa, who Dixon had brought with him.

All of this should have been an opportunity for a reset but, alas, this didn't happen and so we are where we are. Comic book success Mark Millar has said 'my dream job would be to take over Creative Scotland, run it like Hollywood' and turn it into a cultural body that makes investments, generates profits, and increases its pot of money. This totally misunderstands the role of a publicly-funded arts and cultural body, that art is more than business, and that there needs to be publicly-subsidised art and culture.

But there is disquiet all around which isn't surprising considering the origins and purpose of Creative Scotland. Discounting permanent miserablism, there is widespread unease. People worry about 'the cultural cringe', the relationship of a body like CS to government, and where genuine, heretical, and even leftfield art and culture come from, funding and audiences. A generation ago, BBC Scotland and STV used to invest in this sort of thing – alas no more.

Creative Scotland, or whatever comes after it, has to exist in a society which doesn't just have tight public spending rounds (although CS managed to make a mess of a funding round where it had an uplift of £6.6m on the previous year). The very idea of authority and decision-making is constantly up for challenge. It is salutary to remember that in the first 30 years of its existence, from 1967-97, the Scottish Arts Council was not the subject of one parliamentary debate or question. The 'Scottish arts establishment' of that age, the likes of Magnus Linklater and Seona Reid, could reign in relative peace, making decisions without scrutiny, and without having to justify themselves in public. That was an unsustainable system which disintegrated with the arrival of the Scottish Parliament; in fact, the first inquiry into the then Arts Council happened in 1998 in anticipation of devolution, with its then leading personnel not liking or adapting to it.

Scotland is blessed by a rich ecology of passionate, talented, gifted people who love arts and culture, and many artists who create unique, precious work. Yet, in the last decade, something has gone amiss about how we officially think, promote and fund this rich, wonderful world. After recent experiences, instead of just appointing another head to the flawed idea of Creative Scotland, why don't we dare to have the courage of our convictions and do something bold and Scottish-born?

There is a rich world of successful cultural bodies to draw from for inspiration, from the National Theatre of Scotland, to the Scottish Book Trust, the revitalised Saltire Society, and such recent start-ups as Creative Dundee and Creative Edinburgh (which, despite their name, have no connection to Creative Scotland).

Why don't we, after the age of Creative Scotland, the creative class and knowledge economy, the last two of which are now globally seen as discredited terms of bubble economics, create something of our own which reflects the best of our ambitions and values? We could even call it the New Scottish Arts Council, and then give it the room, not Mark Millar-like, to have space from government to experiment, take risks and invest in and advocate in the cultural imagination.

We cannot go back to the old ways of pre-1997 and the old new ways of the last decade have proven even more troublesome. We could even try to reclaim and reinvent the word 'creative'.

# The right way to restore Mack's broken vision

Mary Lockhart

2018

Some years ago in Rouen's Place des Carmes, I was intrigued by the sound of the percussive chink-chink of chisel on stone. In the cathedral I discovered four or five masons surrounded by bits of broken carved stone. Gargoyle tongues. Angel wings. The plump curved calf and delicate foot of a cherub. And blocks and cubes of freshly quarried grey stone.

The gate to the masons' workshop was not locked so I entered and asked if they minded if I watched them work. They were about to have a break and I was invited to take bread and cheese with them. These were part of a team of generations – craftsmen and women who had been working since their apprentice days on restoring the medieval fabric of the churches of Rouen destroyed by bombing in the Second World War.

After a couple of hours in their company, one of them suggested that I might like to meet the stained glass artist who was cutting and assembling the glass for the restored stone filials of the rose window at l'église de Saint-Ouen. She would arrange for him to meet me at the church at 11am the following day. So next morning I went to the church and into its calm light and soaring pillars, and stood in the deep quiet. There seemed to be no-one else there, and I thought that perhaps the artist had not wanted my intrusion.

I could see that the windows were screened and the light filtered by white plastic sheets. Absorbed by the tranquillity, the sudden and silent manifestation at the foot of a nearby pillar of a small man in working clothes took me by surprise. He smiled and unhooked himself from the rope and harness by which he had abseiled from the rose window.

Would I like to come and see his work? He opened a door inside the pillar, and round and round its interior, up and up we went, emerging in the blaze of sunlight between the stone lacework of the window and the white of the plastic sheeting. The tracery of the stonework was silhouetted grey on the sheets, with sudden bursts of translucent, radiant colour projected where the glass had been replaced – jewels in a delicate crown. He showed me the drawings from which he was working. The intricate detail of the sliver by sliver, piece by shaped piece, of the gem-coloured glass. He heated and melted lead, and began to build another part of the celestial jigsaw first conceived and made centuries ago.

It is always possible to rebuild. Across continental Europe, decades of work on war-ravaged towns and cities have produced artists, artisans, craftspeople and engineers of antiquity, who have rebuilt, almost from scratch, the tangible cultural heritage of the continent. Money was short after the war. Industry was destroyed, nations bankrupted, and people were hungry. Yet Europe was rebuilt.

Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh building could be rebuilt. Young people could learn

craft skills in wood, glass, metal and stone, and people from all over the world could visit and marvel. The fire and rebirth could become part of its story and its triumph. But I am not altogether convinced that it should be rebuilt as the kind of art school it has been till recently. It may be that for the next century we need a school of fine art and restoration, where students would learn to use traditional arts and crafts of restoration, of paintings, of sculpture, of instrument-making and gilding, stained glass and replication.

As an art school, GSA was a building well ahead of its time. But not so far ahead of its time that it continued to be the best possible building and setting in which to develop artists 100 years and more after it was so beautifully and cleverly designed.

I loved that building. Loved what it stimulated and produced. I feel it as part of my own identity, and grieve for its destruction. But the budding artists of tomorrow are using very different techniques. They are working with installations, digital animations, projections of light, incorporation of sound. I wonder if future generations will feel that in our lack of confidence in our contemporary artists and architects, and our lack of political will and vision, and our deep pride and emotional attachment to a building we loved, we gave them a replica of the art school of the past and missed an opportunity to imagine and build for them an art school for the needs of the future.

Sometimes restoration is a barrier to new life and creativity, unless its purpose is reimagined. The fly in amber is a thing of great beauty and we treasure it. But its wings are held still, its buzz is silenced, and its eggs are unlaidd. We should have the courage to find the capital both to rebuild what was, with a new purpose, and to set about designing and constructing a world-class building for the future – with outdoor space for sculpture and architectural modelling.

It depends on how much the people want that and whether they are willing to pay for it. Right now, the bereavement phase is only beginning, and there must be time made for lamentation and grief. I fear our tears for Mackintosh's vision may blind us to the challenge of developing our own.

# Modern jazz at Dizzy's

Alan McIntyre

2018

New York shamelessly proclaims itself as the capital of the better things in life, like art, fashion, theatre and literature. London and Paris might legitimately object to some of those, but when it comes to jazz, New York has a strong argument. Although the term 'jazz' was first coined in New Orleans 100 years ago, many of the key figures in its development like Parker, Coltrane, Monk and Miles Davis, all gravitated to New York, making it the epicentre of this most American of art forms.

When I first moved to the city in the early 1990s, I was already a jazz fan, having spent many afternoons in Glasgow listening to Bobby Wishart at the Halt Bar. But an early experience of sitting in an East Village club, mesmerised by the raucous improvisations of the Mingus Big Band, was a true revelation.

While the Village Vanguard, the Blue Note, and other smaller clubs still play a central role in the vibrant New York jazz scene, the high temple is now clearly Jazz at Lincoln Centre (JALC), where I worship regularly with my 15-year-old tenor-sax-playing son. JALC was founded 30 years ago by virtuoso trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis, and its mission has always gone beyond presenting the music to encompass education, advocacy and preservation.

JALC's zeal to protect and sustain what, by its improvisational nature, is a transient musical form, is sometimes taken to extremes. During a recent Dizzy Gillespie-themed big band night, a stylishly-dressed narrator walked on to the stage mid-tune, holding an old radio microphone, and brought the music to an abrupt halt by starting to talk loudly about a Yankees baseball game. The explanation was that there were never any written charts found for this Dizzy composition, so the only trace of it was a radio recording that ran over and got cut off by the sports news. Not knowing how it was meant to end, the JALC arrangers just transcribed it up to the point where it was so rudely interrupted.

I love these big celebratory and educational nights in the Rose Theatre, but often the true joy of music comes from unexpected gifts – the stochastic stumbling into something new, exciting and truly memorable. I received such a gift a few weeks ago. I had arranged to stay in New York on a Tuesday night rather than going home to Connecticut, but the business dinner I was attending got cancelled at short notice. I could have gone home, but I had a 7am breakfast meeting arranged in the city the next day, so I popped open my favourite 'what's on' guide and started browsing. Nothing at the Blue Note or the Vanguard caught my eye, but Dizzy's Club at JALC had an interesting event. A one-night-only, one-set-only, debut album launch by a drummer-led trio I'd never heard of, and it had the added attraction of being free.

Unlike most other NY jazz clubs, Dizzy's isn't in a basement. Instead, it looks out over Central Park at Columbus Circus. Usually, it's a three-sets-a-night place, but for this album launch it was a single early show at 7.30pm – an hour at which many jazz musicians are still at brunch, even on a Tuesday. Dizzy's offers typical cabaret-style seating at small tables for four, but along the bar and the back wall there are single high stools, and that's where I perched myself, just one more suspect in a jazz-loving line-up.

With nothing much to do but sip a glass of wine and people-watch, it soon became clear that I was gatecrashing a friends and family party, and that I would be in a white minority. I was even a minority within that group, as a fair number of attendees appeared to be part of the affluent Upper West Side Jewish community that's the bedrock of many jazz audiences in New York. As groups of three or four people came in, many would weave through the crowd, hugging and fist-bumping their way to their seats. Many of the statuesque African American women could easily have been extras in *Black Panther*, complete with shaved heads, while many of the men in their 20s and 30s were impeccably dressed in light summer suits accessorised by pocket squares. Unlike my random materialisation at Dizzy's, this was clearly an event that had been marked in their calendars for a while.

As the club filled up, I watched a young black guy, maybe in his late 20s, be shown to an empty table for four, where he took the seat directly facing the stage. An older white couple, maybe in their early 60s, were then ushered to the same table by the hostess. Rather than have one of them take the seat with their back to the stage, the duo just sat down bracketing the solo fan. Before long, the three of them were deep in conversation and sharing a laugh, with jazz clearly transcending any visible cultural divide.

We were all there to see the Henry Conerway III trio launch their album *With Pride for Dignity*. I'd taken a cursory look at Henry's biography, but beyond 'young jazz drummer from Detroit,' I hadn't dug much deeper. On the low stage, back-lit by the setting sun illuminating the stone buildings across the park on 5th Avenue, were the usual Steinway, a stand-up bass, and a drum kit sitting on a blue-tasselled rug. When the trio walked onstage, some of the genes and dress sense of the audience were visible in Henry: tall and slim, shaved head, glasses and goatee, wearing a pin-striped dark suit, with blue velvet slip-on loafers and no socks. He was joined by pianist Kenny Banks and bassist Kevin Smith, sporting more beards, braces, and a pork pie hat between them, with each of them acknowledging plenty of people in the crowd as they walked on.

The lights dimmed, and the hour or so that followed was an impressive showcase of modern jazz, powered by the octopus-like drumming of Henry, that was in turn propulsive, lyrical and innovative. At one point, he started a tune with a tambourine and then proceeded to use that tambourine to hit the cymbals, conjuring a shimmering wall of undampened fizzy vibrations that he then punctured with the whip-like crack of his snare drum. On another tune, he started by eschewing the drumheads altogether, and instead just clicked-clacked his way around the rims in some obscure time signature, evoking the sound of the late summer cicadas outside. Kenny Banks was no slouch either. He kept the

Steinway lid almost closed throughout the set, creating a series of dense, rumbling, blues chords that rippled around the room.

The centrepiece of the set was the extended title track of the album, which turned out to be a potted history of the spiritual journey of African Americans. Starting with a Joplinesque ragtime piano introduction, the tune evolved into a multi-part mini-suite, including what sounded like faint echoes of both the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and Gershwin's *Summertime*; the latter eerily reflecting the Jewish-African American mélange of the audience.

As the piano carried the narrative, I spent more time watching Henry. Rather than his foot just going up and down on the hi-hat pedal, it was also moving side to side in a circular motion, as if two dimensions weren't enough to contain his energy. As the song progressed, Henry traded sticks for mallets, with each of his four limbs appearing to inhabit a distinct rhythmic universe, but somehow still working together to assemble a rich syncopated mille-feuille of drum textures, while he bounced and shimmied on his stool.

As they transitioned into their last song, Henry took the mic and asked the audience if it was okay to play the blues; a rhetorical question if I ever heard one, that elicited a quasi-religious chorus of 'hell yeah'. As the set came to an end, it was now fully dark outside, with red car tail-lights twinkling along 59th Street. Diagonally opposite JALC is the Trump International Hotel. In the day time, the windows are mirrored, creating a reflective gold tower, but at night you can see into rooms that have the lights on and curtains open. As the final blues unspooled from Henry and his band, I could see a single white female dancing in one of those rooms, twirling to some unheard music like a flower child from 50 years ago in San Francisco. Whatever music she was hearing, it was clearly out of sync with the laid-back groove infusing Dizzy's Club. With the current political and cultural crisis affecting the US, it seemed an apt metaphor to cap a special night – a night that I was fortunate enough to have been a part of.

As I walked back to my hotel, my steps were synchronised with the sounds of Henry's drums, as I'd downloaded the album on to my phone before I left the club. I know that being a professional musician is a tough career choice. If it's sage advice to never put your daughter on the stage, it's even better advice to never put your son in a jazz trio if you value a steady income. So, I had a big smile on my face when I noticed the following morning that Henry's album was sitting at #1 on the iTunes jazz chart. I'm sure Henry had a lot of pride in that, but for this casual observer, the whole event also had a sense of much-needed grace and dignity about it.

# *Widows* is as thrilling as it is unexpected

Jean Barr

2018

*Widows* is Steve McQueen's first film since *12 Years a Slave*, five years ago, and it is his first venture into genre fiction, with a heist thriller that is as thrilling as it is unexpected. People who want a good story, vividly told, will be glued to their seats for its entire intricately plotted 130 minutes, confident that none of the unanticipated twists and turns in this film are just for shock value or dramatic effect. McQueen has other aims and treats in store.

*Widows* is based on Lynda La Plant's two 1980s BBC television crime drama seasons about the aftermath of a botched armed robbery. La Plant, who wrote the BBC TV series *Prime Suspect*, starring Helen Mirren, is adept at depicting complex multi-dimensional female characters. McQueen and *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn transplant her story from London to Chicago's troubled southside, so as to tell a thoroughly modern tale of class, race, sex and religion, where 'criminals are like cops' and fired-up black preachers fuel the flames of division. Some of the acid humour of the original British version is retained, much of it carried by Colin Farrell, smartly cast as crooked politico Jack Mulligan, trying to hold onto the alderman seat that has been in his family for 60 years.

Jack woos local constituents with a programme of support for small businesses bearing the catchy title, 'Minority Women Own Work'. 'Can I have a MWOW?' he smarmily rallies the audience in front of a line-up of newly empowered, totally unconvinced, female entrepreneurs. In one brilliant face-to-face scene, reminiscent of *Hunger*, he disowns his ghastly father (played by Robert Duvall) because his rancid racism has become a political liability even for him, in the newly predominantly African-American ward, due to boundary changes, where Jack is incumbent alderman.

The surface plot of *Widows* is revealed in the opening sequence. A screeching car chase is seen from the vantage point of a getaway van with its back doors flapping open in scenes that are intercut with shots of mobster Harry Rawlins (Liam Neeson) and his wife Veronica (Viola Davis) kissing in bed. A bomb explodes, flinging an armoured van towards the camera and sending glinting fragments, twisting and turning, towards us – a great metaphor for the remaining two hours of dramatic fragments that will be flung our way.

When Harry is killed in the foiled heist, his widow must face the consequences. According to local criminal (and aspirant local politician) Jamal Manning (Brian Tyree Henry), \$2m belonging to him burned in the car explosion along with Harry. Veronica has to pay it back within a month or else. Two other widows are left shell-shocked and financially shafted: Linda (Michelle Rodriguez), a mother of three whose dress shop has been repossessed because of her husband's gambling; and downtrodden Alice (Elizabeth Debicki), mourning a wife-beater husband, while being egged on by her awful mother to



prostitute herself. Debicki astonishes by being very funny, particularly in a scene where she poses as a mail-order bride. The three eventually join forces to pay off Jamal by following a blueprint plan for a heist that Harry has mysteriously left Veronica in a safety deposit box. They later enlist hairdresser Belle (Cynthia Erivo) as their getaway driver.

A subplot about a pending mayoral election pits Jamal Manning (who wants to be the ward's first African-American alderman) against Jack Mulligan. Jamal's brother and henchman, Jatemme, played by Daniel Kaluuya (*Get Out*), is brilliantly cast as a cold, reptilian killer/enforcer in a sharp suit. In one unforgettable scene in a gym, a 360 degrees rotating camera captures a terrified young man as he raps, ordered to do so by Jatemme, who has a score to settle. The audience is lulled into thinking it's going to be all right, after all, as Jatemme starts nodding to the beat. But, of course, it's not all right.

We worry about and *care* for the women, particularly Veronica, played magnificently by Davis, whose dignified presence dominates the film. Her character is much-maligned – more so than anyone – a fact revealed in a shocking tip-off provided by the fluffy white dog she caresses like a child for most of the film. Stern and driven (she smiles only once) Veronica is the lynchpin around which the rest of the action turns. She is doubly bereaved, we realise, as images of lovemaking with her husband and flashbacks to the tragic loss of their son recur throughout the film. In one powerful scene, she pauses before a closed door, doing and saying nothing, yet managing to convey renewed grief and hardened resolve as she realises the terrible wrong she has been done. Being totally silent, speaking volumes, it is a dazzling, chilling moment.

In their basic tale of bereaved women taking the law into their own hands, McQueen and his collaborators keep coming up with fresh ways of laying bare the canker at the heart of routine everyday corruption in America. Veronica is not just shafted by crooks and bad luck. She lives in a society that doesn't give a damn, where it's every man or woman for himself or herself. The way McQueen stages his film tells us this.

Themes of police corruption, domestic violence, and race-based poverty are there in the texture of every frame – in the pacing and precision of editor Joe Walker cuts, in the imaginative visual storytelling of the director and cinematographer, and in Hans Zimmer's hypnotic, pulsating score. We hardly notice the music – just a few beats to start with, gradually increasing in pace and volume as the heist gets going, then building to a pitch, matched by Walker's quick-fire editing, as the women's well-rehearsed heist moves to its excruciating knuckle-biting conclusion.

Wide framing emphasises the social distance between characters; faces are frequently seen in mirrors and through glass, as when the two rival politicians meet, and we watch them, gauzily obscured, through a window. The fractured nature of this world is captured by Sean Bobbit's camera, swooping down from classy apartments on high to rubbish-strewn streets below.

In one amazing extended take, a conversation taking place inside a moving car (about violence) between Manning and his assistant/wife, is shot in real time entirely from outside

the car. The camera follows smoothly alongside its blacked out windows, never focusing on the passengers, their conversation heard only in voiceover. The effect is uncanny. What we do see is a minor character, the driver, as we experience the short distance separating the slums of the projects from the gentrified district just up the street. It is a brilliant way to point up the irony of the topic of conversation, as we note houses and streets changing before our eyes, in the space of minutes, from small and rundown to big and set well apart.

Such audacious filmmaking is to be expected from Turner prize-winner McQueen. Given his previous punishing preoccupations such as starvation (*Hunger*, 2008), sex addiction (*Shame*, 2011) and enslavement (*12 Years a Slave*, 2013) we just could not have anticipated such an utterly entertaining blockbuster as *Widows* from him. What a treat.

# Brave Scots in the New World

Marcy Leavitt Bourne

2018

The wide sweep of the Starz television series *Outlander* has left Scotland behind and this new season, called *Brave the New World*, is now set in America, specifically North Carolina, in 1767. Nevertheless, it was filmed in Scotland. All art forms, to some extent – television included – comment on the conditions of their making, sometimes obviously so, at other times there is a sub-text. *Outlander 4* is no exception to this.

The focus of the previous three seasons was the relationship between the two main characters, Claire and Jamie Fraser, which ended with their love and loyalty intact, soon to join other Scots in settling in 18th-century America. Once a story has reached the point of the 'happy ever after' stage, where do storytellers take their audience? Where will the threats and suspense now be positioned? There are the expected tropes here, yet there is an edge, an element that subverts this genre so successfully at the very start that, whatever follows, the audience is aware that beneath the action there is a deeper commentary about the world in which we are *now* living.

Bringing the series of books by Diana Gabaldon to the small screen is a tricky assignment, which, in consultation with the author, Ronald D Moore and Maril Davis as executive producers seem to relish. Choices of language, glance and gesture, create the nuances that can subtly shift expectations in viewers. The order of scenes builds the structure for the storyline to follow, giving the viewer information with which to interpret what comes next.

These are decisions that have repercussions when telling any tale. It is clear from the chapter headings that *Outlander 4* does not follow the sequence of the book, *Drums of Autumn*. This is a decision that affects the narrative flow and immerses the viewer immediately in the themes which, one imagines, the producers felt needed to be established. These themes have resonances in the 21st century also.

There is always a strong moral compass to the *Outlander* stories, and so it remains. The theme of 'faith' is bedrock. In the first episode, *America the Beautiful*, the idea of the soul is mentioned in relation to the living and the dead, and in a quiet but strong scene between Jamie and Claire, Jamie says that his soul will still be hers when his body dies. Faith – the Frasers are Catholic – informs their relationship, and also their relation to the world around them. When Claire expresses the opinion that she does not believe in owning another human being, she is asked if she is a Quaker, as only they hold such outlandish ideas.

What we learn from these early scenes is, above all, that Jamie and Claire hold their marriage sacred; that there is corruption among the clergy – as when Jamie is asked for a

bribe to bury their friend in a churchyard – that members of one religion are against slavery and others find it acceptable. The moral integrity of the story rests with the Frasers, and circling around it are the tangled ways in which religious differences – often the source of conflicting social beliefs – create tensions.

Today, in 21st-century America the role of religion is harnessed, even hijacked, in order to build on those tensions, to support any number of issues that are more politically motivated than they are faith inspired. Indeed, there are those today in politics who would claim that faith is the defining feature of their life, as they defend highly questionable moral positions. Without spelling it out, *Outlander 4* hints that issues such as this are already evident in this place and at this time in the American past.

Nevertheless, there is also 'hope'. The first few episodes stay in the 18th century, which is a directorial choice, away from the trajectory of the book. This clarifies the political situation in North Carolina, including immigration and the allocation of land. Politics and immigration, a powerful mix. It was hope that brought so many settlers to America from Scotland in the 1730s, even before the deprivations in the years following Culloden: Highland Scots, who settled in the area of the Cape Fear River, as did Jamie's Aunt Jocasta. They wrote letters home, telling of opportunity. In the early 1770s, thousands of Highlanders emigrated from Scotland and settled in the colony of North Carolina. There were, as well, the Lowland Scots and the Ulster Scots, who came to be known as the Scots-Irish, mostly Presbyterian, and other nationalities. It was the English, however, who were in charge.

By the time the Frasers arrive in the New World, counties had been established, representatives were elected (among the wealthy landowning class), and a governor and council men formed a general assembly. Governance depended on the integrity of the local officials, and this was often called into question. Unrest stemmed from anger against what was seen as unfair taxation and lack of equality.

How is this situation conveyed in the episode *America the Beautiful*, and what of it echoes down the years? Jamie is drawn to the country, for his greatest desire – like that of 21st-century men and women – is to provide a living for his family. Claire looks out over the wooded hills and tells Jamie, from her knowledge of the future, how the country will grow, how immigrants will come in their thousands, taking ancestral lands and destroying lives. She relates it to how the Highlanders were treated by the English. Jamie's reply is succinct: 'A dream for some can be a nightmare for others'. The land itself is almost a character in the story. It is beautiful, and it invites respect from those who settle upon it. It is not unlike Scotland.

Politics and sexism come to the fore when the Frasers are dinner guests of Governor Tryon and the elite of North Carolina. In a discussion about taxation, Claire dares to express her opinion, unheard of in a woman, that she is against taxes that 'bear disproportionately on the poor'. In the second episode, *Do No Harm*, Claire once again is at odds with current thinking concerning slave ownership. Jamie's Aunt Jocasta herself

vouchsafes that she wishes she could speak her mind but that 'the unsolicited views of women are not welcome'.

In the final scene between Aunt Jocasta and Claire, in the third episode, before the Frasers leave for the mountains, there are modern echoes of gender politics. While Jamie (the man) is seen as blameless, Claire (the woman) is criticised for undue influence (power) over her husband (any man), as if he were unable to make his own decisions, or take responsibility for the choices made. Jocasta is looking to blame someone, and so opprobrium is easily cast on women, even by women.

Land distribution becomes a loaded issue as the governing powers have decided that Jamie is the 'right kind of settler' to whom they can make an offer of acreage. The governor, over a glass of French brandy, says to Jamie: 'There is the law and there is what is done'. In those few words, the corruption at the heart of the removal of land from those living on it is made quite clear. He says, furthermore, that there are requirements, one of which is a payment and the other is loyalty to the king. This is a purchase of loyalty, which, as Claire points out, will leave them on the wrong side of history once again. Jamie's desire to stay stems from his belief that he can make it a better land for the next generation, and for those who follow, including his daughter.

What has happened to the American Dream? The phrase was coined in 1931 by the historian James Truslow Adams, and it centres around the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, and how hard work can achieve success. It was an appeal especially to families, and it became a national ethos. Being born in America conferred this privilege on children. Deviating again from the book, the characters of Marsali and Fergus have not been left behind in Jamaica, but instead have come as part of the Fraser family, and their child will be born in America, of immigrants. In telling the story for television, what pointers lead to the current day? How has 'hope' held up?

Immigration is a fraught issue, not only in America, but across Europe, including the UK. The idea of 'a nightmare for others' depends on who says it and where, and what people believe is at stake. Politicised language obfuscates the significance – positive and negative – of proposed immigration. In 18th-century America, it suited the Crown financially to increase the population. In America today, there is much value placed on the idea, the ideal, of 'family', and, while there has been outrage at the separation of illegal immigrant children from their families, leadership from the government has sadly been lacking. The spectre has even been raised of removing the right to citizenship of children born in America.

*Outlander 4*, in coupling the usefulness of immigrants, politically and economically, with the 18th-century seizure of land from the indigenous people, shows how little honest analysis went into the structuring of the system to oversee this development. Instead, we see greed, bribery and political lobbying from the very beginning. A form of neo-colonialism exists today: politico-business interference, with little concern for conservation of the land or benefit to the locals. The use of the word 'savages', implying inferiority, finds

its echo today in talk of 'the poor' in the UK, or the 'forgotten' in the US, as if somehow their situation had been of their own making.

The early episodes of *Brave the New World* also show how the 18th century set spinning a series of positive events, the repercussions of which are felt today in America and around the rest of the world. The ideals of the American Dream have inspired in generations the belief that democracy can prevail, that decency and fairness will eventually reap rewards, that virtue is admirable. Love of the land and the tenacity to protect it from degradation continue, sometimes against all odds. Nevertheless, the final scene of the first episode sees this dream of Jamie and Claire shattered by death and violence, to a soundtrack of *America the Beautiful*, sung by Ray Charles in 1972, thereby crossing the 200-year gap in one bound. The dialogue is silenced. The music says it all, and how ironically prescient to make the choice of Ray Charles: black, blind, but all seeing.

It is 'charity', Jamie's sense of charity in misjudging the Irish psychopath-with-charm Stephen Bonnet, that has brought calamity upon them. He believes this to be a failure on his part, yet seeing good in others is one of the strengths of his character. 'Charity', as defined by Corinthians, rejoices in the truth. In the New World, charity is a little thin on the ground, and never is this more evident than in the treatment of the indigenous population and the ownership of slaves.

Any film team would approach these topics with trepidation. *Outlander 4: Brave the New World*, is being watched by an audience that still hopes, as does Claire, that 'one day it will all be different', while at the same time being subjected to an unfolding of current affairs that seem to predict otherwise. Slavery and trafficking have not gone away. In the 21st century, the belief in truth is constantly undermined.

How, in *Outlander 4*, can the rights of people, who at the time had no rights, flourish on screen; how can they be established without falsifying their positions; how can they be treated with respect while they are personifying those to whom little respect was given?

Jamie and Claire believe in the innate equality of all people. Against this are set accepted opinions and the laws of the land. Aunt Jocasta, for instance, says that the slaves are her 'friends', and that she believes in keeping the families together, which sounds as if it is a form of charity, but really it is to create a better, less fractious workforce. The legal system is so tied up in regulations that it is nearly impossible to free a slave. Not only would the cost be ruinous to the owner, but any changes to the system would shake the foundations of the structure of North Carolina society.

The river, like the land, can become an important character in a tale, acting as a metaphor. It is wide, beautiful, and strong of current. The Cape Fear River when we first see it is thus freighted with significance. Elevated above everyone and everything, on top of a barge carrying its Scottish passengers, stands a black boatman in charge at the tiller, looking ahead of him at the river. Time stands still while every aspect of his countenance can be appreciated. By such framing, his character is established. For having rescued his master he has been freed. He is the future, however distant.

Each black character is given physical space in the scenes, when they are central and even when they are virtually background figures. They are named in a way that causes the viewer to remember, and by their speech and gesture they create personalities that are recognisable. In this way, the theme of equality is addressed through the filming, within the historical context.

It will not be until 1791 that Thomas Paine publishes *The Rights of Man*, in which he posits that when a government does not safeguard the natural rights of its people then revolution is permissible. Even then there wasn't universal acceptance of his treatise, and now laws exist that could be said to undermine the values by which a nation might want to be identified.

When he was asked in an interview about how much current politics informed the filming of *Outlander 4*, Ronald D Moore gave this reply: "This is a classic story of immigrants coming to the New World, a retelling of the "foundation myth". Ultimately the show is about those characters and the story, so we don't choose to look at it as a platform for political ideas. But at the same time, we all live in this culture, we all live in this society and we have to be cognisant of the world, so we try to talk about it through the show, but not preach to the audience'.

Doubtless *Brave the New World* will give its audience the roller coaster ride that it has come to expect, in adventure and suspense, as the wider cast of characters explores their new surroundings and the story travels in time and broadens in scope. These first few episodes provide more than a background, however, as everything rests on understanding more fully the circumstances in which Jamie and Claire – plus the wider family and all the other Scots – are attempting to make a new life in the New World.

As characters, they bring faith, hope and charity to the story and to their roles, and it is worth mentioning that, like the producers, the actors too live real lives in the real world. Both Caitriona Balfe and Sam Heughan run charities to improve the lives of others, and for that, and for their exceptional acting, they should take a bow.

# Creative Scotland is doing little to support Scottish talent

Allan Shiach

2018

It's heartening to see a slight revival in Scottish film activity, with Creative Scotland introducing a training week much like that which the Scottish Film Production Fund created in the 1980s and 90s with Movie Makars – with seminars held in Inverness for young talent. A local councillor and co-sponsor confided in me that in this corner of the land there was a European subsidy available for a haircut. Of the many films which I have written or produced, only two were wholly made in Scotland. That's two more than Steven Spielberg and several less than Bill Forsyth. Neither of mine was able to access any EU money.

The first was a film called *Regeneration*. Based on the prize-winning Pat Barker novel, it starred Jonathan Pryce and Jonny Lee Miller, and was immaculately directed by Gillies MacKinnon. I am proud of it and thought it a powerful depiction of a moment in history which will soon be forgotten and ought to be memorialised. Like most independent films in the UK, it was a monstrous struggle to make. When completed, the US distributors ordered it to be shortened and issued it under another title altogether. Its singular identity was compromised as lost and the title changed, making it hard to track down today.

Our 'studio' was an abandoned bus station. We hired personnel who, with rare exceptions, were Scottish. The film was funded independently by the BBC (in London) and a Canadian distributor, together with contributions from the Scottish Production Fund and the Glasgow Film Fund.

I had written the screenplay on spec some two years earlier, after acquiring an option from the author. The late Mark Shivas got the BBC interested and the first thing they did was ask to re-negotiate my option. They were experienced in these matters, they said, and would be able to secure rights for a better price. But only, as I later discovered, by confining their purchase to television rights. So when MGM announced in *Variety* that they had acquired feature film rights and assigned a producer to their *Regeneration*, it came as a shocking surprise. By saving money, they had lost us everything that mattered.

The producer assigned was Jay Presson Allen, known for a string of distinguished movies from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, to *Cabaret* and *Deathtrap*. She was also known for 'her wicked wit' but turned out to be charming and a little baffled. Two years later, MGM abandoned the project and the rights reverted.

So this time around, I took to the BBC the very project they had once owned. Gillies and I worked on the script for some weeks. Many directors work on script with the writer as an easy way to become familiar with the project. But Gillies was thorough, and through his interrogation of every moment in the script, the whole project was enhanced.



Casting was easy once we had landed Jonathan Pryce to play the pivotal role of Dr William Rivers, more or less the first psychiatrist to recognise what we now call post traumatic stress disorder. We ran into some difficulty with casting the role of Siegfried Sassoon, finding that a young upper-class Brit actor wasn't so easy to find. Everyone eligible could play the toff but few could inhabit the role. The assumptions of rank in the English upper classes of 1916 are oddly hard to impersonate. Luckily, we found James Wilby, who was excellent. The casting of the great English actor, John Neville, was the final note to a painless procedure of adding to a cast which included several well-kent leading men – Jonny Lee Miller, Dougray Scott, Kevin McKidd, David Hayman and James McAvoy – among others.

The real Craiglockhart in which much of the story took place is now occupied by Edinburgh Napier University in the heart of Edinburgh. So our principal location became a chilly semi-derelict building on a bank of the Clyde, standing in for Craiglockhart Hospital, where the doomed youth were treated for 'war neurosis' and then returned to the trenches.

One of our earliest scenes was Sassoon's declaration against the continuation of the war. Sassoon chucks away the medal he has won for bravery and pursues his opposition to the war in the House of Commons and every newspaper. These were scenes which the film's lawyer pointed out were illegal without the estate of the late Siegfried Sassoon consenting to sell us copyright. As he had lived into the 1960s, Sassoon's copyright was enforceable. The agent declined our offer to sell rights. What on earth to do? Shooting had begun and this crucial scene was barely a week away.

Our Highland lawyer came to the rescue. He had discovered that 20 years after death, while copyright is still valid, the estate of the deceased cannot raise an action over false attribution. I wrote a less eloquent declaration against the war and hired an Oxford don to write 'Sassoon's poetry'. I told the agent that we would be using these falsified elements in the film. Or, if they were willing to accept our initial offer, we would use the real thing. We soon made the deal and the real thing is in the film. I am the only person who thought that 'my' declaration was better than Sassoon's. But I managed to overrule myself.

One of the central scenes in the film is when Dr Rivers is taken to another hospital where men suffering from 'neurosis' are treated and returned to action. He witnesses John Neville literally torturing Kevin McKidd until he is 'cured'. The Canadian insurers told us a week prior to shooting that they were unable to insure Neville. He would be entirely at our risk.

I closed my eyes and gambled on the incompetence of insurance doctors. The chance of Neville falling over was small. But the cost of re-shooting the scene, would be catastrophic to our budget. Fortunately, John Neville survived to give a wonderful, menacing performance, the equal of anything he did as Baron Munchausen. He went on to perform in some 20 projects after he left us and lived for a further 14 years.

We shot the trench and warfare scenes in what looked scarily like the real thing, in the muddied fields of Airdrie. The location created by our art department was shockingly powerful. It so happened that we shot on this site on 11 November, Remembrance Day. I

had issued an instruction to cast and crew that on that day at 11am the unit would stop and hold a two minute silence. It was a powerful moment. All the iconography of the First World War – the trenches, the mud and blood, the dead bodies, and the sad geography of trench warfare – were present on the battlefield which we had replicated. The silence was kept perfectly and more than a few were tugged by tears. Amidst the whirlwind of a film set, it was impossible not to be moved.

*Regeneration* received terrific reviews and was nominated for a Best British Film award in the UK, besides almost every award available in Canada.

The second film I produced in Scotland was *The Match*. Glaswegian Mick Davis, a writer/director of immense energy, had managed to convince Polygram to let him make a small Scottish comedy about a contest between two pubs and their football teams. This time around I was a hired hand, acting on behalf of owners in Hollywood. Our headquarters were mostly in locations in Ayrshire. The tiny village of Straiton didn't know what had hit it.

Our director of photography, Witold Stok, came with his own small crew and were the principal non-Scottish elements. The cast were Scots except for our leading man, Max Beesley, who had the accent as perfectly as anyone I know. About three weeks before shooting began, I received a call from the Hollywood moguls which directed me to cast 'three above-the-title star names' in whatever roles I could persuade them to play. This wasn't a light request. The movie was conditional upon some heftier names than the lesser known cast of Laura Fraser, James Cosmo, David Hayman, Isla Blair, Gary Lewis, Bill Paterson, and others of great skill who weren't enough.

I was set to work. How much additional money was to be given to cast these posh names? Answer: zero. It had to be done out of the existing budget. Impossible, we all said, and then proceeded to find ways to trim our total budget here, there, and everywhere else. Loch Ness became Loch Lomond. A field in France became a field in Airdrie. Five-star hotels were replaced with three-star hotels. And so it went on.

By the end of the process, we had landed Richard E Grant, Neil Morrissey, Ian Holm and the recently retired Bond, Pierce Brosnan, in a tiny role. To these we added Tom Sizemore – a great American actor. The schedule was re-arranged to accommodate Brosnan. I don't know how much his presence helped distribution, but it got us taken seriously in Hollywood. He got slightly less attention than our other cameo player, Samantha Fox. The adorable Ms Fox attracted crowds of onlookers who came all the way to Ayrshire to admire her talents.

Beware Richard E Grant, I was advised. Why? Because he keeps a diary, I was told. And then he publishes it. Duly warned, I was polite and uncommunicative with Richard. Ian Holm gave us the best drunk scene I have ever witnessed. Like all great actors he understood that the key to a drunk scene is that the character should try to conceal his drunkenness rather than to flaunt it. The diarist, Richard E Grant, turned out to be good fun and made a plausible English villain.

Neil Morrissey was a charming co-hero and to support him, we even managed to arrange

an appearance by England's greatest goal scorer, Alan Shearer, in a not wholly vital scene with Bill Paterson. Shearer was the ideal professional; he flew in for the day, dressed as requested, spoke the lines he had memorised, smiled at all and sundry, and was back on his private plane before sunset. Test audiences laughed. The word 'charming' was used worryingly often, and the film, when eventually released, was liked but not widely seen.

I worked for a few weeks on another project where Scotland was to stand in for Wales – a dramatic biography of Dylan Thomas. I rejoiced that Kevin McKidd was cast as Dylan since he is the only other Elgin loon I ever met in the entertainment industry. The financier of Dylan insisted, during the pre-production period, on bringing money for the film in bags and bundles. Enough to keep us going for a few weeks, but a dismal omen for the future, and sure enough the project collapsed before we got to make it.

I mention this to underline the difficulty of making independent films, not merely for those in Scotland. The metropolitan bias is considerable. Only the bravest or the most obtuse Scottish producers can function without constant access to the south.

Personally, I do not support the occasional initiatives to build a film studio in Scotland, believing that improvisation can achieve much without the vast overheads of a studio. What we need are more David Heymans. He is the young producer of the Harry Potter franchise and now has his own studio. One or two Sandy Mackendricks would be welcome, too. Or John Griersons. Indeed, the single fact is that talent, and more talent, are likely the most vital drivers of a Scottish film industry. And that talent needs to be supported in a hundred ways besides the benevolent and minimal paternalism of Creative Scotland.

# Mary Queen of Scots was rather dull viewing

Jean Barr

2019

John Guy's book, *My Heart is my Own: The Life of Mary Queen of Scots*, also known as *Queen of Scots: The True Life of Mary Stuart* (2004) starts with one of the great cinematic thrills of history – the moment when Mary Queen of Scots stood on the scaffold in a stately, long black satin dress and allowed her executioners to strip her down to her underclothes, which were bright red. 'Gasps of shock ran through the courtroom.'

Theatre director turned film director Josie Rourke bases her first film, *Mary Queen of Scots* (2018) on Guy's book. Accordingly, its opening scene sees Mary stripped and resplendent in vivid red, place her head on the block – to gasps from the attendant courtiers.

*Mary Queen of Scots* spares us the grisly facts of Mary's beheading (three whacks to sever her head which, held up by the hangman by its red fringe, dropped, revealing its near-baldness). Unfortunately, it also spares us most of the drama that might explain how this most unfortunate of queens came to have her head chopped off at the age of 45 after 19 years imprisonment.

Rourke's film is set mainly between 1561 and 1567, when Mary Stuart (Saoirse Ronan) personally ruled Scotland and the Queen of England was her cousin, Elizabeth I (Margot Robbie). Mary returns from France in 1561 to reclaim the Scottish throne. She is a Catholic. Protestant Elizabeth and her Protestant courtiers worry that she may claim the English throne too. Mary has Tudor blood as well as Stuart: her grandmother was Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII. Mary inherited the Scottish throne at six days old, but was taken off to France at the age of five to marry the French king's infant heir while others ruled Scotland in her stead. She duly married the Dauphin, becoming Queen of France at 16 and a widow at 18.

In the film's second scene, Mary arrives in Scotland from France in a rowing boat from which she and her four ladies-in-waiting disembark wearing spotless haute couture frocks, hair sculpted high in the style of papal mitres – a sign of the kind of film this will be, and that Alexandra Byrne's costume design and Jenny Shircore's hair and make-up could garner awards. This kind of high prestige period drama often does well during awards season.

Mary returns to a nation split in two, between Protestantism and Catholicism. Catholic herself, and now neighbour to Protestant England, she is in a precarious position. The leading party of Scottish nobles is not just Protestant but Presbyterian, led by her half-brother James, Earl of Moray (James McArdle), an ardent Presbyterian and disciple of John Knox. Moray was Regent while she was in France. She lasts just six years as a ruling queen in Scotland: as soon as she produces a son and heir in 1567 at the age of 24 she has fulfilled

her dynastic function. Twelve months later, she is deposed by the Protestant Scottish lords and will spend the remaining 19 years of her life in captivity in Scotland and England. Her enemies retain control of her son James whom she never sees again. The treaty James signs with England as the 19-year-old King of the Scots becomes in effect his mother's death warrant.

With a screenplay by Beau Willimon (creator of the US version of *House of Cards*), much of the historical context of Mary's life is ditched. Unfazed by the Earl of Moray's reluctance to give up his regency to a woman, and undeterred by the misogynistic ravings of Presbyterian leader John Knox (David Tennant, hirsutely enjoying himself), Mary seeks solidarity with Elizabeth. Why not rule side-by-side, 'not through a treaty drafted by men lesser than ourselves'? Flashing back from the moment of Mary's execution in 1587 to her arrival on the shores at Leith a quarter-century earlier, most of the film is set within the two monarchs' parallel courts in Edinburgh and London, where both are portrayed as pawns of entrenched male power.

Because of the parallel court structure of the film, with few exceptions the only people we see are aristocrats and courtiers. This was a source of delight in Yorgos Lanthimos's recent royal romp *The Favourite* because of its witty script and glorious send-up of courtly life. Here, though, it makes for rather dull viewing: a series of statically staged, if beautifully composed, tableaux – lustrously over-stuffed in the Elizabethan court, dark and cavernous in the Stuart.

The two queens meet only once in the film (and they never met in real life), their conflict played out by envoys shuttling across the border between England and Scotland. The theatrical potential of an imagined meeting between Elizabeth and Mary has been wonderfully realised in Robert Icke's adaptation of Schiller's play *Mary Stuart*, which opened at London's Almeida Theatre in 2016, starring Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams. At the start of each performance the two actors are randomly assigned the roles of Elizabeth and Mary at the toss of a coin. Everyone on stage then turns and bows to whoever has the role of Elizabeth, a magnificently theatrical device for conveying who holds the power.

There is little of such imaginative direction in the film, though, with its constant cutting between scenes in Scotland and England. Elizabeth demands that Mary marry her own beloved Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley (Joe Alwyn), to control the Scottish queen in the English interest. Mary says no; then she says yes. Elizabeth suggests another English lord but Mary chooses the Scottish Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley... and so on. In the spaces between such comings and goings, the queens discuss their own love lives with servants and suitors. When the two do come together, their meeting is filmed through gauzy curtains, presumably to convey that it is a fantasy. The pair speak in riddles, a ploy that might work on stage but is merely irritating here.

Much of the historical context of Mary's life is traded in for a kind of easy symbolism. Thus, a scene in which Mary is giving birth to her son is intercut with Elizabeth cutting out red paper flowers to create a picture. Several paired scenes follow, charting their progress,

the camera switching between the two. After the birth, further intercut shots show a blissful Mary surrounded by bloody afterbirth, whilst childless Elizabeth sits dejectedly, a sea of red paper roses between her open legs.

Ronan and Robbie are terrific actors but are hampered by a script with over-written dialogue and laden with tongue twisters ('If God wills Mary to marry, Mary will marry only whom Mary wills to marry'). Ronan speaks English with an impeccable Scottish accent when not speaking in French with her ladies-in-waiting. This, inevitably, has prompted a flurry of debate about whether Mary would speak English with a French or a Scottish accent.

Myriad murders, marriages and betrayals are played out in the course of the film, like the bloody reckonings of a whole series of *The Sopranos* but minus the textured character building that would make us care about any of them. Mary is exculpated from most of the skullduggery, while Elizabeth increasingly coarsens, with Robbie transforming from beautiful eligible young queen into pox-scarred sovereign governed by distrust and disappointment. For much of the film, as a result of smallpox, Elizabeth's pocked face is covered in ghostly white chalk, in sharp contrast with an improbably fresh-faced Mary going to the block in 1587, two decades after the end of the period during which most of the film is set, and by this time 45 years of age.

Robbie is grossly underused in the film, partly because Elizabeth is such a sad case, sitting around lamenting her lack of children or lying in bed with Dudley discussing Mary. Many of her scenes are lumbered with leaden dialogue – usually in conversation with her chief statesman William Cecil – in exposition mode. Cecil is played by a silken-tongued Guy Pearce, whose role in the film as explainer of the politics of 16th-century Scotland and England is no substitute for a contextual understanding of the historical differences between the two nations and courts.

While the film aims to score broad points against the sexism surrounding both leaders, it ends up focusing most of Mary's story on the romantic intrigue that dogged her (a love triangle involving the bisexual Darnley, played by Jack Lowden, and court musician David Rizzio, played by Ismael Cruz Cordova). Mary speaks openly about sex to her handmaidens, and proves to be an ally of her gender non-conforming courtier Rizzio. As a result, in contrast with *The Favourite*, which featured the last Stuart monarch, Queen Anne, the only laughs in *Mary Queen of Scots* are unintended. When Mary comes upon Rizzio, dancing in her candle-lit castle, dressed in a ball gown, she tells him: 'Be whoever you wish to be with us. You make a lovely sister'. Mary is equally nonchalant when she finds her husband Lord Darnley in bed with Rizzio.

She keeps a racially diverse court, welcomes all religions and is utterly relaxed about gender fluidity. The film thinks itself radical because it shows Mary's menstrual blood. Its ideas of gender and power are simplistic, resting on notions of women's natural solidarity and compassion, and delivering its message of sisterly friendship perverted by men with sledgehammer subtlety: 'How cruel men are,' murmurs Elizabeth, advised by Cecil against

sending an army to assist Mary. 'Remember, if you murder me you murder your sister and your queen,' Mary appeals to Elizabeth.

As an agenda-driven film, *Mary Queen of Scots* is removed from character development and storytelling to such an extent that we hardly care about the protagonists' fates. Even when Mary is arrested (after another disastrous marriage, this time to the Earl of Bothwell, main suspect in the murder of Darnley – himself involved in the plot to kill Rizzio), removed to England and separated from her infant son – who, as King of England and Scotland, will eventually realise her dynastic dream – she rouses little sympathy. The religious split hovers in the background, while in the foreground Mary and Elizabeth are treated as doomed by their womanhood and squabbling men. Mary's many years of house arrest and her (at least possible) involvement in the Babington Plot to assassinate Elizabeth are totally marginalised.

Last November, a BBC Radio 4 afternoon play was broadcast – a 90-minute adaptation of an unmade film, *Mary Queen of Scots*, scripted by Alexander Mackendrick, featuring Glenda Jackson as narrator and Ellie Bamber as Mary Queen of Scots. Beginning development in the 1950s, the film was ditched by Ealing Studios as too disrespectful to royalty. A revised script (with Gore Vidal and Anthony Burgess) was derailed in 1969.

Mackendrick's original screenplay imagined a kind of Western or 'gangster study': a portrait of a woman trying to survive whilst caught between rival clans battling for power. A film on Mary Queen of Scots by the director of *The Ladykillers*, *Whisky Galore* and *Sweet Smell of Success*? That film I would like to see.

# Marie Colvin: martyr or passionate journalist?

Jean Barr

2019

It is probably unwise to watch two films on the same subject back-to-back, particularly when one is a documentary with some reconstructed sections and the other is a feature film where some players actually experienced the events depicted. I watched *Under the Wire* (2018) – the documentary – first, and soon after, *A Private War* (2018) – the feature film.

Both films, which came out within weeks of each other, concern the 2012 death under shellfire in Syria of world-famous American foreign correspondent Marie Colvin, who was covering the conflict for the *Sunday Times*. Both films are timely, her death having been ruled as unlawful killing by a recent US court case.

Photographer Paul Conroy who was with her at the time of her death was critically injured in the same attack and was determined to tell the story that she died trying to report. Chris Martin's documentary *Under the Wire*, made for the BBC *Storyville* documentary series, is based on Conroy's memoir of their final assignment in the besieged city of Homs. It portrays a strong friendship and working relationship while telling a heart-stopping story. Conroy, a Liverpudlian ex-soldier, is a funny and astute interviewee and commentator. When he talks to camera about the viciousness of Assad's war, over the awful footage that he himself shot, the effect is devastating.

Marie and Paul believed the best way to portray war was to get to the people who suffer the most. *Under the Wire* includes the powerful story of the 'Widows' Basement', a building housing women and children seeking shelter from the bombing. Colvin's reporting from there became worldwide news and is now credited with saving many lives. The documentary also acknowledges the role of the people on the ground who helped Colvin and Conroy, especially Wa'el, a Syrian translator, who led them through a pipe into Baba Amr, an area of Homs under fierce bombardment. His testimony is very moving.

It is by remaining tightly focused on this final story in Homs that Chris Martin's documentary is so gripping. Much of Paul's footage was lost in the bombing that killed Marie. The consequent search for archive material involved the film team travelling back and forth between Istanbul, Amman and Beirut, tracking down survivors from Homs, and wading through miles of digital footage to tease out images from a two-week period (when Marie was there) during a six-year war. The result is a truly remarkable documentary that remains true to the raw style of found footage and yet keeps the viewer totally immersed in Homs with Marie and Paul. Its re-enactments of war, filmed in Morocco, are seamlessly woven into the real footage.

Conroy is also listed in the credits as a 'consultant' at the end of *A Private War*, a Hollywood biopic starring Rosamund Pike as the veteran war reporter. It arrives in cinemas



eight years after Colvin's death, and just weeks after a US court found this to be no accident, but an illegal killing by the Assad regime. Directed by American documentary filmmaker Matthew Heineman, *A Private War* is based on a *Vanity Fair* profile by Marie Brenner and was adapted by screenwriter Arash Amel who wrote and co-produced the critically slated Grace Kelly biopic, *Grace of Monaco* (2014).

The combination of Heineman's naturalistic style with Amel's overwrought dialogue is not a felicitous one. 'What do you hear when the music stops?', uttered by Colvin's worried friend at a party, isn't just something no-one would say at a party. It is not something anyone would say, full stop, far less someone tentatively broaching the question of alcoholism, even PTSD, with her best friend.

*A Private War* foreshadows its end at its beginning, with overhead shots of a devastated 2012 Homs and a voiceover of Marie Colvin being interviewed about her work. Our realisation that the real Colvin is speaking is delayed by the uncanny way that Pike perfectly replicates her Long Island accent – a vocal impression matched by her weary posture and looping gait. Our first glimpse of Pike's Marie on the frontline finds her reporting on Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers in 2001 where she is caught in crossfire and loses an eye (she will wear her hallmark eye patch with pride from now on). Next she is in Iraq, grabbing a photographer she has just met – Jamie Dornan's Paul Conroy – and dragging him with her to Fallujah to find the mass graves she has heard of, using her gym card to bluff her way past a military checkpoint.

The film is structured around a countdown to Homs and to Colvin's death, as marked out in the *Vanity Fair* piece. Arash Amel's screenplay takes us through key events in the last decade of the correspondent's life, each chapter marked onscreen by how long until the shelling in Homs will kill her, like a ticking clock. This ticking clock structure paradoxically creates an enervating lack of momentum as the film edges inexorably towards the fatal hour. This sense is reinforced by the constant shifting back and forth between Colvin's frontline assignments, and interludes in London where she attends parties, has nightmares, and engages in clunky dialogue scenes.

*A Private War* is best at showing Marie on the frontline. The recreated war sequences in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria have a shocking immediacy as captured by cinematographer Robert Richardson's hand-held camera. This is where Heineman's experience making documentaries such as *Cartel Land*, about the narcotics war in Mexico, and *City of Ghosts*, about a citizen journalist group in Raqqa, pays off. The further we move from the battlefields, the more undistinguished the storytelling.

The unvarying two-dimensional format also produces some confusing drama, with one messy montage mixing scenes of a warzone one-night stand, with woozy images of home, repeated flashbacks that place a dead girl with a gaping wound on Colvin's bed, and shots of Marie at her laptop.

In place of the multi-layered, textured, enquiring perspective that we have come to expect from worthwhile biopics such as Kapadia's film about Amy Winehouse, *Amy*, there is a uniformity of tone and failure to interrogate that offers no fresh insights. At one point,

Marie's editor Sean Ryan, played by a miscast Tom Hollander, wails: 'If you lose your conviction, then what hope do the rest of us have?'. Just try saying this sentence at the same time as imagining any half self-aware editor of a quality newspaper uttering it.

Characters are used to tell us facts about Marie in a repetitive rather than revelatory manner: 'You've seen more war than most soldiers,' her photographer spells out, redundantly. Meanwhile, Stanley Tucci as a love interest, is whiney: After Marie loses her left eye in the Sri Lankan mortar attack, he actually speaks the words: 'And you used to be so beautiful'.

As for the many Arabs and Tamils peppering the film, in contrast with Colvin's own vivid writing, which places their individual stories centre stage, here they appear mainly as background wallpaper. Apart from her Iraqi escort Mourad, none of the people she wrote about have names.

The film's laboured script verges on presenting Colvin as a martyr rather than a passionate news journalist competing with others for scoops. One line in the biopic is particularly risible in coming close to pathologising her remarkable life: 'Maybe I would have liked a more normal life. Maybe I just don't know how'. Yet by the accounts of her friends (some who appear in *Under the Wire*) she was living exactly the life she had chosen for herself. Much too is made of her childlessness, portraying her as yearning to 'be a mum like my sister'. She did try to conceive with the husband she married twice, but though she clearly loved children, she knew she led a life that made it difficult to have them herself.

The documentary focuses on Colvin's work, while the biopic, more interested in understanding what made Colvin tick, falls into the trap of summarising its subject and her motivations, thereby missing the point entirely. The reasons Colvin took such risks to expose and combat the horrors she came across in her work are brought to life in *Under the Wire* with tremendous force. So too is her personality. The documentary feels relentless because it covers such a short period of terror, but there are glimpses of Marie's charm and wit that leaven the unremitting terror.

As Chris Martin's film reveals, she was charismatic and funny as well as beautiful and acerbic; she found purpose in her work and took pride in her success and reputation. Her bosses knew that Marie's risk-taking yielded the best stories, says friend and fellow correspondent, Lindsay Hilsum: Courage made her vulnerable 'not just because such reporting put her in danger, but because she and her editors let it define her'.

One of the most powerful scenes in both films, set in the basement in Homs, shows a frantic doctor and helpers working long hours with the most basic equipment, trying to save the lives of several people, including babies. In Heineman's biopic, one man is beside himself with grief. I read later that he was a refugee whose own child had died in similar circumstances. In Chris Martin's documentary, a nurse, about to help the doctor who is trying to save a mortally wounded baby, realises the child is her grandchild and becomes frantic. It is one of the saddest, most harrowing scenes I have ever witnessed.

For its concise reporting as well as its credible re-creations and above all, its focus on Colvin's work, *Under the Wire* is by far the more necessary film.

# *Hand to Hand: an exhibition of the modern art medal*

Marcy Leavitt Bourne

2019

City of Glasgow College is hosting an unusual exhibition at its Ralph Cowan Gallery in the RIBA-award-winning City Campus. Just visiting the college is a treat in itself, an 'architectural marvel', as it was referred to when it received the award in 2017. It is an ingeniously sited building, rising some 10 metres along the hilly landscape up from Cathedral Street through a series of both internal and external steps (keeping students, staff and visitors fit). It accommodates 40,000 students across a range of six major faculties, and sees itself as 'a threshold for students embarking on their careers'.

*Hand to Hand: the Modern Art Medal* is an exhibition that features work by students from City of Glasgow College department of craft and design, alongside pieces made by students from 14 art colleges around the UK – including Edinburgh School of Art and Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design – and from two universities in Japan, as well as medals by teachers and artists from the Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop project.

'But what is this art medium?' I hear you say. Briefly, this two-sided medium – now very much in a modern idiom – looks back to the Renaissance when medals were made perhaps as gifts for visiting dignitaries, or to record a likeness or an event. They are about the size of the palm of a hand, and not to be worn.

Today, they may take any shape, and their two-sidedness enables a story to be told, about a person, for instance, or a concept. Because they are cast in bronze, usually, they are multiples, so a number can be made, to be shared. In this way, they have something in common with etchings and prints: original, yet multiple. More especially, they are wonderfully tactile, a form of sculpture in relief.

The medal by Ulrika Kjeldsen is based on a traditional Ålandic song, whose title translates to: 'Who can sail without wind, who can row without oars, who can part from a friend without shedding tears'. Ulrika studied metal design at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, University of Dundee, and after graduating has been artist in residence for the past two years. Her skills as a medal maker led her to win the New Medallist study-travel bursary awarded by the British Art Medal Society in 2018. Kjeldsen's medal takes the more traditional round format, but it expresses a touching psychological narrative that is both personal and yet all encompassing. Who has not held these thoughts or feelings, though perhaps less poetically? One side sees a figure standing back to the shore, while on the reverse a small rowboat recedes into the distance. It is a medal expressing separation. Ulrika is also experienced in foundry work, which she learned at college.

In today's modern curriculum, in departments that teach making skills, such as craft and

design at City of Glasgow, students learn about modelling, carving in plaster and wax, bronze casting and finishing, all in one annual module: the British Art Medal Society Student Medal Project. This project – now in its 26th year – is introduced in different areas, such as in the school of jewellery at Edinburgh and Birmingham, or in the department of sculpture at Falmouth School of Art. It receives support from the Goldsmiths' Centre in London.

The culmination of the Student Medal Project is an exhibition, which this year is held in Glasgow. Planned and installed by the curriculum head of craft and design, Lisa McGovern, *Hand to Hand* occupies a spacious gallery, with specially designed cabinets, lit to enable the viewer to examine the details of the student works, which number over 100. While, as is always the situation with medal displays, it is difficult to see both sides, some of them are on small stands which enable the reverses to be seen.

How are medals relevant today? Well, times have moved on from creating medals that satisfied an ego or expressed personal power, and the 20th- and 21st-century modern medal often is made to create a powerful statement about the world in which the artist lives. Lisa McGovern invited her students to make works that were either about plastic pollution or about light pollution – two major issues regarding climate change and life on earth.

One of these medals, *The Chase* by Katie Hemming, won the Michael Roberts Memorial Prize. The obverse of the medal shows a shark chasing its prey, one small fish, illustrating a healthy food chain. The reverse, however, depicts a shark in pursuit of a plastic bottle which it mistakenly sees as food, and nothing is left of the fish but a skeleton. Even the shark's expression changes from one side to another, from happy, toothy anticipation to despair. Around the edge of the medal are the words, 'how long till it's gone', and to further emphasise her thesis, that the world's oceans are in a desperate state, the shape of the medal itself is a plastic bottle.

Ten prize-winning medals are cleverly displayed along a narrow plinth in the exhibition, and their subjects engage with wide-ranging ideas: international mores, foreign cultures and lives, fear of panic attacks, dyslexia, the threats of a digital world, personal identity, the speed of living, managing depression and concern for the planet and how we manage our environment. What is striking about these modern art medals is how deeply felt the messages are, how engaged the students are with their world and how unafraid they are to express their feelings. These subjects take the medallion form and their function is to engage the viewer in thought and appreciation for the artistic object.

Given the opportunity, art of many different kinds can be drawn upon to bring ideas and people together. Scotland seems to be particularly aware of the possibilities, not only at the colleges, but in the communities. For example, Roddy Mathieson – who does the bronze casting for City of Glasgow College and for Dundee – runs the Mobile Foundry, a travelling foundry workshop. With a team of foundry artists and technicians, he runs workshops all over Scotland, one of which is the Alyth Youth Partnership in Perthshire. Here, with money for the community created by the local windfarm, the foundry is casting pieces that will create an art trail through the town, involving young people and schools.

Another amazing project, created in 2015, is the Artline, which takes in eight heritage buildings on the railway through Fife from Edinburgh to Dundee. It makes use of restored art and heritage buildings, bringing back to life for the community places that could have been lost but are now part of an attractive art experience to be widely shared with visitors and locals.

The City of Glasgow College exhibition has one more trick up its sleeve, and that is the display of holograms by Paul Riddell, lecturer in digital media. While not all medals can be seen complete with their edge, here are seven medals from the craft and design department that appear and disappear magically in a special plinth that creates the illusion of having them floating in space right before your eyes. There is also a continuous video in the gallery which shows some of the process of making and finishing of the medals by the students. The modern art medal occupies rather the Cinderella corner of the modern art world, but, unlike some of the ugly sisters it is truthful, unpretentious and packs a punch.

# Godot in Edinburgh

Noel Foy

2019

## I

My interest in Samuel Beckett goes back to the 60s. I was in my mid 20s and living in London. On the spur of the moment, I went to see *Endgame* at the Tower Theatre in Islington. It was the first Beckett play I had ever seen. The theatre archives show that it was staged in September 1961. The Tower is a small theatre with limited seating. As I remember, you sat hard up against the performance space – almost within touching distance of the actors. Perfect for Beckett! I have never forgotten the evening or the play. For those of who haven't seen it a brief resume:

*Endgame* has four characters: Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell. The action all takes place in one small room with two high windows. Outside all is dead. Hamm cannot walk, is blind and sits immobilised throughout the play. Clov, his servant, has sight but is lame, can't sit down and is embittered and resentful. To the back of this bare setting are two large bins. These reveal Nagg and Nell: Hamm's parents. It is a bleak unsparing piece of theatre lasting an hour or so. I could make no sense of it yet somehow it cut to the quick. I remember at the end of the performance the actor who played Hamm had tears streaming through the greasepaint. I knew how he felt.

This memory came to mind after watching *Waiting for Godot* at the Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh in 2015. Here again were the same powerful images, obscure plot and elusive poetic language. Like *Endgame*, it will be with me a long time and I have been thinking about it on and off ever since.

I should say that I was much more prepared for *Waiting for Godot* than *Endgame*. In the intervening years, I had read a biography and knew a good deal more about Beckett's life, struggles and art. I had read several of his novels and I knew about his much talked of play.

## II

But the performance at the Lyceum was the first time I had seen the play live. So my visit to the Lyceum was keenly anticipated. It is worth mentioning that the play was chosen especially to mark the 50th anniversary of the Lyceum Theatre Company. To add to the prestige of the production, two of Scotland's greatest actors – Bill Paterson and Brian Cox – took the leading roles. It was a mark of respect from them and a mark of respect to the play itself. It has been a long journey from derision and dismissal to acceptance and the mainstream.

As I said earlier, there will not be many who have *not* heard of Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*. But I wonder how many actually know what it's about? For those who don't, I will

try to summarise. The play opens with two bedraggled friends, tramps possibly, meeting on a deserted country road. Centre stage is a mound of earth and bare tree. It is apparent that they have met at this exact spot the day before. It is evening. The tramps are Estragon and Vladimir, and they are there to meet Godot. Why is not explained, except that they expect some kind of redemption from him.

The setting for Act 2 is the same, except it is next day and the bare tree has acquired a hopeful leaf or two. Nothing changes in the course of the play and nothing essentially is resolved. Act 1 ends when Godot sends a message that he is not coming; Act 2 and the play ends the same way. While waiting, Estragon and Vladimir converse, complain, commiserate and consider suicide. They also do music hall turns with songs, jokes, backchat, pratfalls, hat-swapping and falling trousers. They eat, fart, urinate, fall asleep, discuss the Bible, Jesus, the crucifixion, the state of their feet, and much else beside. In both acts, they are joined by Lucky and Pozzo. Lucky is a beast of burden and is treated abominably by Pozzo, who goes blind in the second act.

Also cast is a boy messenger who arrives towards the end of each act to announce that Godot will not be coming. When he arrives towards the end of second act, Estragon and Vladimir agree there is nothing for it but to return the next day and resume their vigil. At this point, there is long silence while they stare at the audience; the lights go out and the play ends. It is stunning theatre.

### III

So who was Samuel Beckett and how did he come to write this extraordinary work? Samuel Beckett was born in Foxrock, near Dublin in 1906. He was the second son of reasonably well-off Anglo Irish Protestant parents. He was privately educated and graduated with distinction in romance languages from Trinity College, Dublin in 1927. He was then appointed reader in English at Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris in 1928. James Joyce was in Paris at the time writing *Finnegan's Wake* and Beckett, another Dubliner, became an important friend and supporter. He fell in love with Paris and settled there permanently in 1937.

When war broke out, Beckett was in Dublin visiting his mother. He left immediately for Paris preferring 'France in war to Ireland at peace'. He became involved in the resistance and narrowly escaped capture when his group was betrayed. Escaping Paris in a hurry, he headed for Roussillon, a village in unoccupied Vichy. His companion, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, went with him. Suzanne was also wanted by the Gestapo for her resistance work. In Roussillon, he survived doing farm work and odd jobs. It was not long before he became involved in the local *Maquis* and served until the *Libération*.

Beckett was awarded the Croix de Guerre with gold star for his war services to France. Beckett rarely discussed his resistance activities, dismissing it as 'boy scout stuff'. A gross understatement, as many of his Paris resistance group were captured were tortured, sent to concentration camps or summarily executed.

## IV

France liberated, Beckett returned to his small flat in Paris. Money was tight and he struggled to keep afloat. He tried to pick up his writing career again but it was not going well. Few understood or appreciated his work and he struggled to get published. As a distraction from novels he decided to write a play. Beckett took three months to write *Waiting for Godot*, completing it in January 1949.

As with his novels, the familiar pattern of incomprehension and rejection followed. *Godot* was turned down many times and Beckett, in despair, gave up on it. Suzanne did not. She always had great faith in the work and tirelessly persisted, eventually persuading a friend, actor manager Roger Blin, to read it. He was interested and agreed to put it on. Money to do it was a problem, as was finding a theatre. The money issue was partially solved by the public purse providing a small subsidy. And the Theatre de Babylone in central Paris unexpectedly became available.

The first performance of *Waiting for Godot* took place on 4 January 1953. It didn't go down well and there were walk-outs and derision. Reviews were mixed and lukewarm with one significant exception. Jean Anouilh, an established, successful playwright, loved by the French public, called it 'a masterpiece'. The review caused a stir; Paris argued; tickets sold! Beckett and *Godot* never looked back.

The same thing happened two years later in London. The director was the 24-year-old Peter Hall, just starting out on his brilliant career. It was staged at the small Arts Theatre Club in central London mainly to keep the Lord Chamberlain at bay. Here it followed the same pattern with walk-outs, catcalls and derision. Some leading London critics were savage but Harold Hobson, the respected and highly regarded theatre critic of the *Sunday Times*, liked it very much and urged people to see it.

So did Kenneth Tynan at *The Observer*, who said that after *Godot*, theatre would never be the same. He was right. Shortly after these reviews, it transferred to the much larger Criterion Theatre in the heart of the London's West End, where it ran for eight months. Since these early days *Godot* has rarely been out of production and fills theatres worldwide – including Edinburgh.

## V

In the many years since these first early performances, speculation and debate about the play have never stopped. There are probably more books, articles and PhDs written about *Godot* than any other play of the 20th century. There is a Beckett Society, a webpage and social media profile. Edinburgh University is the hub of much of this academic industry with its *Journal of Beckett Studies* published now for over 40 years.

Beckett may be partially responsible for all the speculation, discussion and debate. He was notoriously opaque about what *Godot* meant. A shy undemonstrative man, he would politely but firmly turn aside inquiries, saying that the play was as much a mystery to him as it was to everyone else. There is no reason to disbelieve him.



It seems to me that all this close textual deconstruction passes most people by. Audiences enjoy the comedy and humour of the piece. That, and the core message of hope and endurance in times of trouble and catastrophe. The late Susan Sontag intuitively understood this when she staged *Godot* in ruined, besieged Sarajevo. Despite mortal danger from shelling and sniper fire, it played to packed houses throughout the run. It was put on in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the city. It has been done twice with Beckett's approval in the notorious high security San Quentin prison.

## VI

Beckett would not allow *Godot* to be put on to segregated audiences in Apartheid South Africa. He did however give his blessing in 1976 to a black cast doing it in the wholly integrated Market Theatre in Johannesburg. Director and actor Benjy Francis said this:

*The tree was central to my staging; when it started to sprout leaves in act two that sent a powerful message to oppressed people – it suggested new life and resolution, an image of hope against all the desolation. Every night, the show received standing ovations. Its impact was monumental: Waiting for Godot provided a powerful metaphor of our struggle which allowed me to get it past the censor and speak to my people.*

It is telling that in all these intolerable situations, *Godot* is the play of choice. Somehow, Beckett's words and the alchemy of theatre give succour, support and encouragement to endure and go on. Was this Beckett's intention all along? There is no way of knowing but I strongly suspect so.

Samuel Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. The citation says that the prize was awarded 'for his writing, which – in new forms for the novel and drama – in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation'.

He died peacefully in Paris on 22 December 1989. In the strictest privacy, he was laid to rest Montparnasse cemetery, next to wife, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, on the day after Christmas.

# *A Symphony in Stone: Glasgow's architectural past*

Jean Barr

2019

The premiere of *A Symphony in Stone*, directed by Matthew Cowan of Production Attic and produced by Tony Burton of the Planning Exchange, closes Glasgow's West End Festival on 30 June. In one of the final moments of this beautifully composed film about Glasgow's architecture, the city is likened to a Beethoven symphony – but one that has kept going for two centuries.

A lyrical celebration of Glasgow's architecture, the film's focus is on how the city's rapid growth in the 18th and 19th centuries brought innovation in planning, architecture and design, its transformation from small medieval cathedral town into wealthy merchant city, enabled by Scotland's union with England in 1707 providing access to England's lucrative global markets. Glasgow's position on the River Clyde made passage across the Atlantic considerably shorter than from other ports, resulting in what the film calls 'Glasgow's dirty secret' – its dependence on tobacco and the Atlantic slave trade as the initial source of its vast wealth.

From this wealth and the industrial revolution it stimulated, Glasgow emerged into the 19th century as a modern city with a style distinct from the rest of Britain – a claim immediately established by the film's dramatic opening aerial shots that reveal Glasgow's grid-like configuration and a panoramic cityscape that is quite ravishing. We may have sensed the harmony of the city's layout as we habitually walk about the place – and several people in the film attest to the ease and pleasure of this – but few of us could say why this is so. Splendid archive footage and interviews with experts such as the late Gavin Stamp – and the value added bonus of Bill Paterson narrating – provide enlightenment.

We learn how architects such as Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, Charles Wilson, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and J J Burnet contributed to Glasgow's unique character, and also why Glasgow became both intensely urban and very green. This is why Gavin Stamp believes that 'if you can't live in Glasgow or London, there's really nowhere else... to live'. 'Look up' has been my advice to visitors new to Glasgow's city centre. From now on I'll add, 'look out', having absorbed a central fact from the film, that Glasgow's uniqueness is largely down to its topography: drumlins, formed by glacial ice and 'shaped like the inverted half of an egg', form Glasgow's landscape. The city (and its architects) works with, rather than against, this natural feature.

This is why there are so many views, particularly of surrounding hills, in parts of the West End and from the city centre. St Vincent Street with its great canyon effect makes Glasgow feel like San Francisco, weather apart, an observation shared by some filmmakers. In the later part of the 19th century, Alexander Thomson, notably, worked in harmony

with the grid. The film bursts with such fascinating facts – for example, that streets running east to west were built wider so as to carry vehicles and goods, whereas those running north to south, the location of the counting houses and offices, were narrower.

It was when the Greek revival movement of architecture was out of fashion (at its height in the late 18th and early 19th centuries) that Thomson re-interpreted it anew, influenced by John Martin's apocalyptic paintings. The camera lingers lovingly on two of Thomson's masterpieces, Great Western Terrace in the West End, and Moray Place in the southside district of Strathbungo, which he designed. Obsessed with columns and lintels, he rammed huge planes of glass straight onto walls without frames so as to draw the eye to the structures. Slum clearance in the late 1860s provided the opportunity for Thomson, a member of the Glasgow Improvement Society and of the United Presbyterian Church, to put these bodies' principles of social justice and civic duty into practice.

As a result of this ethos, the film claims, Glasgow isn't dominated by palaces and aristocratic houses but by civic buildings such as churches and galleries. Nothing was too good or too sacred for ordinary people, it seems. Unlike Edinburgh, which had 'too much monarchy' and a duke whose interest lay in his out-of-town estates, Glasgow was not dominated by a landowning aristocracy, and the interest of those managing and running it remained in the city. Glasgow Corporation studied Haussmann's work in Paris when devising its scheme to house Glasgow's population, from the poorest to the most prosperous, coming up with the tenements that would give Glasgow its special character and an architectural language that would unify the city.

Yellow sandstone came first, with Edwardian red sandstone tenements ('mansions up a close') later. Districts such as Hyndland were designed as unified wholes, with tenements of red sandstone, slate roofs, tall chimneys and tiled 'wally' closes alongside terraces and individual villas, all built to a similar scale, with similar materials and set within trees and shrubbery. As a result, Glasgow is a city of 'situated localities', each with its own park, including tiny 'pocket' parks. This integration of parkland and housing is perhaps best exemplified in Kelvingrove Park, since Park Terrace, which overlooks the park, was designed by Charles Wilson in specific relation to it.

Like other Glasgow architects, Wilson worked on all types of building – schools, churches, townhouses, and even a hospital, Gartnavel. As the city expanded west it also expanded south, notably in Pollokshields where the eastern, flatter part has tenements, and the drumlin-dominated, western part single villas. Developed by the Maxwell family, Pollokshields' broad streets and parks were meant to counter the 'miasma' that brought cholera. (Thomson had himself lost children to cholera). Sir John Stirling Maxwell stipulated that each house should be different but variations on a similar design. Part of the Stirling Maxwell family fortune derived from its slave plantation in Jamaica, called Hampden.

Another late-19th-century architect featured in the film is J J Burnet, designer of the impressive Clydeport building in Robertson Street and of Glasgow University's Chapel. He

studied at l'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and his classicism was very modern, rational and inventive, making use of cast iron and reinforced concrete and re-interpreting American skyscrapers on a small scale. J J Burnet was one of the earliest instigators of the early-20th-century 'Glasgow Style', which is most often associated with Charles Rennie Mackintosh but drew on diverse influences. For example, the Hat Rack building in St Vincent Street with its spiky roof (which I immediately rushed out to see) is a remarkable Art Nouveau building that is not designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh but by James Salmon.

The film is in fact instructive about two schools of modernity evident in Glasgow, one dominated by Mackintosh, the other influenced by American architecture and l'Ecole des Beaux Arts. Mackintosh's importance to the city's architecture is, however, duly acknowledged in some gorgeous footage, including the lovely classrooms, corridors and library of his masterpiece, the Glasgow School of Art. Viewers will relive and lament again the destruction by fire (twice) of this monumental building, whose 'huge castle-like structure seen from a tram must have been overwhelming'. Mackintosh, like other Glasgow architects, always designed the complete work, whether a house, school (Scotland Street) or church (Queen's Cross church, the only one he designed, remains a hidden gem).

A special treat is the film's musical score, specially composed by Liam Paterson, composer in residence at Scottish Opera, performed by members of the Scottish Opera orchestra and beautifully in tune with the film's visual lyricism.

# The painted canvas knows more than its artist

Jean Barr

2019

Writer-director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck came to the attention of mainstream English-speaking audiences with his 2006 *The Lives of Others*, an assured political drama about an East Berlin Stasi agent and his victims. It won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language film and was one of the most compulsively watchable films of recent years. *Never Look Away*, his second foreign language Oscar contender, is another mesmerising contemplation of the postwar psyche of the director's native Germany. This time, he follows three decades in the life of artist Kurt Barnert (Tom Schilling) in a lightly fictionalised version of the painter Gerhard Richter whose life and art intersected with the most seismic dislocations of 20th-century Germany.

Details similar to Gerhard Richter's life are faithfully captured in Donnersmarck's film with which Richter initially cooperated but from which he subsequently distanced himself. It may be too close to the bone because the film's plot turns on a revelation made in a 2005 biography of Richter concerning a connection between the relationships he built in post-war East Germany and the fate of an aunt at the hands of Nazi eugenicists.

The three-hour film begins in an art gallery in Dresden, where five-year-old Kurt (a lovely clear-eyed watchful Cai Cohrs) is being led through the notorious 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition – the culmination of the Nazi policy to eradicate all modern art – by his free-spirited young aunt, Elisabeth (a luminous Saskia Rosendahl). Kurt's father has lost his teaching job because of refusing to join the Nazi party, and the family now lives in reduced circumstances on the outskirts of the town. She whispers conspiratorially to her nephew that she prefers the forbidden art on display (by Kandinsky, Picasso, Otto Dix, George Grosz, and others) to the sentimental realism endorsed by the Third Reich.

Elisabeth is diagnosed with schizophrenia and locked in a clinic, run by gynaecologist Professor Carl Seeband (chillingly played by Sebastian Koch). She will be sterilised and eventually sent to a distant facility, unbeknown to her family, where she will be gassed in a shower with other 'genetically inferior' women. Her family is deceived about her eventual fate. Only we, and Seeband, are privy to it. Whilst being forcibly removed from home she mouths the words spoken to Kurt earlier: 'Never look away'. Now he holds his hand a few inches in front of his eyes as if to blot out the sight of her abduction. The camera shows us what he sees – the hand coming into focus, leaving what's behind blurred. When the hand drops, the awful truth is again revealed, still faintly blurred – reality perceived at one remove – before again coming into sharp focus.

Kurt's experience of the war is contradictory and confusing: he stares in awe as Dresden is firebombed, seen burning in the distance in a shattering sequence that is intercut with

Elisabeth being led to her death – a juxtaposition that in other directorial hands could be gratuitous. He sees members of his family killed by both sides and the others conforming outwardly to the Nazi regime, despite the words *Heil Hitler* (replaced sometimes by *drei Liter*) sticking in their throats. These losses are followed by the tragic suicide of his father in the first years of the Soviet occupation.

Years later, Kurt arrives at Dresden's Academy of Art where he is drilled in socialist realism, forswearing the bourgeois 'ich, ich, ich' ('me, me, me'), hence the German title of the film, *Werk Ohne Autor* (Work Without Author). He meets and falls in love with fellow fashion student Ellie (Paula Beer) who by a terrible coincidence is the daughter of Seeband, the doctor responsible for his aunt's murder. Protected by a grateful Russian officer whose baby he saved, Seeband's career has flourished in the now communist East Germany. His contempt for Kurt's poor genetic heritage is only matched by disdain for his future son-in-law's interest in art.

In Dresden, Kurt progresses from signwriting to mural painting heroic workers, but his heart is not in it. Defection to West Germany promises artistic freedom. The couple elopes to Dusseldorf just before the Berlin Wall goes up, there to discover the burgeoning (new) avant-garde art scene of Dusseldorf's famous *Kunstakademie*, where Kurt enlists as a mature student. Here in the 1960s, representative painting has ceded to conceptual art, and 'happenings'. In one gloriously designed scene, Professor Antonius van Verten, Kurt's mentor, played by Oliver Masucci, and a spot-on stand-in for Joseph Beuys, sets fire to political posters in front of his bemused class: 'Choose art not parties!' he admonishes.

Kurt, desperate to find direction for his work, struggles. It is in the final half hour or so of the film that von Donnersmarck achieves something truly remarkable. Kurt clears his studio of clutter and failed projects so that he has a blank room and a blank canvas, and he starts painting. While finding the iconoclasm of the current art scene liberating, Kurt is prompted to look for new ways of painting rather than to abandon painting altogether. He thinks, tests an idea, scrubs it out, steps back, goes home, returns next day and starts again. As he tries to get hold of what he (or his subconscious) is trying to do, we begin to grasp just how innovative his idea is and how extraordinary the filmmaker's craft in depicting its emergence. Kurt's discovery of his unique kind of 'photo-realism' or 'photo-painting' is exhilarating to watch. And we come to understand the significance of that 'never look away' early scene.

Thus we see Kurt/Richter heightening the photograph-like quality of selected photographs by imitating the effect of 'blurring' created by insufficient depth of field, as if photography, always already at one step removed from reality, allows him to approach reality once again. And we, as spectators, have to make an effort to fix what we see. It is as if the 'diffusion' or 'blurring' of the image imposes the act of recalling, with all its incompleteness and lack of certainty, inviting us to acknowledge the inadequacy of all attempts at 're-presentation', including our own role in interpreting the past.

Since he no longer has to invent his subject matter (though he must select the

photographs) or deal with traditional demands on painters such as perspectival organisation, Kurt is now freed to focus on purely 'painterly' concerns like the handling of paint, tonal values, format and size of the canvas – concerns governing the kind of gestural abstract art to which he has been introduced in Dusseldorf, but without recourse to suspect notions of individual self-expression, since photography places limits on this. (For this reason, Richter preferred press and amateur photography to 'art' photography with its own aesthetic conventions). *Never Look Away* captures all of this in an extraordinary series of scenes that depict the struggle that produces the painting that is key to the drama. Once the catharsis comes, the effect is thrilling.

There is no satisfying confrontation between Kurt and Seeband but in its place is something much more profound, given the film's preoccupation with ways of seeing. Kurt has been working on a painting based on three family snapshots: one of his aunt, one of his wife as a child with her father on a beach, and a recent newspaper photograph of a newly caught Nazi war criminal. These are placed together on the canvas and reworked in layers of paint dragged across it, recalling Richter's characteristic 'blurring' of photographic images. Dense overworking of areas of black and grey convey a similar sense of opacity. When Seeband enters the studio and sees the painting he reels back in terror. Kurt and his colleagues are bemused. The painted canvas knows more than the artist who painted it. We know why, though.

Cinematographer Caleb Deschanel does terrific work in enabling us to viscerally understand Kurt's progress. As that earlier 'never look away' shot suggests, 'it is only by looking away that we can actually see the truth, using obfuscation to achieve clarity'. The film's deceptive format as a fairly mainstream (but also exactly precise) movie might be viewed in the same way – a canny way of wresting a moral reckoning from a cruel, confused, and unresolved history.

# Something to hang on to in times of upheaval

Marcy Leavitt Bourne

2019

Winston Graham, who was born in 1908, was a prolific English writer of novels, also a playwright, and it is for his 12-book series of historical fiction, loosely called the *Poldark Novels*, for which he is most famous. Meticulous research and description of places and people – his notebooks are in the keeping of the Royal Institution of Cornwall – give his *Poldark* books a sense of being rooted deep in the Cornish historical landscape in which they are set.

More than that, however, is the way Winston Graham got under the skin of the times: late-18th-century Cornwall, where technological innovation led to advances in mining techniques – tin and copper – that made some people very rich and others very poor. Landowners called the shots, and sent their representatives to parliament to look after their interests, while children went unschooled and their parents were reduced to penury.

Does this sound familiar? There is more, especially in this, season five of the series, which continues to be written by Debbie Horsfield. It departs somewhat from the books and will be the final season. In it, mental health and attitudes towards it come to the fore.

In case you have been living on another planet, the *Poldark* series began in 2015 – an earlier series was aired in the 1970s – on BBC One. It rocketed to fame in the first season when Ross Poldark, played by Aidan Turner, took off his shirt in the summer scything scene and audiences fainted from the exposure. Eleanor Tomlinson, who emerges from her role as kitchen maid to becoming a wife, and the one with good sense, is the perfect foil to his antics. This publicity may have done wonders for its ratings, but it had the effect of putting a gloss on the show that makes it easy to accept it as a superficial costume drama romp, with debates about the 'hotness' of its male star. It has even been called 'beloved twaddle' and not a series that men would be apt to enjoy.

Curious this, considering that some of its main issues are: the structure and intricacies of how monopolies operate; the way in which the banking industry benefits the few (three generations to achieve a baronetcy), or how to make a fortune in one easy lesson (cheat and make lies sound like the truth); working conditions and a gig economy; failure to educate youth. One further issue, discussed by Horsfield, who has had personal experience with depression, is that of mental illness.

It is useful to recall that Winston Graham was the author of the book *Marnie*, later made into a film by Alfred Hitchcock, starring Sean Connery and Tippi Hedrin. The book, perhaps, gives more substance to this psychological thriller; however, it suggests that the author was not a stranger to thinking in terms of how men and women are affected by shocking experiences in their lives, and how they struggle to maintain a balance in the face of them.



Jack Farthing, as the hated George Warleggan (rich and always on the make) gives an outstanding performance as a man who is driven by grief at the death of his wife into a madness that medicine at the time treated with a kind of contempt, seeing it as a weakness that needed to be beaten out of the sufferer. This, too, is a contemporary issue, and while we do not attempt to punish the mentally ill, neither do we always offer the necessary assistance that they deserve. Fortunately for Warleggan, a more holistic approach is finally accepted, from the good Dr Enys.

The late 18th century was a time of turmoil, from the American Revolution to the French one on the horizon. The issue of the slave trade is also very much to the forefront in this season, as the series is joined by Kerri McLean, playing Kitty, once a slave and now the wife of the former governor of Honduras, a man who has been causing trouble in the colony with his forward-thinking concerning the equality of all races. Ross Poldark, as an MP from Cornwall, makes it his campaign to support the abolition of slavery, and the arguments in the House – like those raised against any changes in the voting system – are those of men who cannot bear the thought that they should lose any of their power.

Winston Graham based some of his characters on historical figures, and interwove them with the reality of the times and a fictional story of generations of one family in Cornwall. Of course it is a tale, and as such it can be mocked as frivolous, but beneath the surface, like the mines it depicts, are deep, deep veins that constitute the structures of English society, its morals and weaknesses. What it gives the viewer is a glimpse also of its strengths – something to hang on to in contemporary times of upheaval.

# Finding out the rest: history and Scotland now

James Robertson

2019

The title of this essay comes from Edwin Morgan's poem *King Billy*, in his 1968 collection *The Second Life*. Now more than half a century old, the poem depicts the life and death of a Glasgow gang leader, a man defined by violence, bigotry and poverty in a city blighted by the same things. Morgan does not shy away from the grimness of this reality, but he also questions why so many attended the gangster's funeral. 'It isn't the violence they remember / but the legend of a violent man,' he writes, 'a folk hero'.

With that phrase Morgan is putting some historical context around Billy Fullerton, the 'King Billy' of the poem; not endorsing the bigotry and violence, but seeking its source as far back as the 17th century, when those earlier folk heroes, the Covenanters, battled a repressive regime for the principle of their freedom of worship – a principle which, however, did not extend to tolerating rival forms of Christian faith.

The poem ends:

*Go from the grave. The shrill flutes  
are silent, the march dispersed.  
Deplore what is to be deplored,  
and then find out the rest.*

I love that last instruction. On the one hand, Morgan seems to be saying, we need to know our history and we need to revisit parts of it, particularly the parts which we think we know so well that we haven't looked closely at them for a while. On the other hand, we need not be restrained or defined by the past. Having acknowledged it, and acknowledged that some of it is deplorable, we can go from the grave in which we have placed its remains and move on into the life of now and of the future.

What interests me most about history is not so much the detail of past lives and societies as the passage of time itself, and the effect this has both on individuals and on the communities in which they exist; how they perceive themselves and how they understand, or imagine, their pasts. Even to consider what history is requires acknowledging such a relationship between past, present and future; but since the present is always being overtaken by itself, what this really implies is a constantly shifting relationship between past and future – between what was and what will be, or, to be more accurate, between what *may have been* and what *may yet be*. More accurate, because we do not know the past with much more certainty than we can know the future. Both are constantly, chronologically, on the move.

The past simultaneously recedes and advances, the future approaches, sometimes so

slowly that it appears hardly to be moving at all, sometimes bearing down with terrifying speed. But if there is truth in William Faulkner's idea that 'The past is never dead. It's not even past', there is also truth in the idea that the future never arrives: it draws near, only to become, suddenly and irretrievably, the past. And although we, as individuals and as members of a society, are in the midst of these flows of time, we are not stationary either but, as we age, are always pushing into and against the future, with the current of the past at our backs.

Walter Scott, at the end of his novel, *Waverley* (1814), beautifully captures this experience of time. *Waverley* is set at the time of the Jacobite Rising of 1745–6. Scott writes:

*There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. The effects of the insurrection of 1745... commenced this innovation. The gradual influx of wealth and extension of commerce have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time.*

*... But the change, though steadily and rapidly progressive, has nevertheless been gradual; and, like those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river, we are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now distant point from which we have been drifted.*

Scott thought that although human *nature* remained much the same in all ages, human *behaviour* was shaped by prevailing social, economic and political conditions. This understanding of the power of historical forces disturbed Scott's own deep-seated conservatism, especially when he saw political radicalism as a by-product of increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, but it explains why his fiction was so admired by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and critic Georg Lukács in the 1930s.

History is the nearest thing a Marxist has to Providence, but for Scott too history was something almost sacrosanct, a natural law of human society. In this, though he lived in and contributed massively to the age of Romanticism, he was a disciple of the historical ideology of the previous two generations. What we now call the Enlightenment was a movement which gave history the status of a science, although in practice its historians theorised rather more than they applied rigorous empirical tests to their theories.

To these men, history was a process that could be understood by gathering evidence and weighing it against their theories of how human society operated. For most of them, this was not just process but progress. Different societies might be at different stages of development, but they were all on the same trajectory, which began with hunting and gathering, moved on to the nomadic and pastoral, then to settlement and agriculture and finally to the commercial stage. Europe, unsurprisingly, was considered to be at a more advanced stage of development than anywhere else in the world.

Scott accepted and endorsed this narrative of history as progress but, like his predecessors, he had a problem with it. They, when their attempts to be North British met with no reciprocal embrace by the English of their inner South Britishness, had turned to the remnants of ancient Gaelic poetry in the form of Ossian, as presented in translation by James Macpherson, to heal their bruised sense of Scottish identity. Scott had to find new ways to reconcile his own and his country's continued disquiet that progress meant, in effect, anglicisation. Building on the Ossianic experience, he conjured up a potent brew of history, Highlandism, poetry and fiction to provide his fellow-Scots with a renewed sense of who they had been that could fit with, but not undermine, who they were becoming.

Like Hume and Robertson, Scott warned his readers against reinvigorating Scottish history as a force or as a narrative that could intrude into the present, and specifically into the new, British and imperial, dispensation. What had happened in the Scottish past was rich in incident and character, but it was *over*.

Scott found himself caught between a deep-seated loyalty to, and knowledge of, his country and an equally fundamental commitment to the Union with England. He sought to find a way for Scotland to accommodate its sense of identity with the economic and other benefits of being a partner in the greatest empire the world had yet seen. This was both a deliberate and a subconscious project for a highly intelligent, complex, energetic and emotional man. To complete it successfully, the Scottish past had to be turned into a kind of serious playground, rich in possibility *except* for the possibility that it might inform the future in any disruptive way. Scott well knew, because of the way he himself was affected by it, that Scottish history had the potential to unleash great energy: fascinated by it, he nevertheless felt a need to keep it, like a wild animal, behind a barrier of time.

The curious thing about keeping Scottish history at bay in the realm of the imagination is that this neither starved it to death nor fossilised it. Instead, it remained – at least in public perception – live but chaotic, its most famous moments and personalities – Wallace, Bruce, Bannockburn, Flodden, Mary, Knox, Covenanters, Killiecrankie, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Highland Clearances – weirdly unconnected by either chronology or theme, while other, perhaps just as significant, events and movements were completely neglected.

Neal Ascherson, in his John P Mackintosh Memorial Lecture of 1986, *Ancient Britons and the Republican Dream*, described this fragmented rendition of Scottish history as 'a scrapbook of highly coloured, often bloody scenes or tableaux whose sequence or relation to one another is obscure'. He was comparing it with what he saw as the careful, linear landscaping of English history, which one could see laid out from the present as if gazing from the terrace of a country house. Ascherson acknowledged, however, the pioneering work of Scottish historians in the post-war period, and there is no doubt in my mind that this foundational work has been built on still further in the last 30 years.

Working as a bookseller in the 1980s and 1990s, I noticed the growth of a seemingly insatiable public demand for serious Scottish history. At the same time as readers were devouring the fictional works of Nigel Tranter and the popular historical works of John

Prebble, they were also – and sometimes they *were* the same readers – buying heavy, deeply researched monographs and collections of essays, mostly issued by the academic publisher John Donald, on a wide range of local, economic, social, political and cultural Scottish history. Simultaneously, single-volume or multi-volume national histories by leading academic historians became bestsellers.

Those disconnections in public awareness noted by Ascherson began to be repaired, the gaps to be filled. Importantly, Scottish historians no longer based their research and their conclusions on the premise that what had happened in Scotland was, by its very nature, subordinate to what had happened in England, or that its relationship with English history was like rough pasture lying outwith the landscaped garden. In these circumstances, it became impossible for there to be only one narrative about the country, and impossible for all the competing narratives to be kept separate from contemporary political developments. Revisionism was everywhere. Nothing was sacred or untouchable. Scottish history became disputed and disputable in a way that it had not been for decades, perhaps even for a century.

What was happening in history was happening in other fields too. The period between the first Scottish devolution referendum of 1979 and the second of 1997 was one of intense and widespread cultural exploration. It was a time of intellectual challenge and renewal, in which the question was repeatedly asked: if, politically, 1979 marked some kind of failure of national nerve, why was that? Maybe Shakespeare had had it right some 380 years before, when he wrote *Macbeth* in the very early years of the Union of Crowns, and had Ross utter the words, 'Alas, poor country, – almost afraid to know itself!'

The 1980s and 1990s, for many Scots, was a time for acquiring self-knowledge at both an individual and a collective level, and for a purpose. The purpose was to make sure that when the next opportunity for constitutional change came, as it surely would, the nation would not stumble but step with confidence into the future.

Andrew Marr's book *The Battle for Scotland*, a history of the long campaign for Scottish Home Rule or devolution, was first published in 1992, shortly after John Major won a General Election for the Conservatives in which the already weak Tory vote in Scotland, widely expected to collapse still further, had actually rallied slightly. The Conservative victory meant that devolution was delayed until after the Labour landslide of 1997. Marr could not know what would happen five years after he was putting the finishing touches to his book but, he wrote: 'because I cannot take the central political arguments against Scottish Home Rule seriously, I remain of the view that it will one day come about'. He continued:

*It is possible that John Major... will be able to suspend the battle for Scotland with an armistice on Unionist terms. But my guess is that he will not be able to bring about permanent political peace. To do that would require an unpredicted and irreversible shift in Scottish feeling – a shrugging off of real history and a retreat*

*from real politics altogether... A Scotland genuinely at ease with itself would be an argumentative, grown-up Scotland with a lively parliament as well as a strong economy – a conscience and a tongue, as well as limbs and a body. And when it does speak, its voice will be sharp and fresh. And its views will perhaps surprise us.*

'A shrugging off of real history.' 'Its views will perhaps surprise us.' These are phrases which were striking back in 1992, and which still resonate 27 years later. Between then and now, we have had not only the creation of the parliament but also the 2014 independence referendum. This event changed how the Scottish past will look when viewed from the Scottish future, but we do not yet know in what ways.

Brexit has recharged and added more urgency to the independence question, which was supposed to have been settled in 2014 but (as now seems clear) was not. If Scotland's past is less fragmented, its future is still to be assembled. Despite the best, and even the noble, efforts of Sir Walter Scott and others, the Scottish past – 'real history' – never could be contained behind a barrier of time. 'What may have been' never was irrelevant to what may be coming, and certainly is not now irrelevant, even if what comes may surprise us.

Beware, be warned, be brave:

*Deplore what is to be deplored,  
and then find out the rest.*

# Contributors

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