ICS BOOKS

THE BEST OF 25 YEARS OF THE SCOTTISH REVIEW

ISSUE 7

BIOGRAPHY

DUNDEE

INVERAMSAY

The Best of 25 Years of the Scottish Review

Issue 7

Biography
Dundee
Inveramsay

Edited by
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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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The greatest man in the world?

Christopher Small on William Morris

1996

What is the connection between floral wallpaper and the Red Flag? The answer, of course, is William Morris. Everybody knows that, and if anybody didn't he (or especially she) will have been reminded in this centenary year of Morris's death. The wallpapering at least has been lavish.

He was, as we've copiously been told in recent months, an artist and domestic designer of wide and lasting influence. All over the place, his work and its derivations are prominently on view; some of them, the wallpaper and furnishing fabrics, have never been away, but we're invited to look at them with a newly admiring eye.

Morris was also a poet; and towards the end of his life he was a declared socialist, using all his talents as an active pioneer in the early upsurge of the movement, literally and in his own person raising the scarlet banner high. But this latter information has been, if not withheld, treated in a somewhat muted manner as something incidental, even anomalous, at most an eccentricity (artists are indulged in that) and not of much importance in what is otherwise comprehensively to be claimed as heritage. (If you want an idea of what's on offer in that line, have a look through the current edition of *Past Times*, 'a wealth of fine and unusual gifts inspired by the past', in which Morris designs have been applied to everything from plates and mugs and scatter-cushions to tablets of soap). In the large commemorative exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a single showcase of old socialist newspapers and pamphlets was tucked in towards the end of the ordered tour of viewing, together with voice-over as, so to speak, auditory wallpaper.

Proportionate to Morris's prodigious output of all kinds, this is perhaps no more unjust than in the present climate it is surprising. Not much more than the last decade of his 62 years was spent in political activity. Nevertheless, it seems to me a mistake to neglect the work, actions and utterances of those few years if you want to receive a real communication from the man and not leave him to the half-life of museums. Nobody's life and work are all of a piece and our notions even of a living person are always selective; far more so of the dead. But if we believe in personhood at all, we're obliged to make connections between different parts, and from that there may actually be something to be learned.

Morris, a stout man in several senses – at times unquestionably what would now be called overweight – impressed those who knew him by his tremendous energies, which he spent without stint in many directions. (One of his doctors named the cause of his death simply as 'being William Morris, and having done more work than most 10 men'.) But they were also impressed by his integrity or, as some expressed it, his simplicity. When he surprised them – and by nothing more did he surprise and bewilder some of them than by

his declaration that 'I am one of those people called socialists' – they knew, nevertheless, that he meant what he said. Most unlike his collaborator and (in more than one way) rival Rossetti, he always did mean what he said, 'sometimes', as Bernard Shaw recalled, 'very vehemently'.

For Shaw he was 'a saint', and Shaw as we know didn't bestow that title indiscriminately – Joan of Arc is the only other Shavian canonisation that comes to mind. To John Bruce Glasier, the Scot so closely associated in his youth with Morris as socialist, he was in recollection simply 'the greatest man in the world'. It would be absurd to claim any special Scottish corner in Morris, the Londoner of Welsh descent who was at least as English as William Blake. But it's possible that such an estimation as Bruce Glasier's came more easily in Scotland, where Morris became known personally more as a socialist than as artist – or where, it would be more accurate to say, these two aspects were seen as inseparably combined. Glasier, who saw this from the first of his acquaintance, also remarked Morris's 'intense self-willedness', the 'unselfconscious egoism', 'ownselfness', or integrity of a healthy child, and he had no doubt that this included his political opinions: 'He was a socialist because he could not be William Morris without being a socialist'.

Morris, on his own part, committing himself unreservedly to the emergent socialist movement, described his motives forcefully and succinctly. He looked upon the material and moral hideousness of the world he lived in and concluded: 'There are only two ways today of being really happy – to work for socialism or to do work worthy of socialism'. It was a carefully worded distinction, and whether or not it was distinction without difference is perhaps the most important point of all he said and did, which must presently be looked at. But, in the meantime, what is clearly to be understood, and may more readily be understood here in Scotland than in the vicinity of the V&A, is that for him the 'two ways' were perfectly complementary, and he followed both with his whole heart.

Those were the days of enthusiasm, of course. Glasier, writing at the end of his own life, remembered his first sight of Morris – it was in Picardy Place, Edinburgh, the clubroom of the recently formed Scottish Land and Labour League – and how 'a kind of glow seemed to be about him, such as we see lighting up the faces in a room when a beautiful child comes in'. (Morris, now in his 50s, corpulent, bearded, seems constantly to have produced this paradoxical impression.) When he spoke in St Andrews Hall the following Sunday (on 'Misery and the Way Out'), 'no such address had ever been heard in Glasgow before'. Glasgow was, of all the cities where Morris spoke, maybe the most ready to hear him, because in the very heyday of commercial and industrial self-confidence, it was already buzzing with critics. (Glasier himself used to answer the question, What made him a socialist? with the one word, 'Glasgow'.)

The young man took Morris on a brief tour, including the yet new glories of George Square and the City Chambers, from which, as Glasier delicately said, Morris 'turned his face… with an unquotable epithet of contempt'. It may have been a much more forceful version of the term he was later to attach to the Westminster Houses of Parliament, as the

Dung Market. (As footnote to the recent bracketing of Morris with other cherished Victorian relics it may be worth recalling the printable part of his comment to Glasier, that 'your respected city, like most of its commercial kinds, is architecturally speaking, woefully bad and I fear impenitently so'.)

Morris was provoked and, his usual response, did some of his own provoking. He was expected to talk about politics and art, and he did – the two were never far apart in his mind – but he wasn't especially flattering to aesthetes and other highminded persons. When he was told that most of the Gilmorehill academics were unionist he burst out – 'That just shows you that your intellectuals, dull dogs as they mostly are, have some scent of what's in the wind, and when it comes to the pinch they are more concerned about the preservation of their privileges than about the interests of literature and art. We'll have to mend what we call education, or it will play the devil with us'.

Actual practitioners of the arts were inclined to agree with him. Glasier also recalls the self-styled 'Arts Congress' in Edinburgh (1889), which Morris set by the ears, and its subsequent follow-up in Glasgow, attended by most of the 'Glasgow Boys', with its consequence that 'within half-a-dozen years more than half the art students in Glasgow and Edinburgh… were either socialists or were largely influenced by socialist ideas…'.

It is tempting to wonder how long this influence may have lasted. It was not exclusive to Scotland, nor was it in Scotland that Morris's preoccupation with the relation of class privilege to 'the interests of literature and art' began; with origins far earlier than his socialist conviction it was a lifelong debate in his mind. But during his visits and tight-packed tours – he noted one which took in Kilmarnock, Edinburgh, West Calder, Glasgow and Edinburgh again, Dundee and Aberdeen within a week – some of the crucial points in this debate were made with special urgency.

Glasier remembered an open-air meeting in Coatbridge, the sinister glow from the furnaces lighting the sky, at which Morris was challenged about his role as artist and advocate if the arts, and carefully explained: 'What we socialists are out for is not to win the support of the dilettante literary and art people (though we don't in the least exclude them from the hope of salvation) but the working class, who suffer most from the present system and have the most to gain by upsetting it and putting socialism in its place'. (He also spoke with a miner about the prospects, some time before wind-farms and hydro were dreamt of, for wind and water power to replace the dirty and dangerous getting of coal.)

And another key remark, one time much bandied about in discussion of Morris's socialist orthodoxy, was after the St Andrews Hall meeting in 1884. Those versed in the melancholy history of left-wing in-fighting will recall that the Glasgow branch of the Democratic Federation, newly reborn as the Social Democratic Federation, and already embroiled in a quarrel which involved Hyndman, Aveling and Eleanor Marx, were gathered (in an upper room above a Gallowgate warehouse) to meet Morris and find out where he stood. The secretary, W J Nairne, suddenly put the shibboleth question, 'Does Comrade Morris accept Marx's theory of value?' Morris replied, 'To speak frankly, I do not

know what Marx's theory of value is, and I'm damned if I want to know. Truth to say, my friends, I have tried to understand Marx's theory, but political economy is not in my line, and much of it appears to me to be dreary rubbish… It is enough political economy for me to know that the idle class is rich and the working class is poor, and that the rich are rich because they rob the poor. I need read no books to convince me of it'.

There can be few horses deader than the question, once flogged with so much zeal, whether Morris should be docketed as Marxist or non-Marxist, or (as Engels fixed it to his own satisfaction) a 'settled sentimental socialist'. He doesn't fit in such pigeon-holes, as the late E P Thompson put it: 'He was somewhere else'. It seems worth asking, and not merely as an antiquarian exercise, where that other place was. In one sense, it was obviously Nowhere, but that answer needs qualification. Once again, there is a Glasgow connection to be noted, a striking and poignant foreshadow, a year or two in advance, of the vision of socialism he was to describe in his best known book.

According to Glasier, a veteran of the then flourishing school of Glasgow Green debaters, Old Tooley, made a direct attack on just those 'dilettante and art people' from whom Morris was anxious to dissociate himself, the 'High Art socialists who designed silk curtains and got out handprinted books in Russian leather which only the spongers on the toil of the workers could afford to buy'. It was near the bone; and Morris (who had long been exasperated by the fact that 'I spend my life ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich') tried, somewhat brokenly, to reply. He admitted that pursuit of the arts must seem, amid the chronic ills of poverty and exploitation, a 'truant pastime'. But, rejecting ascetic isolation and linking enjoyment of the arts directly with social pleasures, he went on to declare: 'I don't want to get away from my fellow-men, for with all their faults – which are not theirs only but our own – I like them and want to live and work among them. My Utopia must be pitched square in the midst of them or Nowhere…'. And Nowhere, of course, was where soon afterwards, as instalments first in *Commonweal*, he located and described it.

Whether Old Tooley was satisfied with this explanation isn't on record. No-one will find the argument, even apart from its apparent confusion – Utopia and Nowhere being the same place – logically consistent. But apologias don't need precise logic to be convincing. This broken-backed utterance of Morris's bad conscience about 'enjoying myself' while 'the mass of my fellows are doomed to such a sordid and miserable life of servitude' does really go to the heart of the matter. And together with its conclusion – 'were it not for my work and the hope of socialism, I believe life would be positively unendurable to me – as indeed it would be to any possessed of any aesthetic and moral feeling at all' – it is a most illuminating comment, saying perhaps more that Morris's own introduction about *News from Nowhere* itself.

Nothing is easier than the demolition, on grounds of probability or even possibility, of that 'Utopian romance', as Morris called it in his sub-title. Self-confessedly it is a dream, and a child's dream at that, as remote from 'the real world' as the let's pretending of happy

children. But those who are so fond of talking about that 'real world', and think of child's play as, well, just child's play, are unreflective. They have no idea what actually moves men and women, still less the children they themselves have grown out of. The greed and push to dominance which supply the dynamics of their universe as slenderly resemble veritable existence as does money the real things it is supposed to create and command. The amazing thing is to see how many swallow this delusion, even while 'engaged' (as a more recent writer than Morris has put it) 'in human life rather than in an economic transaction'.

Morris, who observed the empire of this deception with horror as well as amazement, was not a philosopher, any more than he was or would have cared to consider himself a political economist. But, in his huge and overflowing talents, his generosity of heart, his ebullience and also his pervading melancholy – his very child-likeness – he had a grasp of human needs and desires ordinarily ignored by those dismal studies. Suppose, instead, he said, people 'studied the (difficult) art of enjoying life and finding out what they really wanted; then I think one might hope civilisation had really begun'. The 'education of desire' was the aim, and the means and expression of it were in art, but art was neither mere side-effect nor end-product. Art was not to be pursued for the sake of society, nor was society to be ordered for the sake of art – Morris wasn't either social-realist or art-for-art's-saker, though both have laid claim to him. For him, the arts, 'the expression by man of his pleasure in labour', were far too important to be separated from living either as decorative additive or eventual goal. It was rather properly human life, abundant life as he understood it, that must necessarily express itself in the forms of art.

Abundance he assumed, and he may be – and has been – attacked as setting up a rich man's standards of leisure and plenty. But it was not at all the profligacy which, grossly prevailing, now makes many anxious as they think of the lean years to come. Morris repeatedly distinguished between 'riches', which he condemned (and insofar as he was rich and sold things to the rich, felt bad about) and 'wealth', the unfettered human goods which were only good when they were shared, as common wealth. It is that distinction which transforms his dream into something which, as the last sentence of his book suggests, may be called vision.

It is hard to understand now – further obscured by much of the current 'celebration' of his decorative industry – that he was in part puritan. It was after all the rough simplicities of life in late 19th century Iceland and of the medieval sagas (in which to be unthrifty, or 'lavish' was a serious fault) that renewed his spirits and gave him the new hope and energy he was soon to devote to socialism. It was not the grey puritanism of utilitarians, those 'leaders of modern thought who sincerely and single-mindedly hate and despise the arts', although he could at least respect their sincerity. But it was certainly puritanism of a kind which, when he contemplated the frilled and padded artistic tastes of the Victorian bourgeois, absolutely revolted within him. The standards of their comfortable life, 'comfort' serving to define civilisation, moved him to a memorable outburst:

Is it so indeed? Farewell then my hope! I had thought that civilisation meant the attainment of peace and order and freedom, of goodwill between man and man, of the love of truth and the hatred of injustice, and by consequence the attainment of the good life which these things breed, a life free from craven fear, but full of incident: that is what I thought it mean, not more stuffed chairs and more cushions and more carpets and gas and dainty meals and drink – and therewithal more and sharper difference between class and class… I tell you that art abhors that side of civilisation, she cannot breathe in the houses that lie under its stuffy slavery.

And: 'I have never been in any rich man's house which would not have looked the better for having a bonfire made outside of nine-tenths that it held'.

That the bonfire might well include some of the products of Morris & Co he was ready to accept. Fire is a strong metaphor. It was a 'river of fire' that anyone had to cross who sincerely took up the cause of socialism, and the crossing would be in part a self-immolation. Much that he dearly loved, Morris foresaw, might be destroyed: art itself 'must go under' and he did not know 'where or however it may come up again', but he knew that it would if life itself was not stifled or destroyed. For Morris did not pretend to know what forms socialism, the 'difficult art', would take, what the liturgy would be of the faith he, a conscientious atheist, was ready to call a religion. *News from Nowhere* is no sort of blueprint, nor intended to be, but a projection of the desires of his heart. His much-derided medievalism is personal, its inconsistencies and anachronisms of no consequence. In any case, the child's garden of delights there described is not conceived as permanent, but as interim; an 'epoch of rest', the respite or necessary regression of spirit which after the centuries of hatred and deception human beings so sorely need.

What is more personal in Morris is the perception that human relations partake of the arts by which they are expressed; that 'the art of living' is not a fancy phrase but a framework of moral categories. Therefore it is proper to describe much or most of our present 'civilisation' as *ugly*; not merely in its productions, its violence and its hideous waste, but in the very essence of its injustice, than which there is nothing uglier. So the dreams of all who, perceiving or not, suffer this enormity, are essentially of harmony and proportion.

The implication in practice (and Morris, the dreamer, was an exceedingly practical man) is equality, a word which nowadays we're not supposed to use. (There is a kind of aptness about that, since the party of which Morris was a pioneer isn't supposed, nowadays, to talk about socialism either.) Morris, for his part, spoke about equality a good deal, seeing clearly how poverty and riches define one another ('if there are no poor people, I don't see how there could be any rich').

He knew perfectly well it would not be easy; he knew at first-hand plenty about the resourcefulness of the rich and powerful, and the tenacity of their hold; about the manoeuvres of political life and the compromises that seem to be forced upon it. Towards

the end of his life, wearied by the quarrelling and intrigue within 'the movement', he faced the consequences of that disillusion which has now become general and respectable. If, he said, it could be proved to him that socialism – 'living decently without robbing another' – was impossible, he would 'try to live on' as peaceably as he could:

> *But yet I must tell you that I shall be more or less a pain to myself (or at least a disgrace) and a nuisance to my neighbour. For I do declare that any other state of society but communism is grievous and disgraceful to all belonging to it.*

Inequality and injustice have plenty of allies, and Morris knew it well. He must have remembered in the last months of his life that it was just 100 years since the death of Gracchus Babeuf, guillotined in 1796 after the unsuccessful rising of his Society of Equals. Now, another century on and with more retreats and defeats to record, his best epitaph is perhaps in the meditation of the beholder, a visitant from another age, in the *Dream of John Ball* (first published in *Commonweal*, 1886). The speaker reflects upon the doomed aspirations of England's Peasants' Revolt, and the fate of the hedge-priest who asked the pregnant question: When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?

> *I pondered these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name…*

And so,

> *… Though I die and end, mankind yet liveth, and therefore I end not, since I am a man.*

Kierkegaard at the ceilidh

Derick Thomson on Iain Crichton Smith

1998

The middle years of the 20th century saw a remarkable resurgence of Scottish poetry, in the three indigenous languages of Scotland, and we are now in the process of saying 'Hail and Farewell' to the innovators. The resurgence can, of course, be traced to the earlier decades of the century, particularly to the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, and interestingly he gave considerable prominence to Gaelic poetry in his journalistic output of the 1920s and early 1930s. MacDiarmid was strongly influenced then by the publishing enterprises of Ruaraidh Erskine of Erskine and Mar. A trawl of MacDiarmid's hitherto uncollected prose, *The Raucle Tongue*, provides the detail.

It is partly against that wider Scottish background that we have to assess the work of Iain Crichton Smith, but also against the cosmopolitan and international background that has played a great part in reinvigorating Scottish writing in the last 80 years.

Iain Crichton Smith was born in Glasgow in January 1928, the second of three brothers. His father died before Iain went to school, and the family moved back to their place of origin, the island of Lewis, settling in the village of Bayble. The three boys grew up in very straitened circumstances, but in spite of that, two of them proceeded to secondary education at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway, and then to the University of Aberdeen. They were helped by the bursary system of these times, and by their mother's relations. The eldest brother, Alex John, became a high-ranking official in education in Rhodesia, and later re-emigrated to Canada, where his family still live.

The village of Bayble in the 1930s had a population of approximately 1,000, and the neighbouring village of Garrabost 500. My father was the local headmaster, with the school placed between the two villages. The early 1930s in particular were years of depression, with dole queues gathering in our kitchen as the men went in turn to sign papers in my father's room (he was acting as a JP in this connection). The women of Bayble were prominent fish-gutters, in Stornoway or Wick or Peterhead or Lowestoft, and some of the men were fishermen or sailors, but many were unemployed.

The churches were still a strong influence on society, with the Free Church in the ascendant, but with the Church of Scotland strong also. The Free Church had a particularly doctrinaire attitude to entertainment of a public kind, and very rigid views on religious beliefs and their consequences in the afterlife. Yet these apparently inflexible doctrines did not extinguish humour and fun in the community. Youngsters could still sing Gaelic songs, and take part in the 'road dance' at night, and older people could exchange stories and jokes without fear of excommunication. A wide range of people could go to the village football matches which had recently become popular, but church

members seldom or never went to public ceilidhs or concerts or the cinema in Stornoway.

It was against this mixed background that Iain C Smith grew up, and he frequently reacted against the doctrinaire aspects of it, directing anger and satire against the church, and sometimes branding the whole community in a similar way. But he was aware of other aspects of communal life there, for example the satirical and humorous work of the 'village poets', of which Bayble had its fair share, and this other side shows through in his writings more clearly than in his reminiscences. The famous character Murdo owes at least part of his existence to the less sombre side of community life in Bayble.

Another highly important factor in this mixed background was bilingualism. In pre-war Bayble, everybody spoke Gaelic but most people had at least rudimentary fluency in English, while some had spent many years abroad, one character boasting that he had known Roosevelt well, before he became President of the USA. Iain's home language was Gaelic, but he became strongly attracted to English through books, as there were very limited reading options in Gaelic for youngsters at that time. As a close friend of his older brother, I often visited their home, and remember Iain in his early teens showing me English verse he had written. We discussed it in Gaelic and this dual role was to continue for many years in Aberdeen and Glasgow. His early experimentation with verse was predominantly in English but this was to change, to a degree, in the post-war years.

A crucial factor in this development was the founding of the Gaelic quarterly, *Gairm*, in 1952. One of his most effective Gaelic poems, *Tha thu air aigeann m' inntinn* (*You are at the bottom of my mind*), was published in *Gairm* in 1952, and among others a poem addressed to George Campbell Hay in 1958, and short stories in 1953 and 1958, and in 1960 Gairm Publications published his collections of Gaelic short stories and poems, *Bùrn is Aran* (*Water and Bread*).

In the 1950s, he was also having poems published in periodicals such as *Stand and Lines Review*, and in 1952 Callum MacDonald, still at an early stage in his seminal Scottish publishing career, published a short collection of Iain's poems, *The Long River*. This included the poem *Meditation addressed to Hugh MacDiarmid*. MacDonald was to publish various collections of Iain's work over the years, including his *Selected Poems* in 1981, and Akros Publications published some of his books, but he was taken up by various English publishers, with Eyre and Spottiswood issuing *Thistles and Roses* in 1961 and *The Law and the Grace* in 1965, Gollancz his *Selected Poems* in 1970, and Carcanet a stream of his books in the 1980s and 1990s, including his *Collected Poems* (1992), which won the Saltire Book of the Year Award. Gaelic collections continued on a reduced scale, with *Bìobuill is Sanasan-reice* (*Bibles and Advertisements*) in 1965, *Eadar Fealla-dhà is Glaschu* (*Between Comedy and Glasgow*) in 1974, *Na h-Eilthirich* (*The Exiles*) in 1983 and *An t-Eilean agus an Cànan* (*The Island and the Language*) in 1987. His Gaelic work was published mainly by Gairm Publications, with other publishers such as the Celtic department at Glasgow University publishing some titles. And, in 1975, MacDonald published *The Permanent Island*, a collection of English translations of the Gaelic poems in his 1965 and 1974 collections.

In his prose writings he also alternated between Gaelic and English, with collections of Gaelic short stories published in 1960 (*Bùrn is Aran*) and 1963 (*An Dubh is an Gorm*, *The Black and the Blue*), English stories such as *The Black and the Red* (1973), *The Hermit and other stories* (1977), *Mr Trill and other stories* (1981), *Selected Stories* (1989) and a return to Gaelic with *Na Guthan* (*The Voices*) in 1991. In the novel, his main output was in English, starting with *Consider the Lilies* (1968) and eight novels later *In the Middle of the Wood* (1987). His Gaelic novel *An t-Aonaran* (*The Hermit*) was published in 1976.

Iain's prodigious output also included Gaelic books for children, translations from European poets into Gaelic, and in 1971 he translated a good number of Sorley Maclean's best poems in *Poems to Eimhir*. It was this book that greatly extended Maclean's public. Iain also wrote reviews and essays for a variety of papers and periodicals, claiming to have read dozens of detective stories in one busy weekend. Callum MacDonald published a collection of his essays, *Towards the Human*, in 1986. From time to time he wrote plays, again both in Gaelic and English, originally for radio, and later occasionally for the stage. His output seems seldom to have slackened, and in poetry he continued to produce new work decade after decade, rather like Norman MacCaig, though Norman did not allow himself all these other literary diversions, in prose and Gaelic. A new collection Iain's poems came out shortly after his death.

When he retired from teaching in Oban High School in 1977, and became a full-time writer, his English output became more dominant, no doubt mainly for practical reasons. In his early 50s he married Donalda Logan, and they lived in Taynuilt near Oban. He also took on a punishing schedule of readings, especially in schools, and some writer-in-residence posts in Glasgow and Aberdeen.

This is neither the place, nor the writer, to attempt a close assessment of his English fiction. It may be more appropriate to give a slightly more detailed account of his Gaelic output, and express some opinions on his overall ouvre.

On the whole, critics have been less enthusiastic about his fiction. Cairns Craig tentatively refers to his prose work as 'the hobby of the obsessive wordsmith rather than his vocation', but finds much of interest in the novels in spite of this reservation. Smith's fiction often has a strongly autobiographical strain. *The Last Summer* (1969) is based on his own teenage recollections. We can see the mother figure dominant in *Consider the Lilies*, though it is intertwined with the historical theme of the Clearances. The author's search for his younger brother, who went to Australia and didn't keep in touch with the family, underlies *The Search*, while *In the Middle of the Wood* had its origin in the severe mental disturbance the author experienced in the earlier 1980s. Naturally, many of his poems have an autobiographical background also but he was less constricted by this in verse than in fiction. His imagination ranges much more freely in his poetry, so that he can stay with the recollections of Duncan Bàn Macintyre's *Praise of Ben Doran*, and then range widely through landscape and animals, history and legend, languages and metaphysics, as in his long sequence *Deer on the high hills*, which he regarded as one of his most significant poems.

In his Gaelic verse, he tends to concentrate more on Highland themes but approaches these from new angles. In *Na h-Eilthirich* (*The Exiles*) the poems move from Australia to Canada, while back in Lewis girls can drink vodka, and Elvis Presley and the Beatles have shared the stage with the melodeon player. In *An t-Eilean agus an Cànan* (*The Island and the Language*) he has some hilarious passages in which islanders recall their holiday experiences in a bizarre mixture of Gaelic and English. From the early 1960s, if not earlier, he was fascinated by the cultural conflicts that were becoming a standard aspect of Highland life. These are particularly prominent in *Bìobuill is Sanasan-reice* (*Bibles and Advertisements*) where a few of the poems are set in Oban. Quoting from one of these:

> *To-night the sea is like an advertisement, book after book shining.*
> *My shadow is running down to the sea. My skin is red and green.*
> *Who wrote me? Who is making a poetry of Advertisements from my bones? I will raise my blue fist to them – 'A stout Highlander with his language'.*

He was to return to this theme much later, with the sequence *Shall Gaelic die?*, but in his English verse this is only one aspect of the philosophical dilemma of how to adjust to language, or adjust language to poetry.

In his Gaelic fiction he also moves between the monolingual Gaelic world and the cosmopolitan one. In his earlier collection, *Bùrn is Aran*, the stories are mostly set in Lewis, with several of the characters returned emigrants, trying to adjust to a changing world. One story is set in the war trenches. *An Dubh is an Gorm* (1963) explores a wider range of topics and landscapes. Bringing Napoleon and the Jews and Abraham and Isaac into play along with Highland characters. His last collection of Gaelic stories, *Na Guthan* (1991), explores a wide range of 'voices'. In between, in 1976, he had published a short novel, *An t-Aonaran* (*The Hermit/Loner*). Here, he returns to his native village, weaving together characters and situations from that context and from the other worlds he had explored. This is probably his most sophisticated work of fiction in Gaelic, and must rank high in his overall output. Art and the communication of art, and the artist's vulnerability, are central to the story, as they were to much of Smith's writing, and his gifts of close observation and humour add variety and accessibility to the novel.

Late in his career he was to develop his humorous writing quite hilariously in the Murdo stories. This humour was an amalgam of the village fun he remembered and his own rich imagination, and when he read his stories in public it was hard to decide whether he or the audience was enjoying them most.

This blending of the local and the cosmopolitan was strongly characteristic of his work. Within the last year, he sent me a selection of short poems and prose pieces for *Gairm*. In one of these the chairman at a local ceilidh keeps on making references to Kierkegaard. In an important sense, Iain's life-work was a prolonged attempt to reconcile

the local and the cosmopolitan, Gaelic and English, faith and doubt, the Black and the Red.

There can be no doubt that his prolific and varied output has greatly enriched the Scottish literary tradition, in both Gaelic and English, over the last 50 years.

The long search for reality

Ian Mackenzie on Tom Fleming

1999

Halfway through the ceremony which opened the Scottish Parliament, there occurred one of those moments when an event turns on its axis. James Macmillan's fanfares had – after a stutter – led in the Queen. Formal speeches, ornamented by a rattling piece of political finery from the First Minister, had been amiably delivered and received. Now what? There had been talk of entertainment. Was the tone about to sink? In the Lord High Commissioner's gallery a figure rose. Eagle-poised, shoulders braced, eyes penetrating to every corner, the voice known to millions spoke. Iain Crichton Smith's poem inviting a *New Song* and the esteeming of ourselves, rang into the rafters. What turned journalists' heads was the subsequent young Thurso girl's poem and Sheena Wellington and the whole parliament singing *A Man's a Man for a' That*. But it was Tom Fleming's authoritative voice that had turned the mood, as it had been doing all his life.

The more I have seen of this man and his work, the more intrigued I've become as to what built him. Not easy to probe, I realised, as his high public profile is not supported by self-advertisement. *Au contraire*, in private his narrative flow is directed at entertaining and illuminating you. Frequently it is hilarious, at other times startlingly direct, but it isn't the kind of communication one would feel comfortable dissecting. I went ahead anyway, and he good-humouredly agreed to a conversation in which I'd take notes. What follows is my impressionist gathering together of some of its strands.

Tom Fleming is from top to toe a Scottish actor. But the kind of acting he does is not much affected by being Scottish. It is entirely affected by being human. Early in our conversation, he explained firmly that the kind of professional acting to which he has given his life is not about *expressing oneself* – or, one may deduce, one's tribe, one's nationality – but revealing Everyman. I can confirm this from my own experience in the stalls. I have seen him be Brecht's Galileo, and I have seen him be the very English religious writer C S Lewis. The two men were, to put it mildly, different, but he was each different man. He was also, in 1956, the first person ever to be Jesus on British (or any?) television. That was different again. In such roles, he is not a 'Great Actor' famous for being Tom Fleming. He is an actor co-operating with the dramatist to reveal a truth about you, me and Everyman.

He clarified this point. 'I am not a jobbing actor. I could have aimed to be a star, so that people came to the theatre to see Tom Fleming be himself. That doesn't interest me. Whatever the role, whatever the character, it would always be Tom Fleming. The drama written by the playwright would be secondary. In contrast, what I have tried to be is a leading actor: leading a company in the unfolding of a play.'

This is also what he does and is in the other profession to which he has given his life:

Christian discipleship; for there also he leads others, not by creating a personality cult, but by the opposite route. He works quietly to enable others to be fully human.

But so to describe those two vocations makes them appear separate, whereas in real life they're so integrated you can't see the join. I can give four examples of that integration from experiences outside this interview.

When Fleming played C S Lewis in the stage version of *Shadowlands,* he had to make speeches about the theological problem of suffering. In the internationally applauded film version, Anthony Hopkins played Lewis. Hopkins is a splendid actor and was movingly effective in many aspects of the part. But his theological speeches were unconvincing, like a non-musician pretending to conduct an orchestra. Fleming on stage was absolutely convincing, because C S Lewis's debate with himself and God became a riveting existential dialogue with the audience.

Secondly, he did a radio series reading sermons of great Scottish preachers. Reading? No other actor could have lifted those dead sermons off the page so that they became evangelical events. He did this not by the trick of imitating the preachers' voices, though that would have been technically easy for him as a brilliant mimic who had heard several of them in the flesh. He ignored that external route. He was able to recreate not only the men but their message because he accompanied them down the pilgrimage of their argument.

Thirdly, in a universally acknowledged inspirational *coup de theatre*, at the St Magnus Festival, and later in the General Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, and on Iona, he *became* the late George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community: funny, vulnerable, shaker of foundations, going far from quietly into the light.

Fourthly, Tom Fleming is an enabler in the theatre. He saved an Edinburgh Festival when its central drama production in the Assembly Hall collapsed at almost the last minute. Because of the respect the acting profession had for him, he was able to call together a major *ad hoc* company for a production of *The Three Estates*. The play being itself such a revelation of the social, political and religious turmoil out of which the Scottish Reformation emerged, it was hugely ironic for it to take place in an auditorium which belongs to the Established Kirk of Scotland, and which has become the first meeting place of the new Scottish Parliament. The pastoral implication, however, is this. Organising and directing a huge event at desperately short notice was an artistic miracle. One of the actors told me that Tom still made time to give attention to members of the company who became ill or stressed.

I could not raise these specific points with him in conversation because of his modesty. The humility is genuine, it is not a theatrical performance. He is incapable of such ersatz gestures; they could not survive his wicked sense of humour, Christian realism, and commitment to the truth of how things are in this world. As a leading member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, he remembers playing Kent (in *King Lear*) in a realistic non-rhetorical way which resonated with audiences in Eastern Europe in the 1960s. Later, as director of the Scottish Theatre Company, he was awarded the Roman Szlydowski Prize for

his production of *The Three Estates* in Warsaw in 1986. What mattered to him was the realisation that, as the audiences behind the Iron Curtain rose to cheer, they were making a statement. 'Yes, this is the reality of how it is for us.'

So – what was reality for Tom Fleming as his life evolved? He was born on 29 June 1927, during an eclipse of the sun, and in part of Edinburgh called Trinity. As if these portents weren't enough, the doctor said: 'Well, we've had Peter [Tom's brother] – this must be Paul!'

But the texture of Tom's faith is not that of a sentimental symbolism. Here is his own account of early shocks from a book called *It's My Faith* that was published 45 years ago by the Epworth Press.

> *My father was a Baptist minister – a saintly man, with a genial charm and a fund of good humour. My mother was an artist – I can remember her too with a true affection, though I was only four years of age when she died, and upon my father devolved the task of bringing up a family of three children, myself the youngest. I was 12 when my father died too. My world – the only world I had ever known, a very safe, very happy world – crashed about me in one awful moment on quite an ordinary October morning. I found myself suddenly in desperate need – not of kindness or sympathy, I had that and it helped to dull the immediate shock – no, I needed something to hang on to, someone to put my trust in – I wanted a God, not in a storybook or a Sunday school hymn, but a God that was a real Person, who was alive NOW, and loved me and knew my need, I stood at my father's grave and watched as a sprinkling of earth put paid to the security of my childhood. I saw all of the safest, surest things I had known, as fragile, transitory, fleeting – and there and then, although I can hardly have known it, began my search for something real and abiding.*
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> *I am an actor. It is my job to play many different parts, become many different people. I like acting; it is something that gives me tremendous satisfaction – but actors are faced with this problem of reality every day of their lives. Acting is all right only so long as we remember that it is acting – and that when the performance is over we have to face a real world… as ourselves. Sometimes it's a hard battle through tinsel and paint and powder to find reality. And my believing, from that early time, has become one long search after reality.*

It is the search for reality which seems to be the core of Tom's work and faith. In his conversation he goes back again and again to 'how things are' – an echo of the 20th century's greatest theologian, Karl Barth's saying that the Christian starts with 'the state of affairs'.

Tom recollects that in childhood summer holidays in the Scottish Highlands, while his siblings enjoyed the distractions of society and game-playing, he would spend his days

inside, away from the sunshine, with adult tradesmen in the local community, watching them work. He was fascinated by the physical actuality of their work. I could not decide if he was making a conscious connection between this physicality and that of a profound experience when his mother died. He was taken to see her body, and was interested by the fact that her face was like marble. He wanted to see if her skin was real, so he rubbed her forehead with his fingers to see if it would move. The shocked adults removed him not only from the room but from the house, to go an play in a neighbour's garden. Even at four years old, he registered that he would not let his life be like this. He wanted to be where the reality was happening. He now sees this intense curiosity as the trait of a child – a trait that must survive in adulthood to be the basis of an actor's craft: the knowledge of how things are. So that when he played Jesus on TV, he would not allow the TV producers to censor the physical reality of Crucifixion from the screen; the Crucifixion was shown.

Hearing him talk, I got the feeling that work to him is holy; that all work, spiritual, mental, physical, creative, practical, is a communion with reality. He certainly gives his all to whatever he is doing; in broadcasting circles he is famous for the completeness of his research. One example known to me bears this out. In 1991, the train bringing the Queen to the Gulf War memorial service in Glasgow Cathedral broke down and arrived 40 minutes late. Radio, having nothing to show, eventually gave up trying to fill in and listened to the organ music. But the television producer of the outside broadcast told me with awe of the calmness with which Tom Fleming, as TV commentator, set about producing 40 minutes of interesting material, seamlessly presented as if it had been planned – which in a sense it had.

The consequences of this concentration on actuality reveal Tom to be a radical Reformer. Two quantum leaps clarify this. While yet a relatively young layman in his Baptist Church, he was frustrated by the formality of the communion ritual, because the people he was breaking bread with were concealed by their Sunday suits, whereas he wanted to share this physical sacrament with individuals defined by the reality of their weekday work – as when Jesus welcomed the disciples to breakfast, after they had worked all night. So, with one man and one woman (neither of whom agreed to this idea), Tom began to meet for breakfast every Monday morning at seven, before work. There was no advertising, but eventually so many came in their working clothes that there had to be two large breakfasts at seven and eight, and a community was born.

The next leap was in 1988. The large Victorian Baptist Church building was too expensive to keep, so the congregation moved to a small hall in Canonmills, Edinburgh, where Tom led them to begin a new form of 'corporate ministry'. There is no paid pastor. The lay community does its own pastoral work, and preachers from all denominations, including Roman Catholic, come to preach. Just before my interview, Richard Holloway, the Episcopal Bishop of Edinburgh, had been the preacher. After my interview, I attended an extraordinary communion service in the afternoon at Canonmills. In the morning, there had been a full Sunday service (at which Tom played the organ). Now at 3pm, there was a

tea-party to which the old, sick, and immobile were brought. Everyone wore coloured paper party hats in the shape of crowns. After pies and cakes, Tom, wearing his party hat, took bread and wine and with great simplicity conducted communion for the rest of us in paper hats. Afterwards, there was community singing and while some were cleaning up, others did a spontaneous jig or three. A few days later, a brilliant old lady of nearly 90 who had attended that Christmas communion died, and Tom conducted the funeral.

Having been there with her on the Sunday, I know that she had already experienced the Parousia – communion in a paper hat – before she died. Religion on the physical earth, not an abstract heaven.

If I find Tom Fleming to be in some measure Christ-like, it is not in a filmic way, through an image; not in a dogmatic way, through an ideology; but in a practical Scottish way, through the actuality of human life. It seems to me that this charismatic, self-effacing man lives and breathes revolution in action, *viz.* movement; but the movement is always away from himself. Both in his art and in his life, he has been a man for others.

Whisky and boiled eggs

Stewart Conn on W S Graham

1999

I was recently sent a special edition of a magazine, devoted to the poetry of the south-west of England. The editorial defined its contents as incorporating 'the urban, the pastoral and the experimental *as no other area*' [my italics]. Doubtless the region's literary output reflects these – and the Celtic spirit of Cornwall. But I wondered if the claim to uniqueness related to a use of language and specifically Cornish (of which I gather there has been a recent upsurge) not evident in the issue in question. Otherwise, the claim is surely equivocal.

Many a catchment area must be inhabited by writers with an ear to the ground, urban and rural, and determined to 'make it new'. With its triple linguistic inheritance of English, Scots and Gaelic, Scotland would certainly seem to meet the requirement of 'as no other area'. Many of its current manifestations might arguably be regarded as unique. Even then I'm loath to trumpet them as such: preferring to think not of any single or received new mode, but of there being as many around as one cares to imagine. Nor need a specific approach (however *outre*) invalidate or devalue others.

Anyway, it's surely through an alert sensibility and original way of seeing, allied to an ear attuned to current speech patterns, and not any gratuitous ventriloquism or acrobatics, that the writer can most fully reflect a specific locale, yet be universal. All of which strike me as epitomised by a poet I have long regarded with a warmth disproportionate to any closeness between us comparable to that of the many other writers I've come to know and admire – and think of as friends.

W S Graham was born in Greenock in 1918. In 1938, he was awarded a bursary to the residential Adult Education College of Newbattle Abbey. One of his fellow students was Nessie Dunsmuir, whom he was later to marry.

The following year, Graham went to work in Eire, before returning to Clydeside where he had a spell as a precision engineer in a torpedo factory. Also in Glasgow at this time was C M Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid), whose advocacy of a complete regeneration, not only of Scottish literature but in all walks of Scottish life, laid the foundation for the self-styled modern Scottish Renaissance. Rather than remain part of this and with a somewhat apocalyptic first volume, *Cage Without Grievance* (1944) already under his belt, Graham headed south – at the same time as the Glasgow painters Colquhoun and MacBryde.

Already Graham saw himself as 'banished, more or less, from the Scottish lit scene, which I don't hold with and seems to get more embarrassing with its playing bards and glimmerin lufts keekin wi sna'. In 1947, he won an Atlantic Award for poetry, and in 1947-48 lectured at New York University. But home, for virtually the rest of his life, would be Madron, in Cornwall; among his companions the artists Peter Lanyon, Roger Hilton and

Bryan Winter, he in his medium, they in theirs, pursuing modes of experimentation and abstraction.

His passage from his first Faber volume *The White Threshold* (1949) by way of the verbal exuberance and rhythmic muscularity of *The Nightfishing* (1955) to the maturity of *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970) and *Implements in their Places* (1977) represents a striking voice change. It is far from fanciful to see his confrontation with the (in his case ice-bound) abyss and the frontiers of the imagination, as not out of kilter with Beckett. As with Beckett, he could walk the tightrope between austerity and study of the human predicament, and a linguistic friskiness and sense of fun. This allied to a mastery of form, and furtherance of poetic technique, make it the more regrettable that since his death in 1986 he has on both sides of the Atlantic been in the main unsung.

The first of my sporadic and brief contacts with him was asking him to go to his local BBC studio to record two poems. When I telephoned the office there to see if someone would look after a poet for me, there was a female shriek at the other end. 'Not Mr Graham? The one who wants whisky with his boiled eggs, for breakfast!'

The only time I heard him read in the flesh, he gave the impression of boiled eggs aplenty. Rocking slowly on his heels, he kept asking those in the audience who loved him to put their hands up. It was a strangely discomfiting gesture of insecurity in so handsome and ebullient a figure. He got through the evening. But a recording planned for afterwards had to be abandoned.

Introducing a selection of his poems on radio later, he described one as 'narrow on the page', then invited listeners to envisage it surrounded by whiteness. In a sense, this whiteness intimately linked yet isolated poet and listener from one another. The way Graham put it in a *Poetry Society Bulletin* has added application to the process of reading aloud on radio: 'I am always very aware that my poem is not a telephone call. The poet only speaks one way. He hears nothing back. His words as he utters them are not conditioned by a real ear replying from the other side'.

A wider 'whiteness' was in a very real sense both a source and a setting for a dominant area of his output. His poems set in a metaphoric Malcolm Mooney's Land, an arctic of the mind, dealt with the dilemma and desperation of communication – and uncommunicativeness. Their white expanses could be icily cerebral. At other times, his was a real, if perhaps intractable, floe. And in his maraudings to sea, he was equally a voyager of the imagination, of language and its originality. Even then he could be demanding.

It may be due to this that he remains one of the most seriously under-regarded, and critically neglected, of contemporary poets. Indeed, one reason for his springing particularly to mind of late is that when sounded on the proposed contents list for a comprehensive anthology of Scottish poetry, and asked to suggest any absentees, I preferred to focus on what struck me as Graham's under-representation. Not least because of his other, more intimate side.

This and his music, when he adopts or slips most noticeably into Scottish idiom and

cadences, make him for me one of the most touching of poets. As in the simplicity and economy of *To Alexander Graham*, with its retrospective realisation that he must have loved his late father; and the elemental quality of his love-lyrics to his wife. Indeed, it is to Nessie that many of his most delicate and, at the same time, vulnerable poems are addressed; at times with the eerie simplicity of a ballad, or children's rhyme.

To My Wife at Midnight, the last poem in his *Collected Poems 1942–77* (1979) – on the dust jacket of which he insisted on being described as 'a Greenock man' – ends:

Nessie Dunsmuir, I say
Wheesht wheesht to myself
To help me now to go

Under into somewhere
In the redcoat rain.
Buckle me for the war.

Are you to say goodnight
And kiss me and fasten
My drowsy armour tight?

My dear camp-follower,
Hap the blanket round me
And tuck in a flower.

Maybe from my sleep
In the stoure at Culloden
I'll see you here asleep

In your lonely place.

The fear of night-beasts is never far away. An ear not attuned to Scots adjustments of rhythm, or to scarcely perceptible subtleties of intonation, may not detect the burden of emotion these carry. But it is at such moments that Graham can make the ground shift from under my feet. The more intense his sense of isolation and desolation, the more aware we are of those emotional nuances, and moments of tenderness, that are among the most private (and precious) links we have.

Each of the few items I retain from him has, as it happens, a visual impact. One is a postcard with a delicate ink and watercolour by him of pale cliffs against a pale sea. The second seems cut from a piece of card. Its deep blue represents sea and sky. In a garish yellow are a horizon, a star and the outline of a trawler; in white, a hill-line and in block

capitals: MALCOLM'S LAND. All might have been drawn hastily by a child. On the reverse: 'Good wishes from W S Graham, White Uncle of Malcolm Mooney's Land. 1970-71. Good Hochmagandy'. The third, in its smudged envelope, is a hand-written letter on lined paper, containing a pressed and dried sea-pink.

He journeyed far: not least on the contours of his Don Brown Route, and at the altitudes of Lanyon. He even has a mysteriously Lost Miss Conn, departing from the church fete, leaving the trestle-tables to the wasps. Over the years, he crossed many a white threshold. And he never returned from Madron to live in Scotland. For all that, and aside from its rhythms so deeply embedded in him, he seems never to have lost an affection for his native land – or, to be more accurate, his place of origin: what he termed his 'ark-yard' on the Clyde, Loch Thom with its cackling grouse, or the remembered blue moors of Ayrshire. Part of him appeared to remain haunted by them: as the reader in turn becomes haunted.

One *outre* image lingers. A friend visiting Madron vouches for the fact that one night he saw Graham – after a bender – climb unsteadily but determinedly onto the kitchen sink. Feet precariously on the rim, he lurched forward and in the half-dark managed to grab the two taps; then stood joyously imagining he was driving a Glasgow tram.

The letter I mentioned contains another cogent and subjective reason why he keeps cropping up in my mind. In it, he wrote that he admired my poetry but admired my wife even more: likening her to hot, floury scones with butter and raspberry jam. As there, so in his poetry: rather than being diminished or tarnished by the years, his voice, and with it his vision and his music (certainly to me) remain fresh and stimulating – and true.

Back to Blawearie

Jack Webster on James Leslie Mitchell (Lewis Grassic Gibbon)

2000

The dead leaves of early winter scurried about in the wind that came blowing from the Grampian foothills, down upon the bare land of the Mearns, shorn to stubble and waiting now for the plough which would expose once more the red soil that fills and stirs the nostrils.

It was the fictional setting of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, out there in Kinraddie parish, with Chris Guthrie heading up Blawearie brae to the Standing Stones of ancient times, where you communed with God and nature. It was also the real-life homeland of Gibbon's other half, James Leslie Mitchell, and I was heading down the narrow road which leads to the kirk of Arbuthnott, south of Stonehaven, where the burn babbles by and the tall trees bow like ballerinas.

Unusual in a world of vandals, the kirk door was open so I wandered in to as bare a place as Christianity was ever preached. Yet this was in keeping with the spartan lives of rural folk in times gone by, generations who worked hard and were rewarded on Sunday with a spiritual scrubbing the length of two-three pandrops.

I mounted the pulpit steps, with all the gait of Colquohoun the minister in *Sunset Song* and looked down upon an imaginary congregation, which would include the gaunt-faced boy who was Leslie Mitchell, from the little croft of Bloomfield, just up the brae.

Out again to the fading winter light, I stood by the lee of the kirkyard dyke, alone with my thoughts, to read the black-printed words on that stone by the corner.

Here indeed, alongside his parents, lay the remains of James Leslie Mitchell, alias Lewis Grassic Gibbon (13 February 1901–7 February 1935). And here were memorable words from that closing passage which can reduce grown men to tears:

The kindness of friends
The warmth of toil
The peace of rest

I remember standing here as a young man, nearly 50 years ago, privileged to be in the company of Alexander Gray, once the dominie at Arbuthnott and the first to detect genius in the boy who would become Lewis Grassic Gibbon. (For the moment, let us call him Leslie Mitchell.)

Little did he guess that he was nurturing a talent that would give us the greatest prose writer ever to emerge from those Grampian lands, and arguably from Scotland itself. We then went back to his house in Stonehaven that day, when he turned out an essay book he had kept for 40 years.

Imagine his bewilderment when he first read these words from the 12-year-old who had wandered out from the croft on a starry night to observe: 'What an irresistible feeling of power comes when on a calm clear night you gaze up at the millions of glistening worlds and constellations which form the Milky Way. 'Tis then, and then only, that one can realise the full power of the Creator and the truth of the wild dream of the German poet. There is no beginning, yea, even as there is no end'.

The great Scottish writer was surely on his way. The parish of Arbuthnott, however, was not his birthplace. That distinction falls to the croft of Hillhead of Seggat at Auchterless, on the edge of the Buchan district of Aberdeenshire.

Michell was in fact eight when he and his parents and brothers George and John moved over to the Howe of the Mearns, to the small bit place called Bloomfield. How strange that that little bigging was almost within sight of the farm which was the family home of Robert Burns's father, William, before he set off to look for work in the south and to take the name of Burns to Ayrshire. What a claim for one small corner of Scotland.

So young Mitchell grew up at Arbuthnott, a lad apart from the herd, quiet and bookish but still good-humoured when teased and tormented by lesser mortals. Old Nellie Riddoch, who lived near the kirk until not so long ago, told me of the boy she remembered sitting on the dyke, lost in his books and oblivious to the noise and turmoil of the school playground.

Not for him the drudgery of the land which would, by long tradition, become his lot. He would set out for a wider world, a prospect which drew the wrath of his crofter father, James Mitchell, a dour old devil in a certain mould of Aberdonianism. A life in writing? What kind of thing was that to think about? But Leslie Mitchell took the first step from Arbuthnott School to Mackie Academy, Stonehaven, soon to be so much of a rebel that he stalked out at 15, with a whistle and a swagger, railing against the 'gaping ignorance' and 'shoddy erudition' of some academy teachers.

He found his way to the Aberdeen Journals and one of my own pleasures, when joining that same company 50 years ago, was to realise that I was in the same reporters' room where Leslie Mitchell had worked a generation earlier.

It was the tail-end of the First World War, when revolution in Russia was sparking off passions elsewhere. Mr Catto, the news editor, sent young Mitchell to a nearby hall one evening to report on the formation of an Aberdeen Soviet Society. Concerned by his failure to return, with edition deadlines approaching, Catto donned coat and hat and dashed round to see what had happened.

What met his eyes was a recipe for apoplexy. Instead of recording events quietly at the press table, Leslie Mitchell was up there on the platform, rabble-rousing in preparation for the revolution! Youthful exuberance was having its fling. The edition could wait. Left-wing politics intrigued him for a while thereafter and he moved to Glasgow in 1919 to work for *The Scottish Farmer*, arriving in time to witness the notorious scenes of political trouble in George Square, involving Manny Shinwell and company.

On the personal front, Mitchell ran into a crisis when he was caught falsifying his

expenses, as a means of aiding the political cause. In modern times, many a journalist will openly boast that he gives his talent to his job and his genius to his expenses. But in 1919 it was a reason for instant dismissal. Mitchell, still a decent and idealistic young man, was so upset as to attempt suicide at his Glasgow digs. He also had to face his cantankerous father, who knew all along that this writing business would come to a sticky end.

Like many a young man in trouble, he joined the Army and pursued his enthusiasm for archaeology with a posting to the Middle East. When that came to an end he joined the RAF, around the same time as Lawrence of Arabia, seeing not only Cairo and the pyramids but visiting Jerusalem and spending Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. To pass those years of his 20s as a clerk in the forces, where he was still the odd man out in the barrack-room, was a criminal waste of genius but it did at least broaden his experience of life.

In 1925, he married a fellow pupil from Arbuthnott, Rebecca Middleton, a clever girl who had done well in the Civil Service in London, and in that same year they went back for a holiday in the Mearns, interestingly, going by boat from London to Aberdeen.

Of course, the talent which produced that memorable essay in the 12-year-old had developed through those wilderness years, mainly into short-story writing. But it was not until 1928, by which time he would soon be clear of the Armed Forces, that he wrote his first book, *Hanno, or the Future of Exploration*, and a further two years before his first novel, *Stained Radiance*.

Since Mitchell was dead before his 34th birthday, it is an astonishing fact that he wrote 15 books in the four years from 1931 till 1934, starting with *The Thirteenth Disciple* and including the now-famous trilogy, *A Scots Quair*.

By now well-settled in the attractive surroundings of Welwyn Garden City at a convenient distance from publishers in London, he entered into this feverish schedule of writing which surely proved too much for his constitution. By 1930 he had a daughter, Rhea, with his son Daryll to follow, so there was a family to support and a pressing need to succeed as a full-time writer.

The high point in Mitchell's career was *Sunset Song*, in which he created a new and exciting style of writing which gave the full measure of his genius. It was neither straight English nor Scots dialect but came from an ingenious use of rhythms and cadences with which he was experimenting as early as *The Thirteenth Disciple*.

In a letter to a young and distinguished Aberdeen journalist, Cuthbert Graham, Mitchell himself explained that he was 'writing everything in the twists of Scottish idiom but not in the actual dialect, except for such words as have a fine vigour or vulgarity, and no exact English equivalents'. The result was a highly distinctive form, intelligible to the whole English-speaking world, yet so Scottish in rhythm as to make you near believe it was dialect.

There is one caution for the first-time reader of *Sunset Song*. When I first read it 50 years ago, I thought the prelude was heavy and even the opening chapter struck me as too mannered. But gradually I sank into the rhythm of the language and found myself

bounding along with such joy as I had never known in a book. Suddenly the mundane of everyday life took on new depth of meaning, as my eyes were opened to the excitement of so much I had taken for granted.

I may have had the advantage of a north-east background similar to Leslie Mitchell's. But of all the influences on my own modest career, I can honestly say that I learned more about the art of writing from *Sunset Song* than from all else put together. I analysed and dissected the style, tried to unravel the thinking process which produced that particular form of words but finally conceded that you cannot unlock genius. What the budding writer can do, however, is let the rhythms wash over and refresh you – and give you the confidence to cast off inhibitions.

How Leslie Mitchell came finally to writing a classic about his own north east corner of Scotland has different versions. When in the 1960s I met his brother John, who lived in Glasgow, he told me he was the one who challenged Leslie to write something about their native patch.

But the self-effacing Cuthbert Graham of the Aberdeen *Press and Journal* may have had more to do with it. Shy but astute beyond his years, young Cuthbert was among the very first to see where Mitchell was going. Following a criticism of one of his books, he wrote significantly in February of 1932: 'How will Mr Mitchell develop? It is to be hoped that he will settle down to give us novels of the north-east. After all, he must know the countryside of his birth and upbringing best, and the Mearns, unlike the Wessex of Hardy or the Argyll of Neil Munro, has not been made to live in a novel, and Mr Mitchell could do it'.

Mitchell didn't care for Graham's book review but he took the challenge to heart and said: 'One of these days I'll write that North-east novel he talks about'. Six weeks later he had done it! And, with full credit to the publishers of the 1930s, it was in print by August of that year, six months after Cuthbert Graham's challenge. It was at this point that he assumed the pen-name of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, owing something to his mother's name of Lilias Gibbon.

It was, of course, a brilliant portrayal of rural life in all its loves and lusts, coarseness and beauty, and was bound to cause offence back home, where many a foible and hypocrisy was laid bare. It became the great north-east classic but he never quite got over the hurt of his next visit to the folks at Bloomfield. His mother, a kindly and understanding woman, nevertheless met him with the words: 'Laddie, what did you want to write all that muck for? It's the speak o' the place. You father's fair affronted and I'm ashamed of you too'.

Little did they know; and even less could he explain. He had simply funnelled himself through the auburn-haired Chris Guthrie who, like the author himself, was torn between a distaste for the drudgery that enslaved folk who were the salt of the earth, and a deep and abiding love for the land itself, in all its mysterious beauty.

What a story he had woven from that crofter life that belonged to the years before the First World War. We followed those local lads to the trenches of France and back again to Blawearie brae, to the memorial for those who would see it no more.

And the minister raised his voice to the wind:

For I will give you the morning star. In the sunset of an age and an epoch we may write that for epitaph of the men who were of it. They went quiet and brave from the lands they loved, though seldom of that love might they speak, it was not in them to tell in words of the earth that moved and lived and abided, their life and enduring love.

And who knows at the last what memories of it were with them, the springs and winters of this land and all the sounds and scents of it that had once been theirs, deep, and a passion of their blood and spirit, those four who died in France? With them we may say there died a thing older than themselves, these were the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk.

The character of Chris Guthrie carried the story through to the sequels of *Cloud Howe* in 1933 and *Grey Granite* in 1934, all to come under the umbrella of a trilogy title, *A Scots Quair*.

By that summer of 1934, Grassic Gibbon (to give him his new name) headed north with a brand new motor car he had managed to afford and which would indicate to old man Mitchell some measure of prosperity. But there was no pleasing the old devil. The new car merely drew a sarcastic comment about 'gettin' up in the world – awa abeen your aul' man'.

Grassic Gibbon hid his disappointment but decided to spend the end of his holiday with his old dominie, Alexander Gray, who had by now moved over to Echt in Aberdeenshire. In that fine summer of 1934, they sat out in deckchairs, where he scribbled away in his notebook.

Finally, he folded it over and said that was the end of *Grey Granite* but he didn't think Mrs Gray would regard it as highly as the other two. Cuthbert Graham accompanied him on the journey back south but a recurring stomach pain was soon troubling him.

Grey Granite was in print by the end of the year but in February 1935 Grassic Gibbon was rushed to hospital in Welwyn Garden City. He failed to rally from the operating table and died a week before his 34th birthday, the cause of death given as peritonitis following an operation for a perforated gastric ulcer.

Nowadays he would have lived – and it is galling to think that he could still have been with us, 65 years later. I sometimes look at my old friend John Brown, the naval architect who started designing the great Queen Mary in 1926, and ponder the fact that, as he approaches his centenary, he is exactly the age Grassic Gibbon would have been.

So a great literary light was extinguished even before it was properly established, and we are faced with the frustration of wondering how far he would have gone in world literature. His biographer, Ian S Munro, listed the commitments at his death, running to a million words and ranging from three novels and two biographical works to a massive study of world religions, a social commentary on Scotland and a 250,000-word history of the world. (He had become a friend of H G Wells.)

At Golder's Green crematorium, the distinguished critic Ivor Brown gave a eulogy and the ashes were taken back to this corner of Arbuthnott where I am now standing. I looked around and remembered that that fine Scots poet, Helen Cruickshank, stood here on the day of his burial, a cold wind blowing from the snow-specked Grampians.

She wrote movingly: 'I looked at them, Leslie's people, wondering whether they and their kind would ever understand him as he understood them. His father, from a bare little farm on the Drumlithie road, had a face like Saint Andrew of Scotland. His mother's lined face worked nervously, conquering her tears. I thought of how they would go home to the farm routine; to unyoke the shelt, to milk the kye, to feed the hens, to know the balm that is released from the soil, without knowing that they knew it'.

In fairness to old father Mitchell, poor brute, he realised far too late that he had in fact sired a genius and given him no recognition. I am told that he quietly broke his heart and curled up to die shortly afterwards.

The Second World War was past before I discovered the joys of Grassic Gibbon. A less welcome discovery was that his books seemed to be out of print and a letter to Jarrolds, his publishers, brought no encouragement that that would change.

As a journalist in Aberdeen and later with the *Scottish Daily Express* in Glasgow, I began to write of the need to bring this great Scot back to print. I met his widow and have a letter of appreciation for anything that was being done to stir the publisher. The books did re-appear and by the 1960s Grassic Gibbon had found his place in the Higher Leaving Certificate in Scottish schools, alongside Scott and Stevenson. But the major breakthrough came in 1970 when the late Pharic Maclaren televised *Sunset Song* for the BBC. It was the true beginning of rehabilitation for a sadly neglected writer.

The local laird, Lord Arbuthnott, took a keen interest in Grassic Gibbon and I had always hoped that he would hand over the local school, now closed, to become some kind of focal point of interest, complete with classroom where that memorable essay was written.

Instead, in the 1990s they built a Grassic Gibbon Centre as a modern attachment to the parish hall at Arbuthnott. It is ably run by a local farmer's wife, Isabella Williamson, and is open from April till October. At that parish hall in 1998 I had the pleasure of being the speaker at the very first Grassic Gibbon Dinner, intended as an annual event.

And now, as we approach the author's centenary in February, I was back in his native parish, to find there is hardly a living soul who remembers him. Arch Middleton, his wife's cousin, is still within reach but, as with other rural areas of Scotland, the way of life that belonged to the crofts and small farms is all but gone.

New faces, new tongues come to occupy on short lease, sometimes oil-men with need for a temporary home and little time to become part of the community. Grassic Gibbon's old school has been given over to holiday accommodation.

His childhood home of Bloomfield should surely have been preserved for the nation. But when it came on the market in 1988, the old Kincardine and Deeside District Council put

in a bid which didn't meet the asking price. Now there has been further modernisation and a sign in the window which tells of self-catering.

At least there will be a stage production of *Sunset Song* in Arbuthnott Hall on the centenary evening. Beyond that, Blawearie braes are silent now, a changed place without Chris Guthrie, a new world dawning where the old speech and the old songs will indeed rise but with alien effort to the lips.

Yet, as the last of the light fades beyond the Grampians, the man who gave such eloquent voice to that other world will surely find his immortal place in the long and illustrious story of Scotland.

Rescuing John Buchan

R D Kernohan

2000

When John Buchan died 60 years ago (having become Lord Tweedsmuir and Governor-General of Canada) he had been too popular, fashionable and successful for the good of his subsequent reputation. His posthumously published autobiography, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, went through 20 printings in less than two years. He was an astonishingly readable expression of the perceived greatness and goodness of the times.

As the times changed, his reputation might have been expected to subside, and it did. The post-war climate was unfavourable for liberal imperialists, Tory romantics, and classicists. Buchan was accused of snobbery, racism, sexism and (on even more dubious evidence) anti-semitism. The lifestyle and character of his most famous thriller-hero, Richard Hannay, were compared favourably with those of James Bond.

Even in his home country, Buchan seemed doomed to diminishing honour. A Tory, an anglophile, and an elder of the Kirk did not sit readily with the styles and values asserted by many of those most evident in asserting a new Scottish identity.

But Buchan has been rehabilitated. Far more people continued to read his books than worried about the criticisms. His two major biographers (the late Janet Adam-Smith in 1965 and Andrew Lownie in 1995) gave a balanced view of his life and opinions, including his mildly Zionist sympathies. The main retouches required to the self-portrait in *Memory Hold-the-Door* probably reflect Lownie's evidence that Buchan would have been less reticent in accepting major political office, had it been offered, than he made out.

Buchan also made a creditable 17th in the recent *Who's Who in Scotland* poll for the Greatest Scot of the Century, and his biography of the Marquis of Montrose probably secured that other 'Presbyterian cavalier' 15th equal place as the Greatest Scot in History.

The real rehabilitation, however, has come from continued interest and popularity. A taste for Buchan and enjoyment of his very varied writings – for even his fiction is really spread across several styles and genres – extend far beyond his native Scotland and even his half-adopted England. They reach far past those of us who have a natural or ideological affinity with Buchan's religion, politics, philosophy or national feelings.

The main evidence of interest in Buchan does not lie in the flow of books and articles about him or the summer pilgrims to the museum in the old Broughton Free Kirk, or even the vigorous devotions of the John Buchan Society. It rests much more on the increasing availability on bookshop shelves of a very wide range of his fiction, mainly in paperback. There is no longer much trouble in instantly replacing a battered copy of a Richard Hannay or Dickson McCunn novel. His two most 'serious' novels, *Witch Wood* and *Sick Heart River*, seem back in fashion, even if *Prester John* worries the modern congregations of unco

guid anti-racists and anti-imperialists. But their quarrel is not really with Buchan but with realities of Scots historical involvement in South Africa.

There is no longer any danger that Buchan will be remembered only for *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, so sorely and cleverly travestied in the Hitchcock film version. That short 'shocker' (as Buchan called it) is a masterpiece of its kind, but Buchan showed both before and after it that he could master a longer and more complex kind of adventure novel with considerable power of characterisation, aided by ability to draw so skilfully on his own range of experience and acquaintance that critics and readers sometimes confuse them with Buchan himself and people in his circle. Thus emerged the more complex Hannay of the later novels, whose South African experiences echo those of David Craufurd, and that most romantic cavalier among Presbyterian grocers, Dickson McCunn. And hence the unseemly and misguided competitive claims to be the 'original' of Hannay.

But Buchan's rehabilitation is not as complete as it deserves to be. The survival of his popularity and the revival of his reputation as a writer of thrillers and 'romances' may even have created another danger which, if not countered by those of us who take Buchan seriously as well as enjoyably, could limit Scotland's understanding of a very notable Scot's contribution to its culture.

The danger is that Buchan will be vindicated and appreciated in an almost exact inversion of the way in which he wanted his work to be valued and remembered. He disparaged his thrillers, with a not wholly convincing twinge of conscience about doing so well out of them, earning so much from light work which was real pleasure, holiday relaxation, or even (as in the case of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) relief from the frustrations of convalescence. But he prized his 'serious' historical and biographical books, committed himself to the research which they required, valued the good opinions of the great and scholarly, was wounded by criticism (notably of his original version of the life of Montrose, written before the First World War), and used them to project views of the nature and destiny of man far above the heads of such straightforward heroes as Hannay. He also perhaps used them to draw together some of the very different strands in his own life and convince the world and himself that it was possible to absorb a wide diversity of influences without becoming a mass of contradictions.

Buchan was a Scot who not only did well across the border from the time he moved from Glasgow University to Oxford but who came to love many things English. It was not only in the literal sense that he married into English life. He was also a Presbyterian, and elder at St Columba's Pont Street till his life's end, in what was still a very Anglican society and, in a situation commoner then than now, a Christian whose ways of thought were profoundly and directly influenced by pagan Rome and Ancient Greece. For good measure he grew up in a manse where Jacobites, Covenanters and the Disruption were all held in honour and had a grandmother in whom he claimed to find a resemblance to her kinsman, W. E. Gladstone.

Even his Tory politics were less straightforward than Richard Hannay's. The Buchans

had come to conservatism via liberal unionism, and when John Buchan finally reached the House of Commons, as a Scottish universities member, he became what a later style of conservatism called 'wet'. He also came to describe himself as a Scottish 'nationalist', though by nationalism he meant patriotism and not the pursuit of separation and sovereignty.

If Buchan were no more than a writer of lightweight thrillers and romances, these theological, philosophical and ideological preoccupations would merit no more than footnotes to a preface. But he was much more; and much of what he was has a bearing on the fullest understanding of his books and his permanent significance in the cultural history of Scotland.

Even some of Buchan's admirers draw too rigid a distinction between his thrillers and his 'serious' books. That Buchan himself made the same mistake, compounding his other mistake of undervaluing his popular fiction, is a mitigating circumstance, but no more. It is not merely that one of the best of his novels, *Witch Wood*, is closely linked both to his veneration of the Marquis of Montrose and his own liberal conservative views on Church and State, and that in another, *Sick Heart River*, the principal character emerges from an earlier ruck of minor novels to provide a major reflection on the good life and a good death. It is equally important to recognise the strains both of serious thinking and great writing which run, however unevenly, through the thrillers and especially the Richard Hannay novels. In war and peace, heroism finds expression in confronting forces of evil which seem to derive from the devil, in whom Buchan no longer believed. And when Buchan is at his best, that expression comes in prose as good for its setting, purpose, and genre as the studiously crafted and empurpled prose of the 'serious' books.

To say that is not to devalue the best of Buchan's non-fiction. Nor is it to suggest that there are no scales of value in which the biographies of Montrose, Cromwell and Scott, the brilliant summary of Kirk history to mark the 1929 reunion, perhaps even such diverse examples of Buchan's skills as his war history and his essay on Scots language for *The Northern Muse*, do not rate as far more important than poaching in *John Macnab* or scampers of Dickson McCunn. For there are three mistakes about Buchan: the disparagement of quality in what keeps him popular; the rigid separation of his light work and his solemn work; and failure, even among the many long-standing and newly recruited admirers, to appreciate the importance of great Buchan books that have gone out of fashion. Much that they have to say both about Western civilisation and Scottish nationality remains valuable and relevant in conditions very different from those in which they were written.

There is an irony in the way that Buchan, who took such benefit in sales and standing from the fashions of his time, should now suffer, even in the course of rehabilitation, from the way in which some of his beliefs, causes, tastes and styles have gone out of fashion. To an extent that is inevitable, not least for anyone who pursued political and literary careers at the same time and for a lay theologian trying to present Christian faith as relevant to contemporary social and political dilemmas. Those who attempt similar things today in

contemporary idioms and fashion will fall from fame and grace farther and faster than Buchan, and most of their reputations will never recover.

There are, however, two pairs of special difficulties which admirers of Buchan should recognise. The first pair are relatively minor: he was a classicist and a Tory imperialist. His classicism deeply affected his thinking and the way he expressed it, but reflects a cultural context and range of allusion which are alien even to most educated people today. What was once part of his power of communication has become a minor barrier to communication. Similar allowances need to be made for changing conditions if valuable parts of Buchan's thinking are to be extracted from the debris of past politics. No-one realised more than he did that political parties, though they need traditions, are constantly changing coalitions and that empires rise and fall. If Buchan was mistaken about the British Empire, it was mainly in thinking that it could evolve into a free association of different people (such as those he encountered in South Africa and Canada) and still remain politically coherent and a world power.

But the second pair of difficulties, closer to home, emerges from the kind of Scottish identity that Buchan felt, the institution most intimately associated with it, and the man in whom it was best fulfilled and expressed to the world. It is hard to appreciate Buchan fully without at least some of his committed understanding of the Reformed Kirk and his attachment to Sir Walter Scott. Both are rather out of fashion today, and many of today's self-appointed guardians of Scottish national and cultural identity are alienated from both, though the one made the greatest corporate Scottish contribution to the world and to national character, the other the greatest individual cultural contribution by any Scot.

That helps explain why some modern recognition of Buchan's literary quality has a missing dimension: it may mention the pleasant symbolism of his dignity as Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly but is too cursory in its treatment of Buchan's considerable quality as lay theologian and theological historian. I would argue that Buchan's best 'serious' book is not the biography of Montrose but the one of Scott, written for the centenary of the novelist's death in 1932. Some of his best writing and thinking is found there, matched only in the once famous but now largely forgotten book in which he and Sir George Adam Smith celebrated the Presbyterian reunion of 1929, and whose historical and analytical chapters were the work of Buchan.

It is worthwhile to summarise the essence of Buchan's views of Presbyterianism and of Scottish identity as expressed in these neglected masterpieces: not because they will be universally accepted today any more than in Buchan's own day or can be adequately expressed in a few sentences, but because some understanding of them is necessary if Buchan is to be given his true place in Scottish cultural history. Without this, he might be foolishly written off as a reactionary anglophile, with some residual Scots Presbyterianism, who nonetheless wrote adventure stories whose vigour and freshmen survive their time.

Buchan was complex as a man, Christian and Presbyterian. He admired much in Anglican and Roman devotion – Professor John Haldane even credited him in the

Christmas 1999 *Scottish Review* with understanding 'the mysteries of Catholicism', whatever they are. But even before the self-destruction of the old Christendom in the First World War, which claimed one of his brothers and many of his friends, Buchan had a sense of the fragility of civilisation, vulnerability of goodness, and diligent persistence of evil powers. The 1914–18 war, despite his conviction that Britain's role had been moral and unavoidable, left him not only with deep personal grief but a sense of how much had been lost. In the inter-war years, he was conscious that Christianity had become a minority faith, and one less vigorous than the evil totalitarian heresies of communism and nazism, or the dogmatic secularism of such contemporary pontiffs as H G Wells.

His own belief that civilisation 'must have a Christian base and must ultimately rest on the Christian Church', by which he meant the universal or Catholic Church as defined in the *Westminster Confession*, the classic exposition in English of Calvinist Christianity. But his concept of the Church was of an inspired but fallible evolutionary institution, guided by reason as well as faith and prayer, honouring historical tradition but confessing historical error. His sense of fallibility in the Reformed Church, with its conciliar government and power-sharing, insulated him against any temptation to think matters better ordered by some grand council of bishops or infallible presiding spokesman.

Buchan did not fit neatly into the historical party divisions of Scots Presbyterianism. He had many traits and styles of the 'Moderates', yet he found a coldness in their approach, preferred Wesley to the Scots divines of the Enlightenment, and (appropriately enough for the son of a Free Church manse) regarded Thomas Chalmers as Scotland's supreme religious genius of modern times. Nor does Buchan fit any better into contemporary Christian patterns within the Church of Scotland or the universal Church. He was neither a conservative evangelical nor, though he retained some Victorian belief in progress, a 'progressive'. He was a conservative liberal in theology but a liberal conservative in social matters and politics. Today, that is an unfashionable position, but it is one that Buchan articulated supremely well for his own time in ways that retain much relevance today.

There is an even more direct relevance in his views on Scottish identity, found in various books, articles and speeches but nowhere so well-refined and expressed as in his biography of Scott. The ironies today are that in many a good bookshop there will be far more of Buchan's novels in stock than Scott's, and that another absent title will be Buchan's best book, written partly as an act of homage to a genius whom he knew to be a far greater novelist than himself.

What adds sadness to the irony is that the biography reflects much of Buchan's own thinking about Scottish identity at a time when Scottish nationalism emerged as a political force: thinking which has stood the test of time in a way that his ephemeral political thinking on imperialism and socialism has not.

Buchan recognised the potential of Scottish nationalism, by which he meant a sense of nationality, and related it to Scott's earlier synthesis of unionism, conservatism, Scottish patriotism and enthusiasm for the Crown. He had some influence on the development of

administrative devolution associated with St Andrew's House but, unlike most Tories then and later, was relaxed about the prospect of a Scottish Parliament: he did not seek it, but if there was a settled demand it should be created.

He probably also sensed, though I have not found the argument clearly sustained in his work, that the nature and understanding of Scottish identity would be influenced by the retreat of religion from its central position in Scottish life, especially as the internal structure of Scottish Christianity was already being altered by the consequences of a century of large-scale Irish Roman Catholic immigration. Perhaps there was as much anxiety as affirmation in his claim, as valid now as when it was made amid the euphoria of the 1929 reunion: 'Without some understanding of the Church there can be no true understanding of Scottish history or of the nature of the Scottish people'. The emphasis on understanding surely reflects a worry about misunderstanding.

Today, the misunderstanding is even greater. I doubt if even the average minister, never mind elders and teachers of history, would recognise more than four or five of the score of names in Buchan's peroration about the 'men who had the making of the country in their hands'. Even fewer of them troubled the scorers in the 'Greatest Scot' poll.

Amid changing values and perceptions it is not surprising that much of what Buchan most valued and did best should be neglected. It is still a pity that the revival which secured the place of Richard Hannay and Dickson McCunn in the pop classics of literature should not extend to Buchan's devotion to Scott or analysis of Cromwell – and even to his insights into conflicts of conscience which in their day involved still rougher times on the moors of Galloway.

Exercise of faith

Sally Magnusson on Eric Liddell

2002

Let me take you back to the end of June, 1925. A young Scots missionary is leaving Edinburgh for foreign fields. He heads for Waverley Station in a carriage festooned with streamers and ribbons. Traffic in the city centre stops as crowds spill out on the streets to watch and cheer – among them besotted schoolgirls, housewives, sports fans, students. It's an extraordinary send-off for a departing missionary.

It's tempting to say at this point, 'Ah, but Eric Liddell was no ordinary missionary'. But in a sense that is exactly what he was. Olympic gold medalist, yes. Heroic man of the people, maybe. Certainly a life that became the stuff of legend and earned him the right to be represented in the roll-call of Scottish greatness. But the driving force of his life was to be simply a missionary, at home or abroad, in public or in private. And he carried out that role with a consistency, a modesty and an unfailing charisma that seem to have awed everyone who came into contact with him.

One of the most perceptive tributes after his death in 1945 came from a man called A P Cullen who had known him since boyhood. 'Eric,' he said, 'was the most remarkable example of a man of average ability and talents developing those talents to an amazing degree, and even appearing to acquire new talents from time to time, through the power of the Holy Spirit. He was, literally, God-controlled, in his thought, judgement, actions, words – to an extent I have never seen surpassed, and rarely seen equalled'.

Now talk of the Holy Spirit can make folk feel uncomfortable today. Just as the Sabbatarian tradition he espoused with such self-denying conviction that it will define his memory forever, is a pretty mystifying ordinance to people outside some pockets of the Hebrides. But his was the faith that nourished Scotland and shaped the lives of many of our ancestors for hundreds of years, the fashionably maligned tradition of Luther and Calvin and John Knox. This is a religion which can (and we've seen it happen) become a stultifying thing, enervated by institutionalism and factionalism and sheer human fallibility, the love and energy squeezed out of it, its power to change and inspire people sapped. In Eric Liddell, it was dynamite.

And that is what takes him beyond his time and makes Eric Liddell not just, as has been well argued, the greatest athlete Scotland has ever produced, but decidedly one of the greatest men. He was born in Tienstin, China, in 1902, the son of a Berwickshire nurse and a Drymen draper who had trained later as a minister and gone out to China with the London Missionary Society, which had earlier sent Lanarkshire-born David Livingstone to Africa. Eric's education was at Eltham College, a school for the sons of missionaries in London, and then Edinburgh University where he studied for a BA in science.

It was at university that he discovered athletics, or rather athletics discovered him. He had notched up several trophies at school and was already gaining a reputation on the rugby field. In fact, he played rugby at university level so well that he was soon playing for Scotland, where he formed a dazzling partnership on the left wing with the brilliant Leslie Gracie. He was a fine player, fast, plucky, a good tackler, but although he loved rugby, it was not really his natural métier. He gave it up when his real talent revealed itself.

When he had been at university for a few months, a friend persuaded him to enter the university sports. He replied offhandedly that he had no time for that sort of thing, but went along anyway. And thus began an athletics career that was to take him within a mere three years to Olympic gold. Mind you, career is maybe putting it a bit strong. His chief focus in those days was his studies, and he turned up a couple of times a week to put in some training at Edinburgh's Powderhall, where he practised sprints and starts to the accompaniment of excited barking from the whippets straining at the leash on the other side.

He took his running more seriously once he discovered how fast he really was, although the training still seems laughably casual now. After that first university outing, he was soon winning so much silver that his mother and sister in the family home in Merchiston Place were beginning to despair of places to put it. In his very first 1921-22 season, he brought home – besides the trophies – a silver rose bowl, a cheese and biscuit dish, a three-tier cake stand, a large clock, a silver tea-set on a tray, a kettle, fish servers, a silver brush and combs, six tea-knives, fish knives and forks, another six tea-knives, a flower vase, a leather suitcase, a travelling clock, a silver entrée dish, a case of cutlery and a crop of watches. No-one in the Liddell family ever went short of a gold watch.

In June 1923, he hit England like a thunderbolt. At the Triple A Championships in Stamford Bridge, he won the 220 yards in 21.6 seconds and the 100 in a new British record of 9.6 seconds, which would not be broken for 35 years. If that wasn't enough to clinch his selection for the British Olympics team, then his performance the following week at Stoke-on-Trent certainly was. He won all three sprints – the 100, 220 and 440 yards – the last with one of those inimitable Liddell performances which had spectators gasping.

Three strides into the race he was knocked off the track, got up, hesitated, and when officials waved him to continue, sprang forward again and pounded after his opponents. Arms swinging, head thrown back, he began to catch up with the leaders. Incredibly, having given a top class field a start of 20 yards, he overtook them all and collapsed with exhaustion at the tape.

It was one of the great races of all time, and vintage Liddell – a slow start, impossible odds to beat, almost recklessly brave, running (as everyone said) like a man inspired. But inspired by what? I've always liked the answer he gave to a somewhat pious fan who asked him once what the secret of his speed was. He answered with a chuckle: 'Oh, that's simple. I don't like to be beaten'. And that was true, very true. But there was more to it than that. And the man who gave me the clue to what else was going on in Liddell's running was none

other than that fine young actor, the late Ian Charleson, who portrayed Liddell in David Puttnam's 1981 Oscar-winning feature film, *Chariots of Fire*.

Charleson's Scottish coach Tom McNab had to teach him first to run, and then to run badly – because stylistically Eric Liddell was a quite outstandingly graceless runner. His arms, as I've said, were all over the place, his legs seemed to wobble, his head was flung so far back that he seemed to be gazing at the sky.

Charleson just couldn't get the hang of it. 'When I ran the way Eric did,' he told me, 'I couldn't see where I was going. I kept running off the track and bumping into the other runners. Then one day, on the fifth or sixth day of filming, I suddenly cottoned on to what he must have been doing when he ran. At drama school we used to do what are called "trust exercises", where you run as hard as you can towards a wall and trust someone will stop you, or you fall off a piano and trust someone will catch you. I suddenly realised that Liddell must have run like that. He must have run with his head up and literally trusted to get there. He ran with faith.'

It makes sense. Liddell's faith, nurtured through childhood in a God-fearing family, had matured in his 20s into a passionate conviction that Christianity was the most profoundly true explanation of man's place in the universe and relationship with his maker. He had a defining experience in 1923 when he confessed this belief publicly for the first time in a student evangelistic campaign in Armadale in West Lothian, and from that moment on it informed everything he did and said.

He believed that his running, which was reaching its zenith at the same time, was a deep expression of what he was on earth to do. Not the only thing. Not even the most important thing. But to run – as the screenplay-writer Colin Welland had him say in the film – was 'to feel God's pleasure'. And the spectator who commented sagely at one race, when it was feared that Liddell had lost it, 'Ah, but his head's no' back yet,' put his finger on what it was that enabled Liddell to go suddenly further and faster than seemed humanly possible. That moment when he threw his head back, opened his mouth and set his chin to the sky, he found something extra, from somewhere. And it helped him to run faster than anyone else in the world.

Maybe in the light of that, it's not really so hard to understand why, the year after his Armadale experience, in the very midst of his delight at being selected to run in the 100 metres at the Paris Olympics, he reacted as he did when he discovered that the heats would be run on a Sunday. To everyone's shock and dismay, Britain's best hope in the 100 metres said no, he wouldn't run. It would have violated something deep within him to have ignored a principle so central to his beliefs. The Sabbath was the Lord's Day and that was that.

He was called a traitor, which hurt him; but a lot of his fellow athletes were quietly impressed. They knew what it cost him to turn down the chance of winning a medal for his country.

However, casting round desperately for something to do with him, the British Olympics

authorities remembered his astonishing recovery in the quarter-mile at Stoke-on-Trent and asked him to train instead – in the few months that remained before Paris – for the 400 metres. And that, as his widow Florence told me, was how Eric Liddell discovered that the 400 metres was really his race after all. He told her he would never have known otherwise, never have thought of training for it, because the 100 and 200 were what went together in conventional sporting wisdom.

So, later that summer, in the baking heat of the Stade Colombes in Paris, Eric Liddell lined up for the final of a race no-one expected him to win.

As the competitors got ready to go, a sudden bloodcurdling wail gave them the fright of their lives. Only the Scot in the outside lane knew what was going on. With a swirl of kilts, the pipe-band of the Second Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders swung into the arena, treating the bemused spectators to an impromptu rendition of *The Campbells Are Coming*. As the captain in charge told me proudly some 60 years later, he couldn't resist giving their compatriot a bit of a lift. 'There was nothing the French could do to stop us,' he reported gleefully. Try doing that in the Olympics these days!

He won, of course. At the crucial moment, Liddell's head went back and he surged through the tape an incredible five metres ahead of the field. The stadium went wild. After several minutes, a voice on the loudspeaker tried a tentative interruption. 'Hello. Hello. Winner of the 400 metres: Liddell of Great Britain. The time 47 and three fifths is a new world record.'

The crowd burst into a renewed frenzy of enthusiasm. Next day the Bulletin newspaper concluded: 'This is the crowning distinction of Liddell's great career on the track, and no more modest or unaffected world champion could be desired. Liddell has built up his success by hard work and perseverance, and although hardly a beautiful runner, he has even triumphed over his defects of style'.

This sentiment had been rather more tersely expressed the evening before the race by Jack Moakley, wisest and oldest of the American team, who remarked, 'That lad Liddell's a hell of an awful runner. But he's got something'.

Well, what he had now was a gold medal, and the beginnings of legendary status back home in Scotland. It wasn't just the winning, it was the manner of the winning and the nature of the man which endeared him to people. There were so many tantalising conjunctions in this man: firmness of purpose with sweetness of personality, burning competitiveness with the strength of will to toss it away. And as the thousands of people who stood in open-air meetings to hear him talk about his faith had discovered, so many stereotypes were exploded in him: piety without piousness, a reverence for dogma without a hint of dogmatism, godliness with a huge capacity for fun.

He had need of his sense of humour that next year, mind you, which he spent in Scotland speaking at evangelistic campaigns and keeping at arm's length the hordes of adolescent girls who were considerably more interested in his muscles than his message. One of them, a 14-year-old Edinburgh schoolgirl, formed a fan club which earnestly

required members always to uphold Eric Liddell, to put his photograph in a place of honour and to use the Eric Liddell line (which was a double underlining every time his name was reverently recorded).

Liddell – bless him! – accepted an invitation to take tea with the club, and young Elsa kept the tea leaves in an envelope for years after. She went to all his meetings and goggled. In later life, she could laugh at what she called 'the Beatle-mania of the day', but she still described his effect on audiences as 'electric'. Like others, she recognised that he was actually no great orator, but spoke about his faith with such intensity and sincerity that you were compelled to listen.

In 1925, a year after his Olympic triumph, Eric left – as he had always intended to – for the mission fields of China. Here he was following in a distinguished tradition of Scots missionary service abroad, in which David Livingstone and Mary Slessor are only the best-known names. After that astonishing send-off at Waverley Station, he arrived in his birthplace, Tientsin, to take up a post teaching science at the Anglo-Chinese college there, run by the London Missionary Society for whom his father and brother were already working.

China at that time was a powder-keg: exploited by Western governments, rent by civil strife, plagued by natural disaster and threatened by the Japanese who were already encroaching on Chinese territory in the north-east.

In Tientsin, living the rather comfortable lifestyle enjoyed by Europeans in areas called 'concessions' nabbed by their governments in the last century, Eric had little first-hand experience of the terrible privations suffered by the Chinese people. That time would come, but in the meantime he got on with his teaching and set about energising college athletics, where he soon had pupils breaking records. He also carried on running himself and was soon building a reputation for startling performances.

One race that went down well back home was in Darien in 1928. He was late for the boat back to Manchuria, so after thundering through the finishing tape in first place, he just ran straight on beyond it to a waiting taxi which deposited him at the wharf just as the boat was pulling away. He flung his bags over and then leaped on to the deck himself. 'Fifteen feet,' gasped one newspaper the next day. Eric modestly, and probably truthfully, said it was less. But legend has credited the Flying Scotsman with a 15-foot jump all the same. The story later featured prominently in a strip cartoon about his life in *The Victor* comic.

Eric also found time to court a pretty Canadian girl called Florence McKenzie, whom he married in Tientsin in 1934. They had two daughters in quick succession.

But barely a year after their marriage, Eric began to feel himself drawn towards the real China beyond Tientsin's cosy concessions. The London Missionary Society asked him to go into the countryside to a village called Siaochang in an area devastated by war and drought. It would mean leaving his family, his intelligent young students and his comfortable life in the big city, but as the months passed he knew he had to go. In December 1937, he left to join his doctor brother Rob in Siaochang.

Siaochang was the centre of a wide field of activity covered by the London Missionary Society on the Great Plain. It was a district the size of Wales, and Eric was expected to cover it as an itinerant evangelist, visiting churches, advising the Chinese preachers, sharing the lives of the people he visited, answering their questions, dealing with their problems. He needed all his celebrated patience for the job. The dreary treks on foot or by bicycle across the miles of alternately parched or flooded land were enough to sap the strength and weary spirit without having to dodge bandits and guerrillas, and explain your business to a succession of Japanese gun barrels. When he stayed in villages, he went hungry if his host did, and slept on the floor as they did. Sometimes he found villages burned out, the menfolk shot dead, their families numb with grief.

Siaochang was right in the middle of a vast battlefield. A few months before, Japan had launched a full-scale invasion of China, adopting blitzkrieg bombing and terror tactics to encourage swift surrender. Chinese guerrilla units were counter-attacking behind enemy lines, but their sabotage operations only encouraged reprisals against the civilian population. The people got it every way.

The Siaochang mission took care of the wounded in their hospital and hid hundreds of women and children in the church during attacks. The missionaries themselves were tolerated by the Japanese soldiers, but it was a precarious existence.

Liddell was deeply affected by the suffering he encountered, but he told the hospital matron at Siaochang – a wonderfully spirited lady called Annie Buchan whom I met years later in her home in Peterhead – that he had never had so much joy and freedom in his work as there. His great fondness for people and ability to talk to anyone helped him to smooth out the daily tensions. As a colleague reported, 'He would reply to Japanese threats with a beaming smile and perfect good nature'. It disarmed them.

Annie Buchan never forgot that smile either. When I asked her how she remembered him, she said, 'Oh, he was attractive'. (Shades of the Eric Liddell fan club here!) 'His eyes were always shining and he had a marvellous smile. But he never spoke a lot. He was very quiet. But when he did speak, he always had something to say. There was just never any doubt that he had this inner power. All the Chinese people loved him.'

By 1940, the whole country was in chaos. Chinese Government troops were fighting the Japanese, the communists were fighting the Japanese and the government troops were fighting the communists. A village near the mission was completely wiped out. Others were devastated. Refugees who poured into the compound had to be housed in the school because the church was already full of the injured and dying. Annie Buchan's sharp Scottish tongue was no longer enough to keep marauding Japanese soldiers at bay, and the casual violence was sickening. Early in 1941, Liddell and his fellow missionaries were told to get out. They heard later that Siaochang had been destroyed, every last brick and plank of it.

Back in Tientsin, the reunion with his family did not last long. It was rumoured that Japan was about to enter the world war and British civilians were liable to be interned at any time. Eric decided that Florence, expecting her third child, and the two little girls,

should leave for the safety of her family's home in Canada. He felt that he should stay behind. He was never to see them again, or meet his third daughter. He died before the war was over.

I've always found the way Eric Liddell died curiously fitting; by which I don't mean that it is anything other than sad and horrible to die of cancer in a squalid camp thousands of miles from the people you love. But what I appreciate is the ordinariness of Eric Liddell, the down-to-earth reality of the life behind the legend. Just as he became the fastest man in the world with an atrocious running style, just as he moved audiences in ways they could hardly explain despite the mediocrity of his oratory, so his end was not to fall dramatically to a Japanese bayonet or in the midst of some great act of valour. It was an ordinary death for an ordinary man, yet its impact was seismic.

He died in Weihsien internment camp, south of Peking, in 1945, almost two years after he was rounded up along with hundreds of other so-called 'enemy nationals' and marched off down the streets of Tientsin to the railway station. Weihsien was an old American mission station, only about 150 by 200 yards in total, into which 1,800 people were crammed. The internees, including several families and hundreds of children, had to clean it up, rebuild the interior, mend the walls and furniture and then organise themselves into a community. Bank clerks, professors, salesmen, missionaries and executives became bakers, stokers, cooks, carpenters, masons and hospital orderlies. Men who had once owned coal mines had to scrabble on their hands and knees for coal-dust to make into briquettes for heating.

The Japanese guards did little to harass them, beyond half-starving them with meagre rations. But life was difficult. There were bored children, frustrated teenagers and confused old people, folk from every kind of background, all rubbing up against each other in too little space, queuing for the toilets and the meals and the twice-daily roll-call and the chores; nerves grinding and personalities clashing and nowhere to escape to. The youngsters were soon running wild.

Little wonder that there were tensions, especially between the businessmen and the missionaries. One young teacher, by the name of Langdon Gilkey, wrote an account of his time at the camp, in which he flayed some of the missionaries for insisting on praying aloud at night and singing hymns at 6am in the morning when others were trying to sleep, not to mention being obsessively concerned with vices like smoking. Reading his book, I wondered where on earth Eric Liddell fitted into all this, since Langdon Gilkey was clearly feeling pretty jaundiced about the camp Christians.

Then I turned a page and read this: 'It is rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but Eric Liddell came as close to it as anyone I have ever known. Often in an evening of that last year, I would pass the games room and peer in to see what the missionaries had going for the teenagers. As often as not, Eric would be bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, pouring all of himself into this effort to capture the minds and imaginations of

those penned-up youths. He was in his middle 40s, lithe and springy of step and, above all, overflowing with good humour and love of life. He was aided by others, to be sure. But it was Eric's enthusiasm and charm that carried the day with the whole effort'.

This is an astonishing tribute from the acerbic Mr Gilkey. Eric, he tells us, bridged the gulf between the missionaries and others in the camp. He did his praying privately. He organised sports for the teenagers, chess and draughts tournaments, dart contests, plays, rounders. He tore up all the sheets Florence had left him to bind up the blades of the few precious hockey-sticks which had found their way into internment. He tutored youngsters who wanted to keep up their studies. He carried coal for the old folk. A Russian prostitute said Eric Liddell was the only man who had ever done anything for her and not wanted to be repaid in kind.

One of the hardest decisions he had to make in the camp was what to do about Sunday games. In keeping with his principles, he said he would not organise games on a Sunday. But many of the teenagers protested and decided to organise a hockey game by themselves, boys against girls. It ended in a fight, because there was no referee. On the following Sunday, Eric turned out on that field to act as referee. He wouldn't run on a Sunday for all the glory in the world, but in Weihsien internment camp he broke his unbreakable principle to keep a handful of imprisoned youngsters at peace with each other.

When Annie Buchan, the former matron from Siaochang, arrived at Weihsien some months later, she noticed that Eric looked different. It was more than the malnutrition that everyone was suffering from. He was walking slowly, she thought. Talking slowly. Looking tired and strained and doing far too many jobs for people. He was also beginning to get headaches, feel depressed, worry that he couldn't bear everything as cheerfully as he wanted to.

The end came very quickly. He took ill one evening and Annie Buchan, who had just come off nursing duty, hurried to his bedside. 'I asked him how he was feeling,' she said, 'and he said no-one had a clue what was wrong. One or two of the doctors were standing in the middle of the ward next door, and talking about Eric, and I just went into them and said, "Do you realise that Eric is dying?" Somebody said, "Nonsense". I went back into Eric's room, and by this time Eric was pretty far through. And he just said to me, "Annie, it's complete surrender". I was holding him. I could hardly hear him. He could hardly get the words out, but he definitely said "complete surrender". Then he was gone into a coma and he never recovered'.

Next day, an autopsy revealed an inoperable tumour on the left side of his brain.

Weihsien was numb with shock. Langdon Gilkey reports that the entire camp was stunned for days, so great was the vacuum left by Eric Liddell's death. On a bleak, windswept day in February, they held his funeral. Those who couldn't get in stood in the cold outside. All the 21 nationalities in the camp were represented. Missionaries mingled harmoniously with businessmen. People you would think had nothing in common with the things he stood for were there. And many were in tears.

He was buried in a quiet cemetery in the Japanese officers' headquarters. There, at the windy graveside, the huge company repeated the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, which had been his inspiration.

Outside China, memorial services were held in many parts of Scotland, and in many countries. The news of his death was received here with a feeling of shock and a universal sense of loss. It was felt not just in the religious, the rugby and the university circles to which Eric had belonged, but on the football terracings, in the cinema queues and on the street corners, where once again his name was on the billboards.

A full 18 months after his death, there was a memorial service held by rugby enthusiasts in Galashiels, with 13 Scottish internationalists in the congregation. The speaker told them: 'It's nearly 21 years since Liddell's athletic career in this country closed, and nearly a year and a half since he died. For what other athlete could such a gathering be assembled, in a town in which he has never lived, and a district to which he only paid one or two visits?'

It's 56 years since Eric Liddell died, and the same question is valid. We do remember him today for the lasting honour he brought to Scotland – honour won not just for an historic gold medal, but for the man he was.

Rose like a lion

John McAllion on Mick McGahey

2002

He was certainly no saint. But behind the demonic caricature of him to be found in the right-wing press and media, there was a good man. A very good man. As good a man as any deserving to be included in a 20th-century pantheon of great Scots. Michael McGahey was arguably the best of the Scottish working class in that century.

Let me begin by mentioning George Kerevan. Some will say why George Kerevan? Others will ask who is George Kerevan? George Kerevan was a one time international Marxist. Then he became a Labour councillor and finance convener in the city of Edinburgh. Then he became an SNP candidate for Holyrood. Now he is a journalist on *The Scotsman* and that paper's cheerleader-in-chief for global capitalism.

I mention him at all because he recently wrote a piece in the paper in which he described the day he attended the funeral of Mick McGahey. What he wrote matters much less than the fact that someone like George should have bothered to turn up at all.

The fact that he should want to stand outside a packed crematorium, on a cold February day, in the rain, trying to sing those words of the *Internationale* he and the others there could remember, in order to pay his respects to a man he himself described as a 'crusty old follower of Uncle Joe Stalin', is I think significant itself.

Because there was something about this crusty old follower of Uncle Joe that drew hundreds of people to that crematorium in February 1999: many of them, like myself, who had never been down a pit, never belonged to the NUM, never been a member of the Communist Party, but who were there because they recognised that, with the death of Mick McGahey, the Scottish and British working class had lost one of its finest voices and one of its most inspirational leaders.

At first glance, the high points of Mick's life's work do not appear to be all that outstanding. In 1971, he lost the election for NUM president to the right-wing moderate, Joe Gormley. Joe then stayed on as president just long enough to ensure that, when he finally did retire in 1980, Mick would be age-barred from standing to succeed him under the union's rules. Mick was then forced to stand aside to allow a young Arthur Scargill to take on the top job, and go on to dominate the union's affairs during one of the most critical periods in its history. Throughout that time, Mick's role was relegated to that of loyal lieutenant, very much subordinate to the high-profile Arthur.

Indeed, when he finally retired himself, Mick was the vice-president, never having led the union to which he had dedicated his entire life. It could be said, therefore, that Mick was a kind of 'nearly man' – a man who almost made it to the top but in the end just missed out, who never had the opportunity to make his mark on the history of his union and his

country. Yet, when he died, even right-wing papers like the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Financial Times* praised him as 'the best president the NUM never had'. The even more right-wing *Daily Mail* hailed him as a 'miners' hero'.

The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, described him as 'a genuine great of the trade union movement'. John Monks, TUC general secretary, spoke of him as 'hewn from the rich seam of Scottish communism'. Politicians as different as Donald Dewar and Alex Salmond spoke of his 'warm humanity' and 'unflinching integrity'.

Almost without exception, those who knew anything about the industrial, social and political history of 20th-century Scotland mourned the passing of one of its great figures. The phrase 'we'll never see his like again' falls far too easily from our lips when people we know, respect and love die. But in Mick's case, it is literally true that we are unlikely to see his like again.

His is a generation that is slowly fading into the pages of our history. Willie McIlvanney once described Mick's generation as having been constructed out of the hard experience of their own lives, the serious possibility of a socialism that would transform the lives of all those who followed them. A possibility that our own generation now appears to be almost casually casting aside as worthless. What is certain is that Mick's life was overflowing with hard experiences.

He was born into a mining community in 1925, the year before the general strike. His father, a miner, was described by the *Daily Mail* as a 'hardline communist'. His mother was described by the same paper as a 'devout Catholic'. The use of these particular adjectives probably tells us more about the prejudices of the *Daily Mail* than it does about either Mick's father or his mother. Mick himself would go on to describe himself throughout his life as a 'devout communist', thereby confounding his prejudiced right-wing critics.

Certainly, there are not much harder starts in life than having a father who is an NUM activist, a founding member of the 'Communist Party of Great Britain', and working in the militant centre of the Lanarkshire coalfield on the very eve of the general strike.

Mick's family, and others like them, suffered extreme hardship in the bitter seven-month-long sequel to the general strike as the miners, after being abandoned by the TUC, were slowly starved into submission and forced back to work on the coal bosses' terms. When the return to work finally happened, Mick's father was victimised and forced to uproot the family and move from Shotts to Cambuslang in search of work in a pit where his militancy was less well known. Mick later admitted to learning from his father a bitter resentment at the conditions and exploitation of ordinary working people in the Scotland of the 20s and 30s. It was a lesson he never forgot.

It's worth contrasting at this point Mick's early experiences with those of another Scot who was later to play a big part in Mick's life. That Scot was Ian McGregor who was brought into the Coal Board in the 1980s to take on and smash the NUM. At the time of the general strike, Ian McGregor would have been 13 or 14. In his autobiography, he describes a childhood and family lifestyle very different from that of his contemporaries, the McGaheys.

He writes about how his parents paid for a private education that later guaranteed his access to a place in university. He tells of summer-long family holidays in Argyll, of fishing and rowing on the lochs. He speaks about tinkering around with the second-hand cars of his two elder brothers, of the family gathering together in the evenings to swap stories and drink Ovaltine before going up to bed.

He boasts about how these two same brothers were out in 1926, driving tram cars in Glasgow to help break the general strike, teach the workers a lesson and drive the miners back to work. His only regret was that he was too young to join them. History would later afford him the opportunity to do his bit.

So we see in two of the main protagonists in the 1984-85 miners' strike a clear echo of 1926 and close personal links that lead back to the two opposing sides in the general strike, thereby reminding us of Marx's famous dictum in the *Communist Manifesto* that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. It's a lesson, I'm sure, Mick would not want us to forget.

Certainly, without any of the privileges enjoyed by Ian McGregor, Mick went on to fashion the tools, not so as to escape out of his class, but in Nye Bevan's wonderful phrase 'to rise with his class'. At 14, he followed his father down the pit. He quickly joined the union and the Communist Party, and also began the long process of self-education that would make him more than a match for the likes of the university-trained McGregor.

Bill Shankly once said that he never had an education, so he'd had to use his brains. That is exactly what Mick now began to do. He went to Communist Party classes. He attended NUM day and weekend schools. He read everything he could get his hands on. He steeped himself in the history of socialism and its struggle against capitalism. He taught himself to analyse and understand the economic and social forces that shape all of our lives. He quickly became an accomplished speaker and a recognised leader among his fellow miners.

He soon came to the notice of Abe Moffat, the Scottish miners' leader, when he spoke passionately against an unofficial strike that he judged to be damaging the recently nationalised industry. Thereafter, he rose quickly through the ranks of the union to become a player on its national stage.

The NUM then had a national left that was a mixture of communist and Labour activists from left coalfields. They met regularly to organise within the union and contained within their ranks many individuals of talent and ability. Lawrence Daly, Arthur Scargill, George Bolton and Eric Clarke were just a few of those prominent on the left. Very quickly, Mick became their recognised leader and their candidate for the presidency of the union. He was literally the best that a very talented left had to offer.

So what was it that made him stand out? Partly, it was sheer talent: his self-taught ability to analyse and to understand where the true interest of the union lay in an increasingly complex world. Partly, it was his powerful speaking. He was certainly one of the finest speakers it has been my privilege to hear.

Partly, it was his skills as a negotiator. Eric Clarke told me how, when they would go in to

negotiate with management, Mick would always begin by asking for the names of wives and children of the men opposite, thereby disarming them before negotiations began.

And partly, it was his tremendous political sense of the direction in which the working class as a whole should be moving. When he died, Campbell Christie pointed out that it was Mick's speech to the STUC in 1968 that swung the congress behind Scottish home rule and set off the train of events that led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament a few months after Mick's own funeral.

Yet there was much more to Mick than even all of that. There was the sheer breadth of his learning. He was never a dry-as-dust or textbook boring Marxist. He adored Robert Burns and quoted endlessly from his poetry throughout his days. He would have loved Sheena Wellington's rendition of *A Man's a Man for a' That* at the opening of the Scottish Parliament, especially given the context of it being performed in front of a frozen-faced and not at all pleased Royal Family.

He argued over the merits of authors like Lewis Grassic Gibbon and swapped Shakespeare quotes with the best. He littered his speeches with literary quotations and references, making them a joy to listen to. One of my favourite memories of him was the occasion during the 1984-85 strike when he brought an audience in Dundee to its feet stamping and cheering by ending a wonderful speech with a quote from Shelley:

Rise like lions after slumber,
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew,
Which in sleep hath fallen on you.
Ye are many, they are few.

With his gravelly voice and Scottish accent, it really was something to hear. There was also his tremendous wit and splendid sense of fun. He was delivering soundbites long before the phase was invented. Telling workers: 'If you don't run, the bosses can't chase you'. Reminding them: 'The working class will go from defeat to defeat to final victory'.

Eric Clarke told me of the occasion when he considered he had been overcharged for a whisky at an airport in London. Glowering at the young English waitress, he told her, 'Lassie, had you charged as hard as Bannockburn, we would never have beaten you'.

There was the occasion when the union was to go into court and Arthur Scargill commented they would win because he had employed an excellent lawyer with good left-wing credentials. Mick responded by reminding him that left-wing lawyers were all very well but he would begin to put his faith in the courts when they had left-wing judges presiding over them.

There was his wonderful integrity. During his life, he had cause enough to harbour resentment against huge personal disappointments that hit him hard. In his defeat by Joe Gormley in 1971, Mick stuck religiously to the rules that candidates must not canvass for support. Joe's side did not and won. Mick never complained but accepted unquestioningly

the verdict of his fellow miners. When he was cheated of the chance to run again in the 1980s as the left candidate, he was conscious of the danger that the left in the union might split over the candidacy of Arthur Scargill. He immediately swung his support unconditionally behind Arthur, secured left unity and guaranteed his election.

During the 1984-85 strike, despite clearly having doubts about the conduct of the strike, and being under pressure from leading members of the Communist Party to go public with them, he loyally stood behind the NUM and its elected president. In the bitter aftermath of the strike, when Arthur Scargill was being hounded by friend and foe alike, it was Mick who warned that 'there will be no sacrificial lambs' because the miners had no choice but to go on strike. His loyalty once given was without condition. In his own words, he never deserted his class.

Finally, and above all, there was his humanity. Eric Clarke told me that Mick used to remind him before going into negotiations that the men on the other side of the table were human beings. They were somebody's husband, son or father and therefore always to be treated with the respect that every human being deserves. That was a consideration he gave to everyone.

After the strike, when it could be argued that the miners lost because the Notts miners had kept on working and producing the coal that helped the Tory Government see out the strike, it would have been understandable if the beaten miners had been bitter against them. Yet Mick said about the Notts miners: 'I think if, as an executive, we had approached Notts without pickets, it might have been different. Because I reject, I have made this clear since the strike, that 25,000 to 30,000 Notts miners, their wives and families and communities are scabs and blacklegs. I refuse to accept this. We did alienate them during the strike'.

On the violence during the strike, while recognising the role in it of the Tory Government's mass use of police and scab lorries, he commented: 'I find it difficult to argue that there was not violence on our side, and that violence did not help us. It was played up to the maximum. Many people would say – the miners have a case but we can't have this business of harassment; the vilification of people; it's against the best traditions of British people – so we didn't have the mass support we had in 1972 and 1974'.

He was no hardline Stalinist, but a compassionate, committed and humane communist who – had he been given the chance to lead the union he loved – might have changed its history and the history of this country. There are lines in Hugh MacDiarmid's poem about Willie Gallacher that could have been written especially for Michael McGahey:

Not many men tested in the acrid fires
Of public life come through so intact and unsullied,
Pure gold thrice refined…
… (he) shines out, single on purpose,
Lovely in his integrity, exemplifying
All that is best in public service.

Such a man was Michael McGahey. Scotland has need of more of his kind.

There was a man

Sean Damer on Tom Wright

2002

To know Tom Wright was to know a quintessential Glaswegian, from a working-class background. Maybe that was why he was such an accomplished stained-glass craftsman, soldier, poet, and writer for newspapers, stage, radio and television – not necessarily in that order – and frequently following several of these occupations simultaneously.

Tom knew a lot about soldiering from first-hand experience in the Second World War. He had the unglamorous but tactically very important and highly dangerous job of forward artillery spotter. This requires fieldcraft and other infantry skills of the highest order, and nerves of steel. In conversation, Tom's wartime stories were always told in a self-deprecatory manner, without the slightest hint of machismo. He had been involved in the Battle of the Bulge, had been the first Allied soldier into Brussels, had seen artillery – firing over open sights – break-up a Panzer attack, and had finished the war in the occupation forces in Japan. Yet the funny thing was that he always talked of his wartime experiences as if they were about someone else, and it was often hard to make the connection between his stories and himself.

Tom was a man of profound culture. He had played the violin in his youth, had a truly impressive knowledge of classical music, owned the best CD/vinyl collection I have ever seen, and had personally heard all the world's great instrumental and operatic soloists on their visits to Glasgow. I remember saying one evening that my parents had sworn that Conchita Superbia was the greatest Carmen in the history of the opera, but that I had unfortunately never heard her. Within seconds, Tom was playing a record of this amazing diva, to my utter delight! And I think that he had every available recording by that outstanding generation of romantic violinists which included Mischa Elman, Fritz Kreisler, Isaac Stern and Jascha Heifetz.

Tom also had a profound command of both English and Scottish literature, and, particularly, Scottish history. He was a mine of information on the byways of Scottish culture, and held strong opinions on such topics as the Reformation, the Stuarts, and the Wars of Liberation. In fact, Tom held strong opinions on many matters, as he was possessed of an aggressive intelligence: but he was not at all aggressive in manner. Indeed, he had an old-fashioned charm and courtesy about him, and treated everyone he met as an intelligent human being – until proved otherwise. Perhaps this was why women liked Tom: he was unfailingly civil to them and genuinely liked them. While I could not possibly know, I doubt that he ever knowingly wronged a woman in his life, which might explain why he never really understood feminism.

He loved company, in the Scottish sense of the term, and was himself no mean

entertainer, albeit no cook. His proud claim, was that: 'I do a good buffet' – pronounced 'buff-et'. Several of us enjoyed his hospitality at his Churchill Street flat over the years, where a range of cheeses and salamis, and fresh bread and butter, would be laid out in their original paper on the steps of his library ladder along with a staggering array of fine wines. On one occasion, Tony Fallick and I weaved our way home after a fine night, only to be told the next day that we were slipping, as only six empty bottles had been put out.

Tom was a great flyter, with a considerable sense of mischievous wit. On more than one occasion, I have seen him hold forth on some obscure topic only to realise that he was making it all up as he went along. He disliked snobbery in all its forms and was a quick deflater of balloons. But ironically, for a man who earned his living by communicating, he had a somewhat unclear and quiet diction, and one had to make an effort to hear him. Many people could not be bothered to make the effort: they never knew what they were missing.

Tom was best known, of course, for his writing. He liked to relate that there had been a time in the 1950s when he had earned half-a-guinea a week from his poetry, which made him one of the best-paid makars in the land. His powerful and evocative poem about Glasgow, *This Is My Story*, is happily anthologised in the delightful collection *Noise and Smoky Breath*, edited by Hamish Whyte. It could well stand as Tom's epitaph:

Hail Glasgow, stern and wild,
Fit nurse for an aggressive child!
Old men whose blood is tamed by time
Shake scarred heads at young men's crime,
And men whose blood was always tame
Think every man was born the same,
Seek answers in a scientific fog,
And hold that man's less culpable than dog.

The irony is that while Tom was utterly professional as a writer, he was determinedly anti-elitist, and worked in a variety of forms: poetry, journalism, radio and television drama, television drama script-editing and story-lining, and feature-film screenplays.

It is perhaps for this reason, his very versatility, that he is much less well-known than he should be. Yet he wrote regularly in the pre-war years for local newspapers in company with the likes of Cliff Hanley and Jack House. And there can be no doubting his importance in post-war Scottish stage and television drama. His highly-acclaimed 1960's one-man play about the life of Robert Burns, *There Was a Man*, subsequently televised, made actor John Cairney famous, and Tom a good deal of money. And this was ambitious territory; Pete Lincoln, Brian Cox and, above all, Victor Carin had all played Burns on stage before.

Further, Tom supplied a conclusion to Stevenson's unfinished masterpiece *Weir of Hermiston* for television, and was not outclassed by RLS. And in the middle of all this, in

the 1960s, he found time to do an honours degree in English literature at the University of Strathclyde, as a mature student, an experience of which he was justly proud, as he was of being that university's very first Creative Writing Fellow.

Tom's television play, *The Blood Letting*, about Glasgow gangs, was a stark, innovative drama which prefigured the subsequent work of Peter McDougall. In the 1970s, Tom also worked for Pharic Maclaren as script editor in BBC Scotland's television drama department, during the period when a distinctive Scottish voice was first established in television drama.

Tom carried on in the 1980s writing, script-editing and story-lining *Take the High Road*, when it reached an audience of millions. In the same decade, his one-man play, *Talk of the Devil*, a pungent burlesque of Christianity, gained him both an Edinburgh Festival First Award, and considerable invective from a variety of Holy Willies. This play was repeated in the festival a few years ago, with Russell Hunter in the title role, to critical acclaim. He went on to write screenplays for feature films, secured several lucrative contracts, but unfortunately none had been made by the time of his death last May, although there was talk of a re-make of *The Blood Letting*. Several of his friends encouraged Tom to write an autobiography and that was definitely in hand earlier this year. One can only hope that it was finished and will see the light of day, for Tom was a man with a story to tell. In any event, Tom's literary papers are designated for the Scottish Theatre Archive at the University of Glasgow, a fit and proper location for them.

Another important aspect of Tom's life and work was his long-term membership of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. Sometime chair of the Scottish Branch, he was over the years involved in many of the important, but invisible and sometimes unrecognised, bread-and-butter negotiations which have helped contemporary writers to be paid for their work realistic fees from national radio and television, and film companies. Characteristically, Tom paid into the WGGB pension fund in his heyday, and was pleased to draw his pension after retirement age, although to think that Tom ever retired from writing would be a joke.

It also has to be said loudly that Tom was a man who was generous with time, hospitality, money and professional advice. He went out of his way to assist younger writers who sought his advice, and was generous with his experience and talent to all whom he regarded as serious about the craft of writing. On several occasions, I went to him with problems with scripts on which I was working, and he had an uncanny gift for going to the heart of the matter and unlocking the problem. He encouraged numerous younger writers, but had been a professional for long enough to advise beginners not to give up their day-job. He was a deliberate supporter of the original *Scottish Review* because he considered the editor a man who delivered on promises, and for that and related reasons he became a founding fellow and eloquent advocate of the Institute of Contemporary Scotland.

Tom was a warm man who lived life to the full, was prepared to take risks, had strong opinions, was frequently and unrepentantly politically incorrect, and was a loyal friend. He was a convinced atheist, and a professional bachelor, which puzzled many of us, given his

fondness of women, and the fact that many women were very fond of him. He was a consummate professional as a writer, was rightly proud of his successful career, but never sought self-aggrandisement. He was not to be seen on television chat shows or hobnobbing with the chattering classes. The idea that he might be a littérateur would have been repugnant to him. Latterly, he was to be found from time to time in the bar of the Ubiquitous Chip, where he seemed to be popular with everyone and was always surrounded by men and women of all ages. He was a good man, a good friend, a good writer and good company; he will be remembered for all of these exemplary qualities.

Spellbinder

Isobel Murray on Jessie Kesson

2002

Alastair Scott, travel writer and photographer, did not meet Jessie Kesson until 1989, when she was 73. I met her four years earlier, but cannot better the description he confided to his journal:

> *Jessie Kesson has so much fun in her she is a one-woman riot. I've met only two or three people who regularly laugh so much tears stream down their cheeks, but none who do so as regularly nor as copiously as Jessie Kesson. But then she leans over and puts her hand on my arm, and quotes, 'But I laugh that I weep not'. Her memory is awesome. She talks endlessly, never-never stops, a hoarse, rough voice, a groan above a whisper, but excited as if she fears time may not allow her to finish. She is nervous and covers it with verbosity and enthusiasm – verbose she may be but she is a spellbinder. Out tumbles history, stories, experiences. She always fits a joke in and laughs herself speechless frequently, nudging up her glasses with the act of dabbing a Kleenex at her eyes... She takes small steps, always loses her way, heads off in an instant for the wrong door, chain-smokes all day, dribbles ash all over herself and clothes – and just makes you want to take care of her. Her company seems so precious.*
> (Quoted by Isobel Murray in *Jessie Kesson: Writing her Life*, 2000)

That was the Jessie Kesson I met in 1985, on a hectic day at the Book Festival, when she'd reluctantly agreed to be interviewed on tape before continuing a heavy day with an appointment at STV. Yet she'd tried hard, and successfully, to find new things to say to us. She was a spellbinder, maybe a witch.

But what connection does that Jessie Kesson have with the young girl in the orphanage in *The White Bird Passes*? The one who declared to the orphanage trustees on their last visit before her 16th birthday:

> *I don't want to dust and polish. And I don't want to work on a farm. I want to write poetry. Great poetry. As great as Shakespeare.*

I have to try to connect them, and include also one of the most gifted Scottish writers of the last century, and one at least until very recently shamefully neglected. This is partly because she published relatively little, partly because so much of her work was done for the fine but now unfashionable medium of radio, partly because...

Her life makes an amazing story, one you would not credit if offered as an *Angela's Ashes* spin-off. Jessie was incarcerated in at least five potentially punitive institutions before she was 18. She attended four primary schools before she was 10, leaving and in some cases re-entering each with some degree of mystery.

Jessie spent her young life being separated from those she loved. She was removed from her mother when she was 10, saw her once in her late teens, and afterwards saw her once every six months, from 1939 to 1949 when she died. Liz was dying slowly of chronic syphilis in an institution in Elgin, and when Jessie became a cottar-wife she had only two days off a year on which to visit her. When Jessie was separated from the mother she missed above all, she lost also the grandmother who 'was the glow that kindled and lit up all my childhood in a slum'. Jessie never saw her again. She lost also all the characters in the Lane described by the big-hearted child in *The White Bird Passes*. She never saw them again. Her life was full of this: small wonder she wrote stories with titles like *Road of No Return*, or talks for *Woman's Hour* with titles like *We Can't Go Back*.

The White Bird Passes is, of course, the best account of Jessie Kesson's childhood, although in many details it is far from 'true'. Briefly, Jessie was born illegitimate in the workhouse in Inverness in 1916. She was brought up first, very unconventionally, in the Model Lodging House in Elgin, when she consorted more with travellers and transients than with Elgin's poor, even, and her best friends were the big horses that drove the city dust cart. When she neared school age, her mother took a room in a city slum, from which she could more 'respectably' go to school. Her mother had been cast out by her family following this, her second illegitimate pregnancy, had a drink problem, dabbled in prostitution.

The Cruelty Man, a figure of fear to most of the Lane, was always in search of 'neglect', and that was probably a euphemistic term for what Jessie underwent. She loved school, and loved her undisciplined mother, the country walks they went together, the poetry, reams of it, her mother taught her. But after warnings, the law caught up with them and Jessie was removed from her mother's custody, and sent to an orphanage in Kirkton of Skene, Aberdeenshire, until she was 16.

She threw herself into the life of the orphanage and the new school, as eager to be loved and accepted here as she had been in Elgin. She sang hymns of joy over clean, newly laundered clothes, and the end of searches for headlice; tried to give up the 'swears' which had liberally peppered her speech, worked hard and brilliantly at school – and missed her mother, saving up all the new experiences to pass on to Liz. But it was not to be. Liz visited her only once, horribly changed by the ravages of syphilis, beginning to go blind, come in search of her daughter to come home and look after her as time went on. Not surprisingly, this was refused. Then came the awful meeting in the wood, described in *The White Bird Passe*s, when Janie/Jessie could not find words for what she wanted to say until after her mother had gone.

All the things I know, she taught me, God. The good things, I mean. She could make the cherry trees bloom above Dean's Ford, even when it was winter. Hidden birds betrayed their names the instant she heard their song. She gave the nameless little rivers high hill sources and deep sea endings. She put a singing seal in Loch na Boune and a lament on the long, lonely winds. She saw a legend in the canna flowers and a plough amongst the stars. And the times in the Lane never really mattered, because of the good times away from it. And I would myself be blind now, if she had never lent me her eyes.

Jessie would always have a gift for friendship, and she needed it: so many people disappeared, particularly from her young life, never to appear again. She had to keep starting again. The last orphanage matron died when she was in a mental hospital in Aberdeen: links to Skene had virtually been cut when she left there for the second time. (She was sent to service on a local farm, but returned to the orphanage after six months because she couldn't concentrate on her work, and singed the best table linen while ironing and reading French poetry at the same time...)

Jessie was sent next to school in Aberdeen, to do a commercial course – hardly the recommended answer for one who wanted to write great poetry, as great as Shakespeare. More, anyone without her divided childhood might have had trouble fitting into this regime: on the one hand, she was sent to school with nice middle-class girls who were absorbed in tennis and very early approaches to boys, and on the other, she was simultaneously sent economically to a hostel for girls on probation, often for shoplifting, and they all seemed obsessed with dresses, make-up, slang, pop-music and boys.

School was followed by a spell in a shop selling goldfish bowls but she was soon sacked, because she broke almost as many bowls as she sold, and she became unemployed. Now she began to be accepted by the other girls in the hostel but not by the matron. The matron she encountered in these tormented teenage years in Aberdeen was the worst of all. A former missionary, she resented the fact that Jessie wasn't a criminal and that she was getting further education. She knew all the facts in Jessie's file and made her dislike plain. When the girls made Jessie up and dressed her up one day, she sneered to the effect that Jessie was following in her mother's footsteps. Jessie attacked her and then attempted violence to herself: she ended up in Aberdeen mental hospital for a whole year, aged 17 to 18, not knowing whether she would ever be released.

Alasdair Gray is on record as saying once to a beggar: 'There's nothing wrong with you, my man, that three years good luck wouldn't cure'. Jessie never, as you see, had anything you could call good luck, although she was a world expert at making the best of things. But she did have one crucial piece of good luck in hospital, when a new charge nurse came in, and they recognised each other. Charge Nurse Fowler had been a maid at the orphanage in Jessie's early days there. I don't understand how Jessie bore the extremities I've described but I am as sure as Jessie was that Charge Nurse Fowler helped to save her. She was the only

outsider who could confirm that Jessie was a coherent person, that she hadn't always been 'mad', that she was a bright girl well-respected somewhere. After that long year, Jessie was released and sent to the hamlet of Abriachan, high above Loch Ness, to convalesce as helper to an old woman, and to show she was fit for the outside world again.

Jessie went to Abriachan quaking, frightened, amazed at her release. But now she took her life into her hands for the first time – at the first opportunity. She had learned to love poetry and woods from her mother; she had learned it again from the dominie at Skene School. Now she discovered it all over again. I think her important self-therapy maybe began here. In Abriachan, she put some armour on. One of her most effective radio plays was about a little Glasgow boy boarded out at Abriachan away from his alcoholic mother and learning to survive in an alien but beautiful environment. I think Daniel Kernon can be thought to encapsulate her Abriachan experience here:

> *After that I was happy, I lost need of any personal affection at all from the 'aunt': her coldness skimmed over me and it didn't hurt me any more. I even lost need of the near memory of my mother. I belonged so fully to my own mind, to the brave words I learned in school, to the things my eyes saw, to the music my ears heard.*
> (Jessie Kesson, *Somewhere Beyond*, ed Isobel Murray, 2000)

In Abraichan, Jessie also met Johnnie Kesson. While all the younger men had been scared off from 'the mental patient', Johnnie Kesson was sweet and friendly, and proferred sweeties, for Jessie a long-forgotten treat. He was some 11 years older, and had served abroad in the forces. The two fell in love and soon married, a marriage that was to last 58 years. After her mother, it was the most important relationship in Jessie's life. She once described Johnnie as 'my ballast'. Fairly soon, it wasn't a passionate affair, and all too soon she discovered that he couldn't share her joy in words and writing; but he was her comfort and stay – and she his – for the rest of their lives, and it was this relationship that made possible, in the end, Jessie's taking over her own life and writing it.

Jessie had taken charge of her own life, but it was still fraught with difficulties. She and Johnnie were unskilled and they soon started a family, baby Avril being born in 1938. The Kessons became farm workers, cottaring round the north of Scotland, sometimes staying only six months or a year at any one farm. This hard, nomadic life lasted from 1939 until 1951, when Jessie went off to seek the family's fortunes in London. But she began the new life about 1941, when she began writing for Scottish periodicals, two in particular, the *Scots Magazine* and *North-East Review*. Being published was an exhilarating experience in itself but I also argue in my biography that it was the beginning of a long process of self-healing, of finding that if she could express some of the chaos of her childhood experience, she could come to terms with it to some extent and convince herself of her own coherence as a person.

Much of the early periodical writing was poetry or prose about the early experience, and

when Jessie began to write for radio in 1945, it was again her own early experience that she began with. Her bitterness over being deprived of a university education never entirely left her: at 29 she penned her famous poem *A Scarlet Goon* from a pokey farm-worker's cottage: it ends like this:

But still, I'd hae likit a scarlet goon,
An' a desk o' my ain 'neath the auld grey Croon.
Learnin' a little from the wise,
Dancin' wi' gowden sheen,
Launchin' wi' carefree eyes
– Instead o' lifting tatties in mornin's glaured and cauld.
– O the regret, as a body grows old!

Acceptance by these magazines was unspeakably important to her and a lesser but important joy came with it – the gradual meeting with other people to whom the life of letters was important. This was a long-held dream. She met J B Salmond, editor of the *Scots Magazine*, and she and little Avril went and spent a short holiday with the Salmonds, an epoch-making event for both. Then, despite being tied to farms, often near Elgin and her mother, she began gradually to meet the circle of young men who ran *North-East Review*. To visit Alex and Cath Scott, for example, was a big thrill, even though they were short of beds and she spent the night in the bath. She went on to establish a number of epistolary relationships with people she could communicate ideas to – usually men, although Nan Shepherd was a notable exception. Her publisher Peter Calvocoressi was the most important of these, and the publishers' archive where he filed her letters was treasure trove for me.

When Jessie laid siege to it, the BBC in Scotland gave way quickly. Although they managed to withstand a number of patently daft ideas, they were bowled over by most, and Jessie's writing became more and more confined to radio, although privately she continued to try to write the early life, the book that would become *The White Bird Passes*, a book which was already started by 1941 and was not published until 1958. The early radio work was often again fictionalised autobiography and became not only an end in itself – Stewart Conn has called her 'one of the finest of for-radio practitioners' – but also a means of honing the small body of fiction she produced, in which she claimed always to aim at 'the sma' perfect'. By the time she decided to make for London in 1951, she was well known to the Scottish BBC, writing, appearing in her own plays, and appearing in other people's, such as James Crampsey's famous *Sunset Song*.

So what made her go to London? Her mother finally died in the Craigmoray Institute of Elgin in 1949 and it was only after that that she talked of departure. She had an ambition to write for TV and had no way of seeing it. She began to fear that some of her Scottish journalistic mentors were encouraging her too much to 'keep it cosy', to write Kailyard, and

she determined that distance was necessary to keep her writing in proportion.

The job front was always insecure. Johnnie was never strong, and never skilled, so despite his hard work Jessie had to work until retirement age at a succession of usually very heavy jobs, where a supposedly 'unskilled' worker could earn a decent wage. (By the time they went to London, the Kessons had a son, Kenneth, as well as daughter Avril.)

Her least pleasant jobs included cleaning the nurses' rooms at the lunatic asylum at Colney Hatch; cleaning the men's lavatories at a cinema in Palmers Green; the night care of invalids and/or elderly, doing heavy lifting, helping with toilet, sitting with the dying as a matter of course; setting up and running old people's homes; being employed as a park snooper, set to look for fungus in the grass and incident exposure in the populace. Jobs she didn't mind included her old standby, Woollies, but they couldn't pay enough for extended periods. Those she really loved included doing psychodrama with disturbed teenagers in London and at Tynepark; posing in the nude as an artist's model all over London ('the only time I ever got paid for thinking my own thoughts') and being deputy principal of the Cowley Recreational Institute in Brixton, a catch-all institution to contain and hopefully train displaced evacuees back from the country. Best of all was a magic year as a part-time producer on *Woman's Hour*. Anyone else could have been excused for seeing all this as full-time work.

But not Jessie. Besides work, running the home and taking care of the children, she had two ongoing quests – to write seriously for the BBC and along the way to make any money she could appearing on *Woman's Hour* in any number of unlikely contexts. In the serious writing for the BBC, I think she quietly passed a crucial milestone with the radio play *Somewhere Beyond* in 1961. This first expressed all the tangled emotional horrors of her teens and left her free to find new subjects – *Dear Edith*, about a solitary resident in an old folks' home; *You've Never Slept in Mine*, about a teenage girl taken into care after sexual abuse by her father; *Three Score and Ten, Sir!* about an old woman who has to relinquish her freedom and move in with her daughter's family, every one of them making serious sacrifices.

The other major achievement was to produce those four slim volumes we know as *The White Bird Passes* in 1958; *Glitter of Mica* in 1963; *Where the Apple Ripens* in 1976; and *Another Time, Another Place* in 1983. Moultrie R Kelsall said in 1963 that he had always known she had a streak of genius: we are all in a position to know this now. More: while writing the biography, I produced another mixed volume of written work and radio work, *Somewhere Beyond* (2000), which adds substantially to her published oeuvre, if people will demonstrate willingness to read radio scripts.

National fame came late to Jessie, with Michael Radford's television dramatisation of *The White Bird Passes* in 1980, and then the two co-operated on the film *Another Time, Another Place* while Jessie produced the book. That film won 14 international awards and Radford said to me with strong emotion as late as 1998: 'If she had been younger, I could have turned her into a great screen writer'. But all too soon Johnnie's health deteriorated further,

and Jessie's life revolved more and more around caring for him. Housebound and very deaf, he was a patient but very exhausting patient.

Two rewards were still to come. When the late Sir Kenneth Alexander was installed as chancellor of the University of Aberdeen in 1987, he had four honorary doctorates in his gift, and one of these was for Jessie. She got a 'scarlet goon' at last, and a very splendid one. And the schoolmates at Skene, whom the orphan had always envied for their security and rootedness, held a special lunch in her honour. This was the nearest she could get to completing the circle, coming home. She died, just six weeks after Johnnie, in 1994.

This article was initially delivered as a lecture at a conference of the Institute of Contemporary Scotland

A true polymath

Barbara Millar on Robins Millar

2008

I never met my father-in-law. When I married his son Alan in 1987, James George Robins Millar would have been 98 years old. But I have always been fascinated by his life. He was a Glasgow newspaperman – columnist, feature writer, short story author, editor of the *Evening News* and respected theatre and music critic of the *Scottish Daily Express*, a playwright with successes on Broadway and in the West End, a poet and a cartoonist. A true polymath.

He was married three times and had three children, painted prolifically and was given to occasional bizarre behaviours – taking a spirit stove and leg of pork on holiday to a Parisian hotel immediately springs to mind. I wanted to take a close look at Robins, his life and work, and 2008 seemed to be a particularly fitting time. It marks the 40th anniversary of his death in 1968 and it is 80 years since the staging of his most successful theatrical production, *Thunder in the Air*.

Robins was born in Nanaimo, British Columbia, on 28 February, 1889. His father, the Rev James Millar, was the last Church of Scotland minister to be sent out to Vancouver Island, not as any sort of missionary but because a good many Scots were working in the coal mines there. His mother, Annie Ferries, trained to become a nurse when she knew her husband-to-be was to be sent overseas.

Their first-born was named after his paternal and maternal grandfathers but the name Robins – the one that was always used to prevent favouring the name of either grandfather – was the surname of a Nanaimo parishioner, Samuel Robins. Judging from the article written by the Rev Millar (under a female pseudonym), published in the *Canadian Presbyterian of Toronto* on 4 February 1891, Samuel Robins may well have been the only person in that bleak Canadian town to show the Millar family any friendship or charity.

After travelling from Scotland for more than a month, 'for three days we were left severely alone to wander round the place looking for the town and trying to pick up many things that would make our house look inhabited,' the Rev Millar wrote. Eventually, visitors did call at the manse 'though we had scarcely a place to receive them in, or a chair for them to sit on. These visitors did their best, however, in one direction. They warned me against making friends of this one and that one in the congregation and city until almost everybody who had called had been held up as one to be avoided'.

Ultimately, the 'cold indifference' of the locals gave way to 'active opposition and open ridicule. They made things as unbearable as could be'.

A daughter, Nan, was born in Nanaimo in 1890 and then Rev Millar secured a posting to Buffalo, New York State, where Annie was born in 1892, followed by Mary in 1893. A

further posting to Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana) saw the birth of Bill in 1897.

In 1899, the family returned to Glasgow – the first time Robins had been to Scotland – and rented a house in Arundel Drive, Langside, on the city's southside. Their last child, Eric, was born there in October 1899. Just two months later, the children's mother was dead from TB, aged 39, and family life was shattered forever.

The Rev Millar returned to Georgetown with Mary, Bill and Eric. Nan and Annie went to live at a Church of Scotland home for the children of ministers working overseas and Robins went to stay with his uncle William.

Eventually, gradually, all the Millar children returned to Glasgow for their secondary education and were billeted with strict cousin Mary Goldie. Family rumours persist that 'Cousin Mary', having been burdened with his six children, expected a proposal of marriage from the widowed Rev Millar. It never came. In 1903, he married Hannah Gibson and remained overseas. He died in 1914.

By now living in Alexandra Parade, Dennistoun, Robins attended Whitehill School. He also attended design, drawing, painting and life classes at Glasgow School of Art between 1911 and 1916, where he made a lifelong friend, painter Archibald McGlashan (1888-1980). By the outbreak of the First World War he was working in some administrative or clerical capacity within a hospital, probably Ruchill, and submitting stories to local newspapers. In 1914, he was also drawing cartoons for the socialist publication, *Forward*. (Robins was turned down for military service because of his poor eyesight.) In one of his diaries, he refers to a discussion with 'Johnston' about *Forward*'s anti-war stance.

Johnston was Tom Johnston, who founded the weekly paper, the official organ of the Independent Labour Party in Scotland, in 1906 and edited it for 27 years. It was banned for a time in 1916 for alleged 'treasonable activity'.

At the end of his life Robins was a Tory voter. But the many cartoons he had published in *Forward* were left-wing. Did these cartoons reflect the politics of his youth? Or did their commission simply offer him a creative outlet he could not refuse? There are no clues.

One cartoon, published in *Forward* on 8 August 1914, has the title *Death and the Profit Ghouls*. It depicts a battlefield strewn with the dead, the dying and the trappings of war. A huge spectral figure of a soldier dominates. Nearby two well-padded, pinstripe-wearing, top-hatted gents are chatting. The caption reads: 'The workers of Europe are being slain in their thousands while devastation, famine and pestilence overshadow their families in a war entirely directed for the benefit of wealthy exploiters'.

In another, published on 5 December 1914, an enormous moustachioed man, again in pinstripes, and clutching a union flag, sits in a chair and observes a poorly-dressed, desperate-looking couple with child clinging to them. Behind the portly toff is the skeletal figure of death – with scythe – and the word 'Famine' emblazoned on his chest. The caption says: 'Working men are being hounded on to sacrifice their lives by men who have no intention of doing it themselves. Meanwhile, owing to the miserable pittance they are offered, the spectre of famine menaces the families they leave behind'.

In 1915, the *Glasgow Evening News* was launched and Robins became a reporter on the paper. In 1917, aged 28, he married 21-year-old Edith Gordon and, after the birth of their first child the following year, the family moved, initially to a rented flat in Renfrew Street and later, with his mother-in-law in tow, to a rented flat on the second floor at 9 Park Quadrant, a prestigious address overlooking Kelvingrove Park and Glasgow University. Ultimately, he was able to buy this property although another family rumour persists that, at some point in the 1930s, during what would appear to have become an increasingly sterile marriage to Edith, he rented a pied-a-terre somewhere in town in order to enjoy some extra-marital comforts.

The marriage produced two children, Gordon in 1918 and Joyce in 1926 but eventually Edith left him for John Fletcher, an English Army officer whom she met when houses in Park Circus were commandeered by the Army during the Second World War. Edith's kitchen overlooked these houses and the romance between her and John started with surreptitious waves from their respective windows.

Edith must have often been left alone, for the 1920s and 30s were Robins' most productive decades in terms of his playwriting. Among his personal notes is a list of his plays – there are over 50. Next to a handful he has written 'not acted' but others bear various legends: acted by the Masque Theatre at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow; acted at the Curtain Theatre, Glasgow; the Duke of York's, London; the Lyceum, Edinburgh; the Lyric, Glasgow; the Citizens', Glasgow; the Casino Theatre, Monte Carlo.

His first plays were written in 1921 – *Let Greytown Flourish* (acted by the Scottish National Players in the mid-20s) and *The Shawlie*. In his foreword to *The Shawlie*, which is set in Glasgow's Cowcaddens, he states the year the play was written. 'The point is not of any importance,' he writes, 'except for the chance that one of these years a spendthrift collector of curiosities may pick it out of the twopenny shelf and, finding it about Cowcaddens, may visit the locality; and then may be disappointed to discover that it has become a garden suburb, all tennis lawns, geranium boxes and chaperones. These changes occur in time'.

His aim in the play, he states, is 'simply to picture a slum whose residents are real enough to like it; who find it rich in the warmer amenities; who are also so exasperating as to have no longing to leave it'.

In her book, *The Activities of Popular Dramatists and Drama in Scotland: 1900-1952*, Linda Mackenney describes *The Shawlie* as 'a lively and stimulating piece' which, although it never quite escapes 'the middle-class writer's obsession with personal morals', can be seen, she suggests, as a precursor to Glasgow Unity Theatre's post-war plays including Robert McLeish's *The Gorbals Story* (1946) and Ena Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep* (1947).

However, it was his third play – *Thunder in the Air* – which built his international reputation as a playwright. Written in 1928, the play, about a young man killed in the First World War who reappears in various guises before several people who had known him

when alive, was launched with great success on 5 April 1928 at the Duke of York's Theatre in London. Among the cast members was Margaret Scudamore, the mother of Sir Michael Redgrave and progenitor of the Redgrave dynasty of actors.

In the *World's Press News* of 24 August 1956, theatre critic Hannen Swaffer recalls reviewing it at the time of its launch and describing it as 'badly staged as it was, better than [J M Barrie's 1920 play with a similar ghostly theme] *Mary Rose'*. Barrie, apparently quite disturbed about his future, dashed along to the second night to make sure – which explains why, at home, we have an autographed copy of Barrie's *Auld Licht Idylls* inscribed 'To Robins Millar with kind regards from J M Barrie, *Thunder in the Air*, 2nd night, 1928.' Afterwards, Barrie invited Robins back to his Adelphi flat for a long talk. 'Do you really think my husband's play is better than Barrie's?' Edith Millar asked Swaffer, who replied: 'Yes, before they murdered it'.

The American premiere of the play took place in Chicago in the autumn of 1929. The front page of the *Chicago Daily News* of 11 October ran an interview with Robins under the headline: 'Scotch writer here to see play open', then beneath: 'Robins Millar, amazed by the US, will watch premiere then speed home'.

Robins stayed at the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago and, while there, sent a telegram to his sister Annie, living in rural Canada, saying he would try to telephone her the following evening. Her response to him vividly illustrates how different were the worlds the siblings inhabited. While Robins travelled thousands of miles to be present at the American premiere of his play, Annie's plans were to drive the eight-and-a-half miles into her nearest town 'in the old buggy.'

'It takes about two hours each way with our slow horses so picture me getting home in the dark,' she wrote, 'rather stiff and cold with a lot to talk about if I really actually speak to you. I've been thinking of nothing but your play all this month.'

As Charles Hart, from the Scottish Society of Playwrights (SSP), points out in an article he wrote for the SSP's newsletter in 1979, *Thunder in the Air*'s premiere coincided with the devastating Wall Street Crash. Nevertheless, the play ran for four weeks at the Princess Theatre, which had an audience capacity of almost 1,000. The *Billboard* newspaper reviewed the play as 'a great success,' adding: 'At the end of the play there was a lengthy ovation punctuated by calls for the playwright, although he did not appear'.

Thunder in the Air also appeared at the Wieting Theatre in Syracuse, New York State, prior to its transfer to the 750-seat 49th Street Theatre, part of New York's glamorous Broadway theatre circuit, on 11 November 1929. The *Syracuse Journal*'s review said the play's 'greatest moments contain both poetry and pathos' and urged theatregoers 'who want to see a play which brings a lump to the throat and which will bring enormous satisfaction' to go and see it.

It ran on Broadway for 16 performances and then played at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and in Paris, as well as in regional theatres in Penzance, Plymouth and Newcastle. At the same time, rehearsals were going ahead for productions from Melbourne to Philadelphia.

In the 1940s and again in the 1970s *Thunder in the Air* was also broadcast on radio.

By the late 1920s, Robins was editor of the *Glasgow Evening News*, where he also wrote a regular Tuesday short story under the title *The Redoubtable Bella*. His last-ever Bella column, written on 26 October 1937, read: 'Young Aleck [Bella's little brother] is at the age when a birthday is an event. So it is for all of us, but a time comes when we get past hoping for anything much more than a ninepenny tie and a sixpenny pair of suspenders. Not so Aleck. He was an optimist. He wanted rabbits…'. The story continued but that was the last anyone heard of Bella and her fictional family. The column never appeared again.

Robins' playwriting career continued alongside his 'day job': *The Colossus* was written in 1928; *Dream Island*, 1929; *Throwing the Dice*, 1930; *Wellington*, 1933; *Franz Liszt*, 1935. His most creative years happily coincided with a period of remarkable expansion in the theatre industry in Scotland, as David Hutchison points out in his chapter in Bill Findlay's book *A History of Scottish Theatre: 1900-1950*.

In 1928, the Masque Theatre (which premiered *The Colossus* at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow that year) was founded under Robert Fenemore and the Scottish Community Drama Association (SCDA), formed in 1926, saw entries for its one-act play festivals soar from 35 in 1926-27 to 307 by 1932-33. By 1937, there were more than 1,000 amateur clubs in Scotland, all hungry to perform. The Scottish newspapers of the 1930s also all had regular weekly columns on the amateur scene and carried reviews of productions.

In 1933, the Curtain Theatre was founded in Glasgow by an amateur group led by Grace Ballantine, with the aim of encouraging Scottish playwrights. The theatre was situated in a large, L-shaped drawing room on the first floor at 15 Woodside Terrace and could seat a maximum of 70. Many of the productions were so popular that they had to transfer to the larger Lyric Theatre on Sauchiehall Street. Well-known actors such as Duncan Macrae and Molly Urquhart, who both went on to help form the Citizens' Theatre Company, starred in Curtain Theatre productions.

Robins' play *Once a Lady* was premiered by the Curtain at the Lyric in January 1936. The *Daily Record* preview said: 'It's a comedy and we who know Mr Millar's dry wit are really expecting something very entertaining and exceptionally outstanding'.

His involvement in the world of theatre always extended beyond playwriting and reviewing. In the early 30s there was a movement in Glasgow to establish a permanent 'experimental theatre' for both amateur and professional productions. A former church building in Berkeley Street, Charing Cross – previously the Ritz Palais de Danse – was purchased at a cost of £5,000 and the experimental theatre founders – Norman Bruce, R F Pollok and D Glen Mackemmie (chairman of the Scottish Community Drama Association until 1934) – intended the new theatre to have a modern revolving stage and an audience capacity of 700. It was also suggested that the experimental theatre would test out the theories of stage production promulgated by R F Pollok, who had devised a system of registering the movements and gestures of actors by assigned numbers.

Following a meeting at the Scottish National Academy of Music in March 1930,

however, a report in the *Daily Record* notes that 'Mr Robins Millar suggested the three founders should accept temporary election – his amendment along these lines was put to the vote and defeated by 29 to 22 votes on a show of hands. Mr Robins Millar suggested that, since the movement was to be run by three dictators, it would be a good thing to have, after the productions, meetings such as this at which the rank and file could express their more or less "bolshy" opinions as they wished'.

'If they knew,' he said, 'that they were going to be allowed to say exactly what they thought, it would be a great comfort to them during performances'. It would also, he suggested, be of great benefit to the producers and the actors.

Robins' play *Wellington* toured for 12 weeks in 1933; *Franz Liszt* was staged at the Theatre de Casino, Monte Carlo in 1935; *Studio Party* opened at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, in 1937 and also played at the Lyceum, Edinburgh; *There's Money In It* was part of the Lyric Theatre season in 1938, while *Day In, Day Out* and *The Sell Out* played at the Citizens' Theatre in 1945 and 1955 respectively. *Royal Scotch*, also originally produced at the Citizens', was performed at Perth Theatre as late as 1959.

The review of *The Sell Out* by Alexander Reid for *Scotland's Magazine*, May 1955, says the 'farcical comedy' is, 'at the bottom, a cry for independence, for the right to nonconformity, for the individual against the gang, for the family business against the combine'. He says the play had 'a thick crust of comic lines and comic incidents' and that it was enthusiastically received by the first night audience.

'Mr Millar provided good opportunities for nearly everyone (in the cast) and almost all were exploited… Fulton Mackay's serious-minded Highland assistant-in-the-ironmongery department and Madeleine Christie's henna-haired "modom" being particularly funny.'

1937 was a particularly auspicious year for Robins. The *Evening News* had previously been owned by Allied Newspapers, formed in 1924 by the three Berry brothers, later enobled as Viscount Camrose, Viscount Kemsley and Lord Buckland. But in that year they split their interests into Camrose, the Amalgamated Press and Kemsley Newspapers. This period of uncertainty unsettled Robins and he left the *Evening News* to become feature writer, theatre and music critic on the *Scottish Daily Express*. (The *Evening News* finally folded in 1957.)

He took over the daily *Talk of Glasgow* column and his first, published on 3 November 1937, included a colour piece about waiting in the St Andrew's Halls for the results of the municipal elections and an item on gas masks, beginning: 'Gas masks will add nothing for personal beauty'.

In February 1937, his three-act play *There's Money In It* was performed at the Lyric Theatre with amateur actress Elvira Airlie in the role of Ethel Deacon. This may have been the first time Robins and Elvira met. She then worked at Govan Harmony Row School although later she taught elocution, giving private lessons to, among others, Gordon Jackson, then an aspiring actor with a strong Glasgow accent. She was to become Robins' second wife in 1943, following his divorce from Edith.

Robins' niece, Evelyn Lennie, says Elvira was 'quite conventional, pretty and very well-liked', but her health was fragile. She was crippled by rheumatoid arthritis, which later largely confined her to a wheelchair and resulted in her needing lots of care and assistance, including being carried by Robins to and from their second floor apartment. 'She could hardly move,' Mrs Lennie recalls. 'Her sister, Doris, was there a lot. I used to go regularly on a Sunday to see them and Robins would always be painting.'

Evelyn and her cousin Will were also regular beneficiaries of Robins' largesse when he would offer them his excellent critic's seats at various plays and operas. However, this was not without strings. The productions they went to see were invariably ones with which Robins was extremely familiar and which he felt he did not need to see one more time. His young relatives were given strict instructions to enjoy themselves but also to telephone him should anything untoward happen, such as cast changes or scenery collapses, so that the event could be incorporated into his review.

In 1952, Elvira died aged just 43 – records give the cause as rheumatoid arthritis and an abdominal abscess. The following year Robins, now 64, met and married his third wife, 33-year-old Agnes Stevenson Barrie (whom he always called Steve), my mother-in-law. Steve was a teacher at Drumpark Special School in Coatbridge and, by April 1954, the mother of Robins' last child, Alan.

Robins' love letter to his wife, written on the day his infant son was born, says he is sure the new baby 'will make the bonds that unite us stronger and give new happiness to our marriage'.

'In these months you have been wonderful and have warmed me continually to admiration of your qualities. While we were comrades before, your sweetness and your kindness, your forbearance and readiness to adjust yourself have been greater than I could have expected. In all these things you have been the perfect mate. The trying days are over. Now there is joy for you and, sharing your pride in the boy, I shall help you all I can. There will be amusement, laughter and the thousand interests of parenthood. It will be grand having you both at home.'

Subsequent letters – to celebrate a wedding anniversary and Christmas – further reveal the depths of his affection in this late marriage. 'You are quite a wonderful woman, so it is only natural that my affection and admiration and love increase as time goes on. To me you are comrade and lover,' he wrote. 'May the good luck that brought us by chance together so fortunately always be with you.'

But though his spirit was clearly willing, it did not always translate into actions. Alan remembers he and his mother being instructed, one summer holiday, to take themselves off to Kelvingrove Park each day to learn to play tennis, so that Robins could have the flat to himself and paint or write totally undisturbed. Robins refused to have any mod cons such as central heating installed to warm the chilly, cavernous rooms at Park Quadrant and totally forbade the introduction of television to the home.

Holidays involved, on more than one occasion, carting a spirit stove all the way to the

continent, along with joints of meat to be cooked on it. However, Robins had travelled often in Europe during the period of great privation between the wars, having been in Poland with Compton Mackenzie, and in Florence, so perhaps past difficult experiences encouraged him to make sure there was always going to be food available.

On another continental venture, in the mid-1950s, Robins, a non-motorist (though he had driven in the days when no licence was needed and knocked down a pedestrian, at which point he relinquished the steering wheel), instructed his three-years-younger father-in-law to take the family on a tour of Europe. Alan remembers this as a 'tour of the bomb sites of Europe', although he still boasts that he took his first steps in Baden-Baden. His grandfather, the reluctant chauffeur, refused to accompany Robins ever again on such an adventure.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, Robins continued to fulfil his role as theatre and music critic of the *Scottish Daily Express*, although he no longer wrote plays. After briefly giving up painting, declaring he was 'a total failure', he resumed it enthusiastically when his sister Mary gave him a birthday bouquet, the colours of which he simply had to capture.

His sister Annie kept a diary of her visit to Scotland, from Canada, in 1950 when Robins took her to the *Daily Express* office to show her the five paintings of Scottish lochs and mountains he had completed to decorate the canteen. 'That will immortalise him', his sister believed. The *Express* building was demolished and has recently been redeveloped for housing. The paintings had probably gone by the time the *Express* vacated the offices in 1974.

A chain smoker, rarely without a cigarette between his lips until he took to snuff in the 1960s, Robins' health nevertheless remained robust until an unexpected heart attack in 1967, which hospitalised him for a short time. When out of hospital he resumed his work as before.

He died, of a second heart attack, on 12 August 1968, while planning a three-week stint at the Edinburgh Festival. An obituary, written by friend and colleague Mamie Crichton in the *Scottish Daily Express* of 13 August, said: 'His silver hair and bespectacled face, unchanged as long as most of his colleagues can remember, were familiar in theatres throughout Scotland. He had almost certainly seen more plays and stage entertainments than anyone in the whole country. His opinions, highly regarded by public and theatrical professionals alike, were often expressed with wry wit that stemmed from long experience and great breadth of outlook'.

A couple of reviews very late in his career – from 1967 – reveal the disparate activities he was required to cover. 'Harry Secombe managed to appear at the Alhambra, minus his singing voice. He just croaked a little into the mike, with a laryngitis wheeze. And gallantly tried a cartwheel. I am sure against doctor's orders.' On the same programme were 'the Bachelors… come from London to supply star appeal. They have a pleasing liking for old lyrics. I have never heard *Danny Boy* more fearfully assaulted. But I'd forgive these boys anything for their Irish exuberance'.

'Challenge to opera lovers is made by Sadlers Wells in setting up a season of four weeks at the King's,' he wrote later that year. 'A further challenge is that instead of "playing it safe", unfamiliar and even new operas will test how loyal fans really are.'

On *The Magic Flute*, he added: 'Stilted and clumsy it may be, with its naïve fairy tale mixed with Freemasonry, which meant a lot politically in 1791. But always when the plot gets boring, Mozart pours out a stream of exquisite music to ravish the ear'.

At his funeral service at Maryhill Crematorium (he had no religious convictions), just two days after his death, luminaries from the theatre world – including Jack Short (Jimmy Logan's father) from the Metropole, Edward Ashley from the King's Theatre and Alex Frutin of the Frutin Organisation, mingled with newspapermen – including Ian MacColl, editor of the *Scottish Daily Express*, William Steen, editor of the *Evening Citizen* and Sandy Trotter, chairman of Beaverbrook Newspapers in Scotland, and personal friends, including Dr Tom Honeyman, director of Glasgow Corporation Museums and Art Galleries from 1938 until 1971 (and the person responsible for bringing Salvador Dali's 'Christ of St John of the Cross' to Glasgow) and former Glasgow Lord Provost Dr James Welsh.

Ian MacColl, in his announcement of Robins' death, called him 'the doyen of theatre critics in Scotland. His notices were models of clarity and preciseness, yet he was never uncharitable or unkind'.

Arthur Boyne, deputy editor of the *Scottish Sunday Express*, in a letter of condolence to Robins' widow, said: 'Robins was unique. The years, time itself, did not seem to touch him. He was a grown-up youth. And it can only be those who did not really know him who use the adjective cynical about him. There may have been just a little protective veneer of worldliness there to keep the bores at bay but he had what cynics never have, enthusiasm. And he was the most professional newspaperman in the business. He made the whizz kids we have to tolerate now look infantile'.

Robins was a regular attendee at the Scottish Community Drama Association (SCDA) divisional and Scottish final festivals from the 1930s so, in his memory, a Robins Millar Award was established in the early 1970s by the western division of the SCDA, with an initial donation from the *Daily Express*. His widow also made a contribution and now, 34 years later, the award fund stands at over £16,000, with £1,800 given to members of the SCDA's western division in 2006. Murray Thomson, the current western division treasurer, describes the fund as 'a great success story'.

I never met my father-in-law. I will always wish I had. But the final paragraph in his life story should be his. In a letter to his sister, Annie, written just a few hours before his death, he said:

'On the whole, I deter myself from looking back – so many mistakes and indeed unkindnesses to admit, yet sometimes I do reflect on what different turnings I might have taken, that would have led to disaster of one kind or another, quite likely to early death, and I am glad to be living, especially to be living happily.'

The man who lit Glasgow

Barbara Millar on Henry Alexander Mavor

2008

His son was a celebrated playwright and doctor of medicine, his grandson was also a successful playwright and director of the Scottish Arts Council, but Henry Alexander Mavor made his name in a completely different arena – as one of the pioneers of the electrical engineering industry in Scotland.

Born in Stranraer in 1858, Mavor was the fourth of 11 children of James Mavor and Mary Anne Bridie, the daughter of a Dundee skipper. James Mavor had been ordained as a minister but never had his own parish. Instead, he became a schoolteacher in Glasgow and moved the family to the leafy environs of Pollokshields. Henry's son (with his wife, the deeply religious Janet Osborne) – Osborne Henry Mavor, better known as James Bridie (whose own son was Ronald 'Bingo' Mavor) – penned this colourful description of his father in his autobiography *One Way of Living*: 'My father was a tall, spare man with a heavy, ginger moustache and short beard, with darker hair with copper-coloured lights in it. He had a heavy stoop and long, thin hands and feet. His eyes were light blue, shaded with heavy eyebrows, the left with a humorous tilt. His cheeks were rather sunken, his forehead was high and finely modelled, his nose was lifted at the tip, his lips were full and he had a small, strong chin. He wore a blue morning coat, a white silk necktie and a bowler hat. His manners were courteous and his speech had the tang of the schoolmaster about it, without being pedantic. I had never heard anyone speak Shakespeare's verse with so fine a sense of its values as my father had'.

Henry Mavor became a clerk in a business firm and also worked on a windjammer, the grandest of 19th-century cargo ships, sailing around the world. Then, following his dream, he began studying medicine. If he had been allowed any personal choice in the matter he would have become doctor of medicine. But he was only allowed to follow this ambition for two years. During this time, his professors believed he showed remarkable promise. However, family financial problems meant he had to drop out of his course to embark on training to become an electrical engineer at Glasgow College of Science and Arts.

The first public lighting in Glasgow had been provided by the Town Council in 1767, on the south side of the Trongate, then the main thoroughfare. Lighting at that time was still primitive – occasional oil lamps on wooden pedestals. The complexity and expense of these lamps made large-scale street lighting impractical and, even by 1814, there were little more that 1,200 street lamps in the whole of the city. By 1818, coal gas was used to illuminate the streets. Maintenance proved to be relatively cheap and lighting quickly spread throughout Glasgow. But it was not until 1878 that electric lighting was introduced, courtesy of Henry Mavor.

Since qualifying as an electrical engineer, Mavor had worked as a local agent for the

English firm of Cromptons, pioneers in the use of electric light for public use. He was also employed for a time by the Swan United Company, who produced a practical incandescent bulb at roughly the same time as Thomas Edison in the USA. The two companies eventually settled their differences, pooled their resources and set up a joint UK operation to exploit their inventions.

Mavor was involved in the provision of the original lighting to the General Post Office in George Square, Glasgow, when it opened in 1878, the first public building in the city to be lit by electricity. This installation was subsequently extended to various shops, municipal buildings and offices. A few years later, in 1882, he established the first electric lighting plant at Queen Street Station. In that same year, the Corporation of Glasgow held a banquet, lit by electric light. By the time the dessert was served, however, the lights had begun to fail. Mavor left the banquet and ran across George Square, discovering that the stoker who fed the boiler – that supplied the steam engine that worked the dynamos – was very near exhaustion. Mavor took off his dress coat, rolled up his starched cuffs and stoked the boiler fires himself. He then returned in time for the speeches.

Mavor was, by now, a partner in Muir, Mavor and Coulson Ltd, a business set up to design and manufacture electrical machinery and to provide electricity supply by meter. His relations with his employees had been described as 'exceptionally cordial'. In 1887, a younger brother, Sam, joined Henry and his colleague Arthur Coulson. In 1890, Henry joined the Institution of Electrical Engineers, proposed by William Thomson, later Lord Kelvin, the eminent Victorian engineer and physicist who worked on the first transatlantic telegraph cable. Under Sam Mavor's direction, Muir, Mavor and Coulson began to specialise in the application of electric power to the mining industry, concentrating on developing and manufacturing machines for coal cutting and conveying, which great increased productivity in the west of Scotland coalfields and which were sold throughout the world. The work which engaged Henry's attention, however, was the problem of electric propulsion of ships, and many patents on this subject are evidence on his inventive fertility. His practical experimental work included equipping a 2,000-ton vessel with electrical propelling machinery and he made visits to the United States as a consultant to the company which equipped the US Navy collier *Jupiter* with this machinery.

Mavor was a skilled draughtsman who spent much of his leisure time sketching, painting and modelling. But he also had a deep interest in education and social problems. He was chairman of the Glasgow branch of the Board of Trade Committee on Juvenile Employment, a governor of the Royal Technical College and a member of the Executive Committee of the Engineering Employers' Federation. Although he was very active physically, Mavor was never very strong – suffering from chronic bronchitis, chronic dyspepsia and bunions. 'These disabilities did not impair his physical courage', wrote his son. 'A navvy stood on his bunion in a tramcar. My father damned the navvy and the navvy replied in kind. My father struck the navvy on the head with his umbrella and the fellow, after a moment's hesitation, left the tramcar.'

In 1915, he died very suddenly of pernicious anaemia, aged 56. His obituary in the archive of the Institution of Electrical Engineers (now the Institution of Engineering and Technology) is a glowing one. Mavor, it reads, had been 'endowed with a singularly alert penetrating intellect and with a gentle, sympathetic and generous nature and his large circle of friends knew him as a man of versatile talent, broad culture and refined tastes, with an extensive knowledge and fine appreciation of literature, music and art'.

Travelling woman

Barbara Millar on Lizzie Higgins

2008

Scots traditional singer Lizzie Higgins steadfastly refused to perform on the public stage until she was 38 years old, despite countless entreaties. Her reason for always declining invitations was that she did not want to compete with her mother – the legendary Jeannie Robertson, described by American folklorist Alan Lomax as 'a monumental figure in world folk-song'. Lizzie finally made her debut performance in 1967 but, with sad irony, this turned out to be Jeannie's last public outing.

Regina Christina Robertson was born into a traveller family in Aberdeen in 1908. Her father, Donald, was a remarkable piper, her mother Maria, a singer with a huge repertoire of songs and stories, which she taught to her eager daughter. Maria would tell the story behind each song before singing it, a practice which Jeannie followed and which, said her many fans, gave her singing such authority.

Stanley Robertson, Jeannie's nephew and himself a piper, singer and story-teller of national renown, has a very early memory of 'holding Aunt Jeannie's hand while she sang to me'.

'She taught me so many things,' Stanley continues. 'Everything was passed down orally. So many of my folk couldn't read or write because they never got to school.' Jeannie had grown up with the nomadic traveller lifestyle of spending six months of the year on the road, following traditional traveller occupations such as tinsmith, horse dealer, pearl fisher, hawker and berry-picker.

Scottish travellers had once enjoyed a privileged place in society. But, following the Reformation in the 16th century, their wandering lifestyle and different culture attracted much persecution.

'I stopped going to my local pub many years ago because the landlord put a sign in the window saying travellers were not welcome', says Pete Shepheard, who first encountered Jeannie when he was a student at St Andrews University, helping to run the folk club there. Jimmy Hutchison, who, with Pete, was instrumental in setting up the first folk festival in Scotland, in Blairgowrie, often toured with Jeannie and other travellers and was shocked at how often hotels and hostelries would refuse them entry. 'I never expected to encounter any prejudice,' he recalls, 'but there was plenty'.

Jeannie eloped with Aberdeen piper Donald Higgins and had two children – Lizzie, who became a noted singer in her own right, and Jeemsie, a seven-year-old already learning to play the pipes when he died suddenly from meningitis. 'There were lots of hard times for Jeannie,' Stanley muses. But there were also good times to come.

In 1953, Hamish Henderson, generally regarded as the father of the Scottish folk revival,

was a 'temporary honorary research fellow' at the newly-founded School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. He visited Aberdeen, having heard of Jeannie's growing reputation, to record her. But Jeannie, suspicious of this stranger turning up on her doorstep, refused to let him in and challenged him to sing the opening lines of Child ballad no 163, *The Battle of Harlaw*. When Henderson was able to do so, she immediately thawed.

American 'gatherer of songs' Alan Lomax also made his way to Jeannie's little prefab. Lomax had been part of various left-wing organisations in the post-war US, championing singers such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. He came to Britain with a deal from Columbia Records, to record songs and music for the World Library of Folk and Primitive Music.

Between 1950 and 1958, Lomax collected songs in England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland, as well as countries on the continent, but nothing made as much impact on him as his visits to Scotland. 'The Scots have the finest folk tradition in the British Isles,' he wrote, 'with songs and ballads among the noblest folk tunes in western Europe'.

It was Jeannie Robertson, however, who impressed him most. 'When I met Jeannie,' he said in the 1970s, 'I knew at once that she belonged with the great ones… she had a great sense of how to lay a tune along the words to make both shine more brightly, and she knew how to put in the delicate brush of embellishment, to make the song come to life in the most important parts. There was nothing like Jeannie's singing in the whole of Britain'.

Jeannie's first LP record was *The World's Greatest Folk Singer* and she took to performing on the public stage 'like a duck to water' says Stanley Robertson.

On one occasion, he recalls, at a theatre in Edinburgh, Jeannie was on the bill along with an opera singer, whose name is now forgotten, and then-celebrated chanteurs Juliette Greco and Harry Belafonte. 'The opera singer did her arias and came off the stage to tremendous applause,' says Stanley. 'Neither Juliette Greco nor Harry Belafonte were prepared to follow this performance. Aunt Jeannie was standing there, in her new pinny, bought for the occasion, so the compere asked if she was also frightened to go on next. She told him: "I'm feart for no woman. And if I cannae sing better than that, I'll pack it in". When she finished *Lord Donald*, a famous megaballad, there was not a dry eye in the house'.

Physically, Stanley describes Jeannie as 'a strong, handsome woman with jet-black hair, huge, flashing almond eyes and dramatic expressions'. 'She never wore much make-up for the stage, just a touch of rouge,' Stanley continues. 'She was very proud – and she had a tiger's temper. I often got a row off her.'

Traditional singer Dick Gaughan says Jeannie was the best singer of classic Scots ballads he has ever heard. 'When she sang, she knew and understood every nuance of the relationships between the characters in the story, their motives and the consequences of their actions and, by the time she'd finished, so did the audience.'

Jeannie sang at countless folk clubs and festivals, made records and recorded for the BBC in London. But she always had time to help young singers who were keen to learn,

remembers Jimmy Hutchison. 'She used to come down from Aberdeen to our folk club in St Andrews and would spend the weekend staying with one of us. When she was with you she would always sing to you and talk to you. It wasn't a formal teacher-pupil relationship, but I learned a lot of songs from her.'

In 1968, just after her public performing career ended, Jeannie was awarded the MBE for services to folk-song, the first folk-singer and the first traveller to receive this honour. She died in March 1975.

'Far from the common perception of her as some kind of untrained, traveller woman singer,' Dick Gaughan concludes, 'her singing was the result of a powerful artistic intelligence and knowledge, and the accumulated experience of generations informed her work'.

Rebel with a cause

Barbara Millar on Mary Barbour

2008

Willie Gallacher, James Maxton, David Kirkwood, Tom Johnston, John Maclean, Manny Shinwell, Harry McShane, George Buchanan. The names most often recalled of the fiery political activists associated with the 'Red Clydeside' period of intense radicalism in and around Glasgow between the 1910s and the 1930s are, almost invariably, those of prominent men.

But women were also at the forefront of this movement and one of them, Mary Barbour, went on to achieve a string of 'firsts' during her many years of working relentlessly on behalf of working-class families in Glasgow.

Many was born in 1875 in Kilbarchan, Renfrewshire, the third child of seven born to carpet weaver James Rough an his wife Jane Gavin. In 1887, the family moved to Elderslie, where Mary was employed initially as a thread twister and then as a carpet printer. In 1896, she married iron turner David Barbour, from Johnstone, and they moved to Govan, Glasgow, where David found work at the Fairfield Shipyard, while Mary stayed at home to raise their two sons.

She also joined the Kinning Park Cooperative Guild, which had been founded in 1871. Nineteen years later, the first Cooperative Women's Guild was formed in Kinning Park – at first little more than a cookery class but later described as 'a feminine university', where members were encouraged to discuss ideas and debate politics, equipping them with the skills to participate in the affairs of the cooperative movement and to stand for election to local councils and education authorities.

Mary's political education progressed further. She joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and became active in the Socialist Sunday School movement. However, her activism began in earnest with the Glasgow rent strike of 1915.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 brought many changes to Glasgow – the second city of the British Empire and, with a population of over one million, the sixth largest city in Europe. In pre-First World War Glasgow, there had been a large number of empty houses but, with the commencement of hostilities, a huge incoming workforce of tens of thousands, employed in the shipyards, engineering works, munitions factories and other Allied war industry trades, meant accommodation was suddenly in great demand and quickly became in short supply.

Local landlords' response to the housing crisis was to hike rents to unmanageable heights. ILP councillor Andrew McBride and Women's Labour League president , Mary Laird, formed the Glasgow Women's Housing Association and, soon, other local women's housing associations were formed in a bid to resist the rent increases.

In Govan, in June 1915, the South Govan Women's Housing Association was set up under the leadership of Mary Barbour, who organised tenant committees and local women to refuse to pay the new rents and to drive out the sheriff's officers and resist evictions.

Huge numbers of meetings were held – in kitchens and on the streets – in order to stay one step ahead of the sheriff's men and the women used drums, rattles, bells, whistles and trumpets to rally and mobilise supporters, who would then cram into closes and stairways to prevent the sheriff's officers from entering and from carrying out their evictions. The women also used little bags of flour, peasmeal and soot as missiles, aimed at these bowler-hatted officials.

The rent strike in Govan soon spread to other industrial areas of Glasgow – Partick, Shettleston, Ibrox and Parkhead – and, by November 1915, it was reported that 25,000 Glasgow households were refusing to pay the increases on the pre-war rent. There were mass open-air demonstrations and processions to the City Chambers, the largest one assembling on 17 November 1915 when thousands of women, nicknamed 'Mrs Barbour's Army' by Willie Gallacher (one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the only person to serve as a communist MP), accompanied by shipyard and engineering workers, converged on the Sheriff's Court in the middle of Glasgow.

In his book *Revolt on the Clyde*, published in 1936, Willie Gallacher said Mrs Barbour was 'a typical working-class housewife who became the leader of such a movement as had never been seen before, or since for that matter. Mrs Barbour had a team of women who were wonderful. They could smell a sheriff's officer a mile away. At their summons women left their cooking, washing or whatever they were doing. Before they got anywhere near their destination, the officer and his men would be met by an army of furious women who drove them back in a hurried scramble for safety. Attempt after attempt was made to secure evictions, all of which ended in futility. The increased rent could not be collected, the tenants could not be evicted'.

Lloyd George's Government feared that demonstrations over rent increases could lead to strikes and disruption to the production of arms, ships and other vital munitions so, in December 1915, the Rent Restrictions Act was rushed through, preventing further rent increases in munitions districts and also establishing rent levels at pre-war levels for the duration of the hostilities.

Her rent strike activism made Mary Barbour a working-class heroine and also whetted her appetite for further political involvement. In June 1916, with Helen Crawford and Agnes Dollan, she was instrumental in founding the Women's Peace Crusade in Glasgow – which organised anti-war demonstrations and brought together working-class women from all over Scotland, who were concerned about the effect of the war on families, homes and jobs – and was a regular speaker at its many rallies on Glasgow Green.

She stood as one of three candidates for the Fairfield ward of Govan in 1920 and was elected to Glasgow Council as its first woman Labour councillor. The causes she espoused were always those which would help alleviate the hardships faced by working-class women

– she campaigned on issues such as better housing, free milk for schoolchildren, pensions for mothers, child welfare centres, council provision of labour-saving devices for housewives, the abolition of back-court wash-houses (which created a smoke nuisance in tenement blocks) and the provision of public wash-houses and baths, and the establishment of play areas for children.

In 1925, she became chair of the Women's Welfare and Advisory Clinic, Glasgow's first family planning centre, and she worked tirelessly to raise funds to support its team of doctors and nurses. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the introduction of health visitors – the famous 'green ladies' – and, even after retiring from the council in 1931, Mary remained involved in campaigning for fair rents and also organised seaside outings for the children of poor families.

'Granny Barbour', as she became known, was the guest speaker at the inaugural meeting in Glasgow in 1953 of the Scottish National Assembly of Women. She died in April 1958 and is remembered for the outstanding contribution she made as one of the pioneering Labour leaders on Clydeside and as the champion of countless numbers of working class Scotswomen and their families.

Last days of a poet

Catherine Czerkawska on the dying of Robert Burns

2009

At Brow Well on the Solway, you walk to the very edge of the land and almost tumble into a mass of thrift, clumps of pink flowers fringing the shore, like some wild garden. They face the sea, looking outwards and when the wind blows through them, they tremble with a dry, feathery sound.

At all times of the year, the wind blows unhindered across these mudflats. There is nothing to stop it, down here, on the Solway. And the sky is dazzling: high and bright with the malicious glitter of a sun half-hidden behind clouds. It is a place of endings, of dizzying infinities. A place where long horizontals constantly carry the eye outwards and beyond. Where these same long horizontals dull the urge to fly.

In June, when the thrift is still in bloom, it is as restful as it will ever be. There are wild roses in the hedgerows, white, pale and dark pink. There is a froth of bramble flowers with the promise of fruit to come. Oystercatchers and peewits patrol the mud. There are whaups bubbling in the peaty wastes. And you can hear the laverock, climbing higher and higher, to the very edges of sound and tumbling through the skies in an ecstasy of movement. Down there, in front of you, a burn meanders through the mud, freshwater meeting salt, while beyond that again is more mud and silver water, cloud shadows and the misty hills of another country. But it is still the loneliest sight you will ever see.

On the third of July in the year 1796, Robert Burns left his home in Dumfries and travelled to Brow Well on the Solway. It was, essentially, a poor man's spa. There was a chalybeate or mineral spring with a stone tank built to house it and not much else. One Doctor Maxwell had diagnosed a wholly fictional malady called Flying Gout, and advised him to drink the waters in an effort to alleviate his symptoms. He was thin, he was weak, he could barely eat and he was in constant pain. He stayed in a cottage close by. He ate a little thin porridge, and drank some porter with milk in it. When the porter bottle was empty, he told his landlady that the 'muckle black deil' had got into his wallet, and asked her if she would accept his personal seal as payment but she refused it and brought him the porter anyway.

In July, the thrift would have been dying. As well as instructing him to drink the foul tasting waters, the doctors had recommended that Robert should try seabathing. They were only following the fashion of the time. In the south of England, there would have been snug bathing machines and separate beaches for men and women to indulge in the novelty of saltwater against skin. One month's bathing in January was thought to be more efficacious than six months in summer. But perhaps there was a sense of urgency in the poet's case. No time to wait for winter.

He was, no doubt, in that state of desperation where you will try anything. He would have gone struggling and staggering and wading into the sea, half a mile every day, far enough for the water to reach up to his waist, because that's what the doctors had advised. Did they know how shallow these waters were? How far he would have to walk? How bitter the struggle for desperate mind over failing flesh? His landlady would have gone flounder trampling when she was a lassie, kilting her skirts up and wading out into the firth, feeling for the fishes with her toes. Did he feel the Solway flounders slithering away beneath his unsteady feet? It was his last chance of a cure and he was full of fear. Fear for his wife who was heavily pregnant. Fear of debt. Fear of death.

Nearby is the village of Ruthwell. In the church, there is an Anglo Saxon cross. It is so tall that the floor has been dug out to make room for it. Because it was judged an idolatrous monument with its intricate carving, its runic inscriptions, which must have seemed suspiciously pagan, it was smashed into pieces on the orders of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. That was in 1664, but it lay where it fell for many years and the good folk of Ruthwell used the stone blocks as benches to sit upon, while they yawned their way through interminable sermons. They had to destroy it where it stood, because the cross was there long before the kirk, which was built around it, an irony which seems to have been lost on these stone killers, as they were sometimes called. They would light fires beneath the stone and pour cold water on the cracks until they split apart.

Later, the pieces were removed into the churchyard, which was where the poet may have seen them. In 1818, one Henry Duncan gathered the fragments together and restored the whole. The runes are a quotation from a powerful Anglo Saxon poem called *The Dream of the Rood*. It is a poem in two voices: the dreamer who relates his dream and the voice of the cross itself, telling how he – or perhaps she, for there is a certain sexual element in the poem – was cut down in the forest, how the young hero was sacrificed, struggling in blood and pain upon the body of the tree, both of them victims of a savage betrayal. *Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning.* A cross I was raised. I lifted the mighty king on high. The poet's voice calls to us down the years but only if we are willing to listen.

The seawater would have done some good only in that it numbed the pain. In July at Brow Well on the Solway, you can still hear how the laverocks climb to the very edges of sound while at his feet there would be the silvery meander of a burn. It would have been his last chance.

He had been a week at the saltwater and had secret fears that this business would be dangerous if not fatal. No flesh or fish could he swallow. Porridge and milk and porter were the only things he could taste. And how could he attempt horseriding, which the doctors had also ordered, when he could not so much as drag himself up into the saddle?

'God help my wife and children if I am taken from their head with Jean eight months gone', he wrote. He sent letters to his father-in-law, Adam Armour, begging him to let Jean's mother come to Dumfries, but there was only silence from Mauchline. His correspondence reeks of desperation.

From the middle of the month, the tides were unsuitable for bathing, so he went home, borrowing a gig from a farmer named John Clark, in Locharwoods. When he got back to Dumfries, he was too weak to walk up the Mill Vennel, let alone climb the stairs to his bed.

Poor Burns had almost run his course. Still, he must struggle with the stream, till some chopping squall overset the silly vessel at last. Love swells like the Solway but ebbs like the tide. Life too. And all the sweet waters flowing by, the bonnie banks and green braes, all the soft flesh, pressed close, all these things come only to love. The greatest of these is love.

It is not hard to see these things, here at Brow Well, on the Solway. He walks to the sea, and comes to the edge of the land and almost falls into a great mass of thrift, clumps of pink, fringing the shore like some wild garden. But it is already dying. You can picture him. You can see him in your mind's eye, as he goes struggling and staggering and wading through the water. It is July. The wind blows unhindered across the mudflats. And the sky is dazzling: high and bright with the malicious glitter of a sun half hidden behind clouds.

You come to the edge of the land. The thrift fringes the shore like some wild garden. But it is already fading to brown. When the wind blows through the flowers, they tremble, with a dry, feathery sound. You walk to the sea and there are laverocks singing. Who knows where sky ends and sea begins or where sea dissolves into sand?

This is a place of endings, a place of infinities. The birds are so high you can hardly hear them. They climb to the very edges of sound. Like his words in her mouth, his Jean, like his songs on her lips. And at his feet the silvery meander of a burn. He, who always sang of rivers and streams, is coming, at last, to the sea.

Then we sever

Barbara Millar on Agnes McLehose ('Clarinda')

2009

The 25th of January may have passed, but 2009 also marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns' most celebrated muse – Clarinda – perhaps the only woman he loved but never bedded.

Agnes Craig was born in Glasgow on 20 April 1759 (although some have suggested she may have been born in 1758 but knocked a year off her age, to appear younger than Burns). Her father was Andrew Craig, son of a Glasgow merchant, who had been elected to the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow in 1745 and, in 1746, was made town surgeon on a salary of £10 a year, supplemented by lucrative private patients. Craig and his wife lived in the Saltmarket. Agnes was their fifth child and, with her sister Margaret, the only ones to survive infancy. Agnes was also the great-niece of celebrated Scottish mathematician Colin MacLaurin (who until recently held the record as the world's youngest professor).

Andrew Craig was the uncle of William Craig, rector of Glasgow University from 1801-1803, who later became an advocate and then was raised to the Court of Session in 1792, with the title Lord Craig. He became an important benefactor to Agnes after the death of her father in 1782. Lord Craig was the son of the Reverend William Craig, minister of St Andrews in the Square in Glasgow, where Agnes was married on 1 July 1776, at the tender age of 17 years.

Her father had vehemently opposed the match with James McLehose, a Glasgow law agent, often described as 'dissolute', 'drunken', 'a wastrel' and 'brutish', and forbade the young man to enter his house. But McLehose determined to pursue Agnes and, on one occasion, when he knew Agnes would be travelling from Glasgow to Edinburgh, bought up all the other seats in the coach, so that he would be her sole travelling companion.

In the end, her father did give her away in marriage and she had four children by McLehose in four years, one of the babies dying in infancy. In 1780, terrorised by a turbulent, violent marriage during which she was regularly beaten, Agnes fled to her father's home while McLehose set sail for Jamaica, although the couple never divorced. Two years later, her father, who had been in ill health for some time, died, leaving Agnes with the rents on some property in Glasgow, which were sold to provide her with an annuity, and £50 in the bank. Craig stipulated in his will that none of his effects should ever come into the hands of James McLehose.

Agnes McLehose, often also known by the diminutive 'Nancy', moved to Edinburgh to 'a desolate-looking court of ancient buildings' in Potterrow, in the Old Town. The court was known as the General's Entry and it was claimed the accommodation had once been

assigned to General Monk, while commanding in Scotland, though there was little evidence to support this. The buildings were erected by James Dalrymple, afterwards the first Earl of Stair, and Monk was a frequent visitor to his friend – which may have been how the rumour that Monk lived there began. Nancy moved in to 'a little parlour, bedroom and kitchen' in the court, living on her annuity which was supplemented, from time to time, by gifts from her cousin, Lord Craig.

On 4 December 1787, Nancy met Robert Burns at a tea party in the house of Miss Erskine Nimmo in Alison Square, Edinburgh. Nancy had been urging Miss Nimmo to effect an introduction to the celebrated young poet for some time as a letter to Burns after the tea party reveals: 'Miss Nimmo can tell you how earnestly I had long impressed her to make us acquainted. I had a presentiment that we should derive pleasure from the company of each other'.

Burns and Nancy were instantly attracted to each other and Nancy went home and penned a note, inviting him to tea the following week. He was unable to make that day but offered to come two days later. However, in the intervening period, the actions of a drunken coachman caused Burns to fall from a coach and sustain 'a good, serious, agonising, damn'd, hard knock on the knee'. His doctor would not allow him to move, he was confined to his lodging. Thus began his correspondence with Nancy.

'I can say with truth, Madam, that I never met with a person in my life whom I more anxiously wished to meet again than yourself… I know not how to account for it.' Nancy replied in kind: 'I perfectly comprehend…'

She then sent him some of her verse, which he praised as: 'poetry, and good poetry', and at Christmas they exchanged further poems. By this time they had decided to give themselves pseudonyms – she was 'Clarinda', Burns 'Sylvander' – but the correspondence was taking an amorous turn, which Nancy could ill-afford to indulge. Her Calvinistic spiritual adviser, Rev John Kemp of the Tolbooth Kirk, and her benefactor, Lord Craig, would scarcely have approved of a married woman exchanging flirtatious missives and she urged Burns: 'I entreat you not to mention our corresponding to anyone on earth. Though I've conscious innocence, my situation is a delicate one'.

On 5 January 1788, Burns was able to visit Nancy in a sedan chair. There followed a further five visits during the month. After his visit on 12 January, she wrote: 'I will not deny it, Sylvander, last night was one of the most exquisite I ever experienced. Few such fall to the lot of mortals! Few, extremely few, are formed to relish such refined enjoyment. But though our enjoyment did not lead beyond the limits of virtue, yet today's reflections have not been altogether unmixed with regret'. Burns reassured her: 'I would not purchase the dearest gratification on earth, if it must be at your expense in worldly censure; far less, inward peace'.

She clearly was uncomfortable following further meetings, writing: 'I am neither well nor happy. My heart reproaches me of last night. If you wish Clarinda to regain her peace, determine against everything but what the strictest delicacy warrants'. 'Clarinda, my life,

you have wounded my soul', responded Burns and, shortly afterwards, the relationship began to decline.

Burns had an affair with a servant girl (possibly Nancy's own servant) Jenny Clow, who later bore him a son. Just before he left Edinburgh in February 1788, heading via Glasgow, Paisley and Kilmarnock, to Mossgiel and, ultimately, a marriage to the patient Jean Armour, there was a further exchange of letters between the two, with Burns apologising for the 'injury' Sylvander had caused Clarinda's reputation.

They corresponded a little during 1790 and met, for the last time, in Edinburgh on 6 December 1791. On 27 December, Burns sent Nancy the bittersweet love poem *Ae Fond Kiss*. The next month, she boarded a ship for Jamaica, to attempt a reconciliation with her husband, only to discover that he had replaced her with a mistress who had borne him a daughter. She returned to Scotland three months later and, although a few friendly letters were exchanged with Burns, his passion for her was extinguished. His final letter was sent on 25 June 1794.

Thirty five years later, on the anniversary of his death, Nancy wrote in her diary: 'This day I can never forget. Parted with Burns in the year 1791, never more to meet in this world. Oh, may we meet in Heaven!' Nancy McLehose died in 1841, aged 82 years. Her correspondence with Burns – some 80 letters between Sylvander and Clarinda – were valued at £25 at her death. She was buried in the Canongate Kirkyard in Edinburgh, where a celebrated bronze sculpture to her 'voluptuous loveliness' stands against the eastern wall.

My political hero

Alf Young on Michael Foot

2010

Michael Foot was a political lodestar of my youth. In the 60s, I marvelled at his oratory at CND rallies. A decade later, when I got to know him a little, I was in awe of his infectious love of learning, his way with words and the simple human decencies which marked his conduct towards others. I had put behind me a background in science and a career in education in search of a more personally fulfilling path through life. Already in my 30s, I decided to dabble in the backrooms of politics, taking a badly paid job as a researcher for the Labour Party in Scotland.

When I first heard yesterday that Michael was dead at 96, my mind flew back to that time, to the first days of April 1978, and a fraught Westminster by-election, already under way in the north-west Glasgow seat of Garscadden. Party machines were pretty ramshackle vehicles back then. When the sitting MP, Willie Small, died, I was despatched to the constituency to help run the party's campaign.

Centred on the sprawling Drumchapel housing estate, Garscadden was safe Labour territory with a majority of more than 7,000. However, the Callaghan Government was increasingly unpopular. The IMF had been through the UK's books and found them wanting. The Winter of Discontent loomed. Margaret Thatcher's years in power lay just beyond. Even in its heartlands, Labour was, as now, struggling to retain its grip on power.

And across Scotland the SNP was on a powerful surge. The party of Donald Stewart and Winnie Ewing had captured 11 Commons seats in the previous General Election. All six council seats in Garscadden were already held by nationalists. Our candidate in this by-election, my dear friend Donald Dewar, faced the fight of his life if he was to get back into parliament.

Michael Foot had come north to address a big Labour rally in the constituency. One of my jobs was to drive him around. He was then the age I am now, eligible to draw the state pension. But there, sitting in the front passenger seat of my battered Ford Escort, was 'a good man fallen among politicians', as someone once dubbed him, who would never be stilled as long as his convictions burned bright within him. Here surely was a mentor for what I should do next with my own life.

The hours I spent with him turned out to be a bittersweet experience for me. I have no doubt to this day that Michael, speaking with all his trademark verve and passion to a packed assembly hall in a local secondary school, helped turn our faltering campaign around. I learned a lesson that endures still – no election is ever in the bag for any party, or down the drain for that matter, until the votes are finally counted. Donald Dewar, despite

telling me on the afternoon of the Garscadden poll, as the snow began to fall, that all was lost, emerged the victor by a margin of 4,552.

But the way Michael Foot was greeted on the steep streets of Kingsridge-Cleddans that night helped persuade me, a year later, to walk away from a life in politics and build a new career in his own first love, journalism. By-elections throw up all sorts of issues and challenges. One of the most intractable in Garscadden was abortion. SPUC, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, didn't put up a candidate in the contest. But it was determined to have its say.

We arranged a private meeting for its representatives with Michael, then leader of the House of Commons, in a local party member's flat. It lasted more than two hours. Michael would not, could not, give them what they wanted, a promise to repeal David Steel's 1967 abortion act. He was, as ever, patient, informed, considerate. The Dumbarton lawyer who led the SPUC delegation had the good grace to accept they had had a fair hearing. When the meeting broke up, I drove Michael to his rally.

We parked in the school playground and had to walk up the street to access the main entrance. Along that pavement stood a long line of primary-age schoolgirls, each in a first communion white dress, each holding a flickering candle. As we passed, each one hissed in his ear 'Murderer, murderer'. I think it was Michael's late wife, the film-maker Jill Craigie, who once observed that he was 'not really cut out for political intrigue'. That night, walking beside him, I felt him physically flinch and flinch again as that orchestrated charge was repeated by each innocent child in turn. We said nothing as we endured the ritual humiliation. But I knew I wasn't cut out for such intrigue either.

I don't where he found the reserves to make the speech he subsequently delivered. But I do know that evening changed my own view of how suited I was to a life in politics. Within a couple of years, I had given up my Labour Party card to concentrate on a new life in journalism. But before that happened, I had one other moment of political epiphany that involved Michael Foot.

In the final, disintegrating phase of the Callaghan Government, the party's Scottish leadership tried to get the Prime Minister to see the wisdom of holding a two-question referendum on constitutional change. One question on a measure of home rule. The second on outright independence. I wrote the paper that proposed the strategy. But before it could be presented to Callaghan in Downing Street, it was leaked to the *Daily Telegraph*. Callaghan was incandescent. He wanted to know who had had the temerity to spin him into such a corner.

The buck was passed around the Cabinet table by Labour's Scottish leadership until it settled with me, the author of the offending paper, but not the source of the leak. Callaghan, at his bullying worst, gave me, a minor party functionary, a roasting. Taking a leaf from Michael's book, I decided to stand my ground, defend my convictions. I told him precisely why his approach to the Scottish question was so misguided, why, without a second question on any devolution referendum, it would all end in tears. As we left the Cabinet

room, Michael came up to me, put his arm round my shoulder and said: 'Well done. It's high time someone had the courage to stand up to him'.

So farewell Michael Foot. You'll never know how much our brief encounters helped shape my own journey through life. We both learned, in our different ways, that there is more to life than politics. Much, much more. Especially when one surveys what masquerades as political choice at the moment of your death.

Father of the nation

Alan Alexander on Donald Dewar

2011

In 1987, I came back to Scotland after over 20 years away. I've been here ever since, a period that coincides, almost, with the '25 years' over which *Who's Who in Scotland* readers have chosen their Greatest Scot. It comes as no surprise that Donald Dewar, whom I knew as a student at Glasgow University in the 60s and with whom I was in touch, one way and another, until he died, should take the top spot. When I came back, I was struck by the extent of his domination of the Scottish political landscape and by the genuine affection in which he was held by people of all parties and of none.

Margaret Thatcher had just won her third General Election; anyone who was even vaguely left of centre was in a state of deep gloom; but in Scotland there was evidence of a political discourse quite different from the free market dogma of Westminster. It was an odd mixture: a feeling that the Thatcher Government was somehow illegitimate in Scotland and an optimism that, eventually, and sooner rather than later, a better way could be devised of governing Scotland within the United Kingdom. That Scotland had its parliament only 12 years later owes more to Donald than to anyone else.

He told me in the early 70s, after he had lost his first Commons seat in Aberdeen in 1970, and had failed to return in 1974, that he thought he might never get back to parliament and front-line politics. He was wrong, and his victory in the Glasgow Garscadden by-election of 1978, in which he strongly argued the case for devolution and against separatist nationalism, was the first credible response to the so-called SNP tide that had given the SNP 11 seats in parliament. It had also given them a salience in Scottish politics that was far from the fringe 'tartan Tory' status that they had dismissively been given by the strongly unionist (and trade unionist) Scottish Labour Party.

Donald knew that they were, electorally, more dangerous than that and that Labour's position in Scotland could be defended only by presenting the people with a clearly Scottish agenda. Perhaps because of his own experience, he took nothing for granted, had enormous respect for the voters and believed that Labour had to deserve to win: all lessons apparently lost on his successors.

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, Donald was the most instantly recognisable figure in Scottish Labour and in Scottish politics more generally. These were not easy years: he had to see off a militant challenge in his Garscadden seat and he had to reconcile various warring factions into which, in the wilderness of opposition, Scottish Labour fragmented.

By the 1990s, devolution had become, in the words of Donald's friend and contemporary John Smith, 'the settled will of the Scottish people' but it still had to be delivered. Both Smith and Tony Blair, well aware of Donald's ability as a politician and power as an

intellectual, moved to broaden his experience and he became first shadow social security secretary and then opposition chief whip. Neither job seemed natural to him. But the speed with which he mastered the notoriously complex and politically dangerous welfare brief, and the skill with which he managed that most difficult club, the parliamentary Labour Party, showed that if he was essentially a Scottish politician, that was by choice rather than because of any failure to perform at UK level.

However, his UK responsibilities meant that the heavy lifting on the road to devolution – Labour's participation in the work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, negotiations with other parties, and keeping on board a party that was not uniformly enthusiastic about devolution – was taken on by George Robertson as shadow Scottish secretary rather than by Donald. No-one was in any doubt, however, that Donald's commitment to and drive towards the creation of the first Scottish Parliament in 300 years informed, influenced and underpinned the process.

When someone decided to bestow the title of 'Father of the Nation', it went not to Robertson but to Donald Dewar. He hated it, people knew he hated it, but the fact that it stuck was further evidence of the affection for him. On the day of the opening of the parliament in 1999, people on the Royal Mile, as he passed by, broke into song: to the tune of the Cuban anthem *Guantanamera*, they sang, 'There's only one Donald Dewar, there's only one Donald Dewar'. It was true, and for me it vies with Sheena Wellington's unaccompanied rendition of *A Man's a Man for a' That* as the enduring memory of the day. (If Donald recognised the tune, he wouldn't have been able to spell it. As a student he wrote an essay about the Risorgimento in which he spelled 'Garibaldi' five different ways, none correct!)

When Donald introduced his Scotland Bill in 1998, he read the first clause, 'There shall be a Scottish Parliament', paused, looked at his audience and beyond to the people of Scotland and said, 'I like that'. It was powerful because it was so uncharacteristic of a man for whom the personalisation of politics was a matter of regret. But it was evidence of a longer, deeper and more nuanced commitment to devolution than one hears in John Smith's more statesmanlike comment quoted above. But Smith had to convince the UK party that devolution was a good idea: Donald had to make it work.

Smith and Dewar had been friends since they met at Glasgow University in the late 50s and they worked very closely in the decades that followed. Smith loved to tell a story from the 1992 General Election of when he and Donald were working the crowd at The Barras in Glasgow. He heard 'a wee Glasgow wifie' say to her pal, 'Aw look! Therr's wee John and Big Thingmy'. Am I wrong to see affection in both descriptions, but rather more in the latter than the former?

Donald was the only Westminster figure of real stature who opted for Holyrood rather than Westminster. His mastery of the new system and its parliament has been rivalled by no other politician, with the possible exception of the now majoritarian Alex Salmond. But his firm, intelligent and committed guiding hand was available for little more than a year.

His death underlined his uniqueness and none of his Labour successors has come anywhere close to following his hard act. Arguably, these successors held firm to his approach until 2007 when they lost office by one seat to a minority SNP. That they were not worthy of his legacy is nowhere clearer than in Scottish Labour's sense of entitlement and their conviction that 2007 was an aberration that would be put right next time. Donald would never have been so complacent nor so cavalier.

In 1997, not long after Donald became Secretary of State for Scotland, I went to Glasgow Airport to meet my wife (then Scottish director of a major UK public body with a clear interest in the nature of the devolution settlement). She greeted me briefly but she had seen Donald on the plane and went off to lobby him. I waited half an hour. She emerged with Donald at her side. He was carrying two enormous briefcases, each brimming over with papers and both obviously quite heavy. He handed one to me and said: 'Good to see you, Alan. Carry that. Think of it as a service to your country'.

Typical of the man: friendly, open, self-deprecating and witty, but with a clear undercurrent of serious purpose. I've tried to think of anyone who could come close as the Greatest Scot of the last 25 years, but I can't. And that is amazing, and a little depressing, because he was alive for only 15 of them.

The strange background of Margo MacDonald

Kenneth Roy

2014

Long ago (February 1990), when Margo MacDonald languished in the political wilderness, Kenneth Roy met her for dinner one evening. This is an account of their conversation, written at the time.

After observing a succession of dismayingly young executives desert the Cowcaddens studios of Scottish Television in Glasgow around six in the evening, it was a relief to be confronted in reception by a middle-aged career woman borne down by bulging shopping bags and pot plants.

'Apricot hyacinths,' explained Margo MacDonald.

'What's in the bags?'

'The messages, of course.'

I took the messages, Margo held fast to the apricot hyacinths, and we trudged off to her favourite Italian restaurant. She had been in London presenting a BBC television programme. 'I was standing in for Anna Ford,' she said. 'They must have been looking for someone bearing a close physical resemblance.'

It was turning into a tough week. Her flat had just been burgled, and now here was a producer stopping us in the street with eager tidings of the party conference season and a reminder that her services would be required for a ritual wet weekend in Dunoon.

Once the producer was out of the way, I asked her what she thought of party conferences.

'They're neurotic,' replied Scottish Television's political pundit. 'The only one that was ever worth going to was the old Liberal conference. For the home baking.'

The Italian restaurant was empty, though not for long. One young waiter was entrusted with the apricot hyacinths and warned to guard them with his life, another accepted the message bags, a third fetched a bottle of 'very special' Italian wine; meanwhile my companion lit the first of the evening's many cigarettes.

'Tell me about your background.'

'It was quite strange. My parents split up when I was six weeks old, and my mum brought up my brother and sister and myself. She didn't have good health. She had cancer, and three or four heart attacks… a helluva time. But then we went to live in East Kilbride, and that was terrific because there was proper community support.'

'Did you get on with her?'

'We were all proud of her. She was a very considerable woman. She kept the family going, never once gave in. And although she wasn't highly educated, she knew a bit of

Burns, she knew about MacDiarmid before he was fashionable, she had a good appreciation of Scottish music.'

'Is Scotland a matriarchal society?'

'I don't know about that. But our family was full of women. I thought men were useless and weak. I thought that was just their natural condition.'

'Did you ever see your father again?'

'About 30 years later. But do you mind if we don't talk about that?'

Margo Aitken, daughter of Jean, was an exceptionally able child. She was primary dux and won a place at Hamilton Academy, which was then a selective school for the cream of the neighbourhood. She bought the school blazer – a boy's one, almost down to her knees – in a pawn shop.

'It was drummed into us that we were brainy. We were schooled to think of ourselves as an elite. And that made me uneasy, because it was obvious that there was nothing elite about our family. I also knew that my pals at the baths, who were as good at swimming as I was, and whose families were exactly the same as mine, went to junior secondaries. But they weren't God's chosen children. I was one of the lucky ones.'

'Not so much lucky as clever.'

'No. Dead lucky. No more deserving.'

'Creaming worked, though.'

'Aye, it worked! For the people who were creamed! I heard Mrs T [Thatcher] talking the other day about how some poppies naturally grow straight and strong, while others are stunted in their growth. Has it never occurred to her that what the stunted poppies need is a good dose of manure?'

The restaurant was filling up – mostly, it seemed, with employees of Scottish Television – and Margo, the most celebrated of them all, was in fine fettle. 'Aw, Christine!,' she bellowed to a neighbouring table. 'You've got a voice like a foghorn!'

'What did you discover about yourself at Hamilton Academy?'

'That I was competitive. That there were things I wanted to do better than anybody else. I wanted to be the world's best netball player. Do you know what else I wanted to be? The world's best journalist. But my mother had this idea that journalists were men who wore dirty raincoats and felt hats. She also thought it wasn't the most secure job. She knew that if you got into teaching, you'd made it. Not enlightened thinking, but probably very sensible.'

She took her mother's advice and worked briefly as a teacher of physical education. By her early 20s she was married to Peter MacDonald, a former fellow pupil at Hamilton, and had two small children. She was still hoping to make a break into journalism when she became the SNP candidate in the traditional Labour seat of Govan.

'Winning the by-election was a shock and an absolute disaster in career terms. Alex Dickson might have been on the point of offering me a job at Radio Clyde. But in some ways I was glad of the experience. Westminster taught me a lot about power politics – and respect for the strength of the system that I'm opposed to.'

She is no longer a member of the Scottish National Party ('They threw me out, remember?') but in her second marriage to Jim Sillars is presumed to be something of a back-seat driver. True or false? 'Oh, I'll argue with him about SNP tactics and strategy. Sometimes I wouldn't let them run a raffle. But other times, particularly in the last two or three years, I admire them for what they've done.'

'Do you see Jim as a charismatic figure who will lead us to the promised land?'

'I don't know. I only know he's one of the most honest men I've ever met. He has a quality that is absolutely priceless in a politician – he doesn't care what people say or think about him. Sometimes I could stoat his head off the pavement for having that strength. He'll say something in all honesty, and not anticipate how it will be twisted and used against him.'

'Which other politicians do you admire?'

'Usually,' she said with an ironic laugh, 'the ones I admire are the ones who don't get into government. Like Tam Dalyell. He's got the same quality as Jim. Canavan's great, too. But I also have a lot of time for Michael Forsyth'.

'That's a pretty odd choice.'

'Well, I admire him for sticking to his guns. We need idealogues like him. Without them, the benevolent compromisers wouldn't have touchstones, would they?'

After four months in the Commons – she was defeated in the February 1974 General Election – her hopes of a broadcasting career were quickly dashed. BBC Scotland told her she was too closely aligned to the nationalist cause and that she would need to spend a long period in purdah before she would be acceptable as an on-screen face.

Instead, she got a job for which her crusading fervour qualified her – Scottish director of Shelter, the Campaign for the Homeless.

'I once shocked them at Shelter. We were discussing whether there was any such thing as anti-social tenants. To me that didn't need any discussion. Of course there are anti-social tenants. There are folk you don't want to live next door to, because they don't look after the place properly, they don't take their turn on the stairs. My colleagues were quite disgusted with me, I think. But when I asked around the table who'd ever lived in a council house, I was the only one.'

'Did you come from a family who took their turn on the stairs?'

'Oh, yes. My mother was an egalitarian whose ideas of social conduct and behaviour were genteel.'

'Was she religious?'

'She was a Christian woman and taught the Christian ethic.'

'And you?'

'I'm not a church attender, but I am a Christian. I believe in Christ the saviour, I believe in God, I believe in the teachings of Christ.'

'What do they tell you?'

'They tell me to love my neighbour. They teach me consideration of other people's

eccentricities. And since I'm not a naturally humble person, they also teach me a bit of humility.'

'If you're not naturally humble, what are you?'

'Bolshie! Not sure where that comes from. My mother couldn't afford to be bolshie – the wee soul had worked that one out. And I wish I wasn't bolshie either. I'd like to be nice and respectable. Being bolshie consumes so much more energy.'

As a television interviewer, Margo likes the idea of testing every case: telling politicians to prove it. She is still enough of an optimist to believe that journalism is one of the fundamental professions of a healthy democracy.

'What are the others?'

'Natural selection being what it is, some people will live – so we can do without doctors. But we can't do without teachers, so that must be the ultimate profession. We've destroyed a lot by downgrading the importance of education. This theory that you've got to leave school ready-made to be flexible for the post-industrial age – what the hell does that mean? I always thought you were meant to come out of school as a trainee adult.'

'And you would put journalists next to teachers in society's pecking order?'

She no longer seemed convinced. 'Sometimes,' she said. 'In mellow moods.'

'Your mum was worried because it wasn't a secure profession. Do you feel secure?'

'I don't. I'm anti-establishment, and journalism in Scotland is establishment.'

'Are you happy?'

At first she dodged the question by saying that she certainly wasn't complacent. When I pressed her, she replied that she could not be completely happy when she considered the state of Scotland.

'I'm not talking about the state of Scotland. I'm talking about you.'

'Ah, but that's part of me.'

'Surely you don't need an independent Scotland in order to be personally happy.'

'I'm not sure. People all over Europe just now are saying, "We're going to do it the best way for us". But what about the Scots? We're still creeping along. Nothing big or brave ever came out of that. Where's the boldness? Where's the risk?'

Margo MacDonald, MSP, died on 4 April 2014 at the age of 70

The death of a friend

Walter Humes on Malcolm MacKenzie

2014

The Scottish Conservative Party conference took place last week only a few days after the funeral of one of my closest friends. The two events are not as unrelated as they may at first appear. My friend and former colleague, Malcolm MacKenzie, was for many years an active member of the Tory Party but eventually became disenchanted and left.

His political journey provides a stark illustration of where the party has gone wrong and, if analysed intelligently by the Conservative leadership in Scotland, could provide valuable insights into possible ways of recovering lost ground. Whatever the outcome of the referendum and the next elections to the Scottish Parliament, it can only be healthy for democracy to have a right-of-centre party that is able to challenge the soft orthodoxies of the left-wing establishment.

Malcolm MacKenzie was born in 1938 in Clydebank, where his father worked for the Singer company. He often said that although the family was not well off, he was given plenty of 'cultural capital'. By that he meant he was encouraged to read from an early age and soon became a regular at Clydebank public library. He was also taken to musical and theatrical performances and developed a lifelong love of the cinema. The opportunity to hear visiting speakers at the town hall stimulated his interest in politics. At Clydebank High School he did well academically and was school captain in session 1955-56.

His contemporaries at Glasgow University included a number of people who went on to achieve prominence in national politics, most notably two party leaders (John Smith and Menzies Campbell) and the first First Minister of Scotland (Donald Dewar). With Dewar, he won the prestigious Observer Mace debating competition in 1963 and throughout his life his skill in advancing arguments and analysing policy proposals was much in evidence.

Younger readers may be surprised that someone of Malcolm MacKenzie's modest background should have felt his political home was with the Tory party. But in the 1950s, many aspiring working-class people voted Conservative. Indeed, in the 1955 General Election, the Tories gained more than 50% of the vote in Scotland and were a powerful force at local government level.

By 1997, that figure had dropped to 17.5%. It is a serious indictment of the Tory leadership in Scotland that it has never engaged properly with the reasons for that dramatic decline. Scottish revulsion at the policies of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s is certainly a major part of the explanation but the process of growing disillusionment was evident before that.

Malcolm MacKenzie belonged to the liberal wing of the party, believing in a measure of state control on economic matters and adopting a progressive stance on welfare and social

issues. His pragmatic, non-doctrinaire approach meant that he was respected not only within his own party but across the political spectrum. He could easily have gone into national politics himself. As a young man, he attended events designed to prepare Tory activists to stand for parliament and had the opportunity to meet senior figures such as Willie Whitelaw.

However, he opted for teaching and after working in schools and at Jordanhill College, joined the education department at Glasgow University, where he remained for the rest of his career. He was a brilliant teacher, much loved by his students, many of whom went on to occupy key positions. They included Frank Pignatelli, former director of education for Strathclyde region, and Sir David Bell, formerly permanent secretary at the Department of Education in London and now vice-chancellor of Reading University.

Malcolm MacKenzie's keen interest in politics continued while he pursued his academic career. He became a prominent figure within Scotland, at one time serving as vice-chairman of the Scottish Tory Reform Group and writing pamphlets about the strategic direction of the party. Two of these continue to have relevance to current debates about independence: *Scottish Toryism, identity and consciousness* (1988) and *Scottish Toryism and the union* (1989).

What happened to cause him to feel he could no longer remain a member of the party? By the early 1990s his moderate views were out of favour and he began to despair of the hard-line policies advocated by Michael Forsyth and others. I remember him coming back from a party meeting in Edinburgh deeply depressed at the views that were being advanced by ambitious young political aspirants, only too willing to parrot the extreme monetarist policies favoured by the far right.

He regarded them as crude, greedy and lacking in humanity. The party had travelled far from what he remembered as the 'principled' Conservatism of the 1950s. He concluded that it had lost its way and had alienated itself from many of its core supporters of the past. The results of the 1997 General Election, which heralded three successive Labour victories, proved him correct.

As I watched a film clip of Philip Hammond, Tory Defence Secretary, speaking to a half-empty hall at the Scottish party conference last weekend, I wondered what prospects there were of the Scottish Tories at last coming to their senses and beginning to tackle the deep-rooted nature of their problems. The signs are not good. They await the report of a commission led by Lord Strathclyde on ways of strengthening the devolution settlement and improving the accountability of the Scottish Parliament. This is too little, too late. The other parties have been making all the running in the debate about the referendum and its aftermath.

When Murdo Fraser was contesting the leadership with Ruth Davidson in 2011, he put forward the proposal that the Scottish party needed to establish its own identity, quite separate from the UK Conservatives. His argument was essentially that the Tory brand had become toxic in Scotland and that it needed to dissociate itself from the public

school/Oxbridge elite south of the border. It was a bold move that almost certainly contributed to his defeat. The party needs to revisit that issue.

Senior Scottish Tories should ask themselves how they are regarded by outsiders. Are they perceived as anything more than a refuge for 'mature' voters who simply reinforce each other's prejudices, as a rallying point for the largely discredited Scottish gentry, and as a networking opportunity for lawyers and business types hoping for personal advancement?

How can the party win back the Malcolm MacKenzies of this world – people who believe that hard work should be rewarded, but who manage to combine this with a social conscience and a commitment to the good society? Until Scottish Tories engage in this kind of frank self-examination, they will continue to exist only on the margins of Scottish political life.

A Hebridean bohemian in Rose Street

Iain Smith on Hector MacIver

2014

Hector MacIver was born in the Outer Hebrides in 1910 and died in Edinburgh in 1966. He had a reputation that is chronicled in the festschrift *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland* (Editor: Karl Miller, and recently republished by Faber).

Hector's claim to fame is a slightly curious one. He was a friend and confidant (and drinking companion) of – among others – Hugh MacDiarmid, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice, and Sydney Goodsir Smith. One price for their acquaintance, given that much of it was spent in the Café Royal in Edinburgh, was just possibly the liver cancer that killed him at a comparatively early age. Drinking with Dylan Thomas was never a particularly healthy activity.

His ex-pupil, Miller, wrote in the introduction to *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland* that it was:

> *Published in the honour of Hector MacIver… He was a writer, a broadcaster, a talker, a speaker, and he produced plays. He was a gifted man and a gifted friend… He was not famous in the usual sense, but he made contributions to more than one of the fields under discussion and he did have a kind of fame. It went by word of mouth and seldom reached the newspapers; it was as oral as the world of his origins.*

Hector was brought up in the village of Shawbost. His father was a merchant; and his mother a teacher. The family were affluent by the standards of the village. They lived in a slated 'white' house, at a time when most of the village houses were thatched 'black' houses. His house was full of books when most houses had none.

Hector's picture of his childhood village describes features that, even then, would have seemed inconceivable in lowland Scotland; and are now, for the most part, long gone, even in Shawbost. The thatched black houses with the fire in the middle of the floor and in winter the cattle at one end of the house had vanished by the end of the 1950s: a retrograde step for those of a romantic mind, a huge step forward for those more concerned with domestic comfort and infant mortality.

The Viking-descended water-driven mill for the oats and the barley had fallen into disuse long before the 20th century was half old; the cultivation of the oats and the barley which lasted well into the 1970s has now vanished; the digging of the native peat for fuel survives, but at a rate a fraction of what it was a century ago. The monolingual English infant teacher with the monolingual Gaelic infant class has gone, at least in that stark form: not least because there are very few monolingual Gaelic children entering school.

Only Hector's description of the treacherous Atlantic and of the winter storms powering

themselves in from the ocean would be as true today as it was almost a century ago.

His account of boys stealing turnips from the crofts would have still been applied some 40 years later in the village where I was brought up; as would the New Year theft of carts and other agricultural implements which, in the name of celebrations, were dumped in the village pond. Today, these customs are dead. The boisterous Hebridean village lads of today, even if they are so minded, have no access to turnips or to carts: they are reduced to the primitive joys of the iPod and the MP3 player.

MacIver records that he went to Edinburgh University to study English, British history, moral philosophy and fine art. There he met Norman MacCaig, Sydney Goodsir Smith and Sorley MacLean, later the finest Gaelic poet of his age.

On graduation, Hector trained as a teacher; and, as with so many Scottish teachers of the 1930s, initially found employment hard to come by. This appears to have been a spur to start a significant amount of broadcasting and print journalism. He records that it was through broadcasting he met Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas, both of whom became significant figures in his life.

A 1930s literary critic wrote of a 1934 Scottish publication which included essays by Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn and Eric Linklater:

> *One of the best essays was Hector MacIver's piece on the Outer Isles. It seemed to me full of exciting promise and I took it for granted that we should see much more of his writing.*

And a source of the time quotes an extract:

> *In all the Hebrides, Benbecula is the sea's dearest child. That is why the returning tide races so quickly over the sand, hurrying with pouted lips to kiss its shore. And when the night's embraces are over, the sea leaves Benbecula again, like a mother bird going to forage for its young.*

By the late 1930s, MacIver had obtained a teaching job at the prestigious Royal High School. But he had also become even more set in the activity for which he became most famous (or notorious). In an autobiographical essay, he wrote:

> *How the walls of the Abbotsford or the Café Royal or Milne's Bar echoed to the talk at this time, on the state of Scotland, as Chris [Hugh MacDiarmid] and Sydney [Goodsir Smith] and I set the Celtic world to rights. Clouds of blue smoke, gallons of beer and whisky, witty talk heart to heart, narrowness and prejudice flew out of the Abbot door.*

(Never having explored any of these hostelries, I dropped into one some time ago – purely for research purposes. I ordered a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and six oysters, and admired

the stunning internal design. A waitress said to me: 'You like this place?' I said: 'Yes: the service is good, the wine is excellent, the architecture is interesting, the oysters are fine; and I believe that some famous figures have been in here'. She looked at me and said: 'Yes, sir: five years ago Sting was here'.)

Hector had gifts other than teaching and writing and talking. In a pub on Rose Street, while no Sting, he one night showed another of his talents. The musicologist Ronald Stevenson subsequently wrote:

> *Within a few minutes of our meeting, we had got on to Scottish music and soon he was singing – I remember his pleasant baritone – songs from his native Isle of Lewis. And very unusual songs: they were no 'sangs o' the cratur' but strangely serene psalm songs sung in the Gaelic, with no less than 10, and sometimes more than a dozen, notes to each syllable. Such long-linked melismas I had never heard in any other vocal music.*

This may be a slight over-exaggeration: melismas, some very extended, are found in Gregorian chant.

A piece about author and poet Louis MacNeice tells us in an aside something of Hector's literary activity (most of which is now lost):

> *MacIver had published on the iniquities of landlordism, the failures of the herring industry, subsidy and the dole, and the collapse of Lord Leverhulme's attempt to set up manufacturing industry on Lewis.*

Hector's friendship led to MacNeice visiting Lewis and staying with Hector's family in Shawbost. This proved a somewhat traumatic event for all concerned:

> *Louis had stayed with my family and me at An Gearraidh Buidhe and was supposed to be travelling with his wife. Actually he was not married!… More than 20 years after, my family still became virulent when discussing the 'immorality' of his visit.*

A later writer puts it more bluntly:

> *My English teacher, Hector MacIver, was his friend, the dedicatee of I Crossed the Minch which in 1938 launched the ribaldries of the poem Bagpipe Music while recording, though rather discreetly, how MacNeice ran off with the wife of the painter William Coldstream and had liberating sex with her in the black Calvinist houses of the Western Isles at the pit of the 1930s slump: surely deserving a Nobel Prize for libertinism.*

The book includes the much renowned *Bagpipe Music*:

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

One has to search a little to find what effect Hector MacIver had on *I Crossed the Minch* other than being a genial host. But one critic picks out where there is clear evidence of MacNeice and MacIver collaborating in an analysis of the difference between a dance in Shawbost, part of the 'Celtic timelessness' as they saw it, and a concert in the town of Stornoway – where the dancers were 'becoming objectified, alienated products of the music industry.'

Or, as MacNeice himself put it in *I Crossed the Minch* '…one could thank God that one was not a citizen of Stornoway… European man at his worst'. The point that MacIver and MacNeice seemed to be making was that the entertainment in Shawbost was an indigenous local product; the culture of Stornoway they saw as an importation.

One 21st-century Hebridean critic has written to me:

MacNeice's view of Stornoway. What did he expect? For centuries the town has been the antithesis of rural Lewis: anti-Gaelic, weak in religious faith, hedonistic, eager to adopt imported behavioural trends (e g cinema-going, flapper attire in the late 20s, complex female hairstyles). Cailleachs [old ladies] from distant townships would actually stop to stare at the latest outlandish fashions among the gilded urban youth.

How much Hector appreciated MacNeice's book is sadly unrecorded. This would have been interesting to know, not least because of what is said by one reviewer (in 2007) on the book's re-publication:

MacNeice moans about the Island people, the drab landscape, 'the monotony of heather,' the food… He gropes his way over the islands with his eyes and ears closed. The only conversations he records are with people of standing; the editor of the Stornoway Gazette, which was produced in English, schoolteachers or his middle-class friends... The locals he mentions only in passing as a means of providing him hospitality which he appears to accept as his right. The Gaelic language he holds up as a barrier to local conversation.

Between one thing and another, one can understand why the book was as poorly received in Stornoway as it was in the MacIver home in Shawbost.

Matters, fags and booze

Barbara Millar on Gavin Maxwell

2014

The title of his most successful book was taken from a line of her poetry. 'He has married me with a ring, a ring of bright water, whose ripples travel from the heart of the sea.' But the tumultuous and passionate relationship between author and naturalist Gavin Maxwell and celebrated poet Kathleen Raine was never consummated, yet only ended with his premature death.

Maxwell was born 100 years ago, in July 1914. His father, Lieutenant-Colonel Aymer Maxwell was killed in the First World War, when his youngest son was only three months old. Brought up by his aristocratic mother, Lady Mary Percy, a daughter of the 7th Duke of Northumberland, Maxwell's early years were spent in a small village in Wigtownshire, where he rapidly developed a love of nature and animals. When he was young, however, he was also schooled in the usual aristocratic pursuits of game shooting and he was such a good shot he was much in demand at pheasant shoots. His party trick was to throw a weighted packet of cigarettes into the air and shoot it with a revolver before it hit the ground.

So, when the Second World War broke out, he was a natural choice as a small arms instructor with the Special Operations Executive. He had been due to be parachuted into France to help the Resistance, but he broke his ankle on the compulsory static jump onto a concrete gymnasium floor and was not allowed to go to France, in case the same thing happened again. It was perhaps as well – one Army officer had already labelled him as 'a creative psychopath'.

At the end of the war, Maxwell took flying lessons but, according to his nephew, Sir Michael Maxwell, he ran out of instructors willing to fly with him. Both his grandfathers had owned newspapers so he decided to enrol on a postal course in journalism, which he never completed, before trying to make a living, with limited success, as a portrait painter.

He then purchased the Isle of Soay, in the Inner Hebrides, with the intention of establishing a basking shark fishery. He built a processing plant, and bought several harpooning boats, with varying degrees of unseaworthiness. But the project never really got off the ground although it led to his first book – *Harpoon at a Venture* – published in 1952 to critical acclaim, and selling reasonably well.

Maxwell has been described by his friend and fellow naturalist Sir John Lister-Kaye, as 'impractical', with 'a lifelong inclination to follow his wildly romantic instincts'. He had always been interested in the story of a distant aunt who had married a Sicilian nobleman in the early 19th century and, in pursuing this story, he became fascinated by Mafia corruption and ended up writing *God Protect Me From My Friends*, which helped to further establish his literary reputation.

But it was a trip to the marshlands of southern Iraq in 1956 with explorer Wilfred Thesiger which was to change his life. On the trip he was given an orphaned otter, which died. Maxwell was so distressed that he sought out another, which he named Mijbil. And, when he left Iraq, Mij came too. Initially, they lived in Chelsea, where Maxwell would take Mij for a walk on a leash along the King's Road. Mij soon developed a reputation for biting people, however, so Maxwell brought his charge to Sandaig, his remote Highland cottage on the coast near the village of Glenelg in Lochalsh, close to Skye.

His trip to Iraq had resulted in the book *People of the Reeds*, which the *New York Times* lauded as 'near perfect'. But real popular acclaim arrived with his first 'otter book', *Ring of Bright Water*, published in 1960, and followed by a sequel *The Rocks Remain* in 1963. By this time, Mij had been joined by other otters – Edal, Teko, Mossy and Monday – and Maxwell was in his element, playing with his companions on the shores of the Sound of Sleat.

By now Maxwell was involved in his passionate, yet platonic, relationship with Raine, one of post-war Britain's most celebrated poets, whose attention he seemed to both crave and to resent. Much of her poetry, she said, was inspired by her deep love for Maxwell, and while it gave him the title of his book, he claimed it also exposed him unfairly to public scrutiny.

Maxwell was homosexual, although he did go through with a brief marriage to Lavinia Renton, daughter of Viscount Chelmsford and, it is noted, enjoyed a 'brief dalliance' with Princess Margaret. But Raine's advances drove him to despair. Only once did they share a bed, without any sexual contact. 'Every night of my life since then, I have spent alone,' Raine later declared.

After a particularly bitter row at Sandaig, Raine fled into the garden, clutched at a rowan tree – a magical tree in European folklore and mythology – and, weeping uncontrollably, cried out: 'Let Gavin suffer in this place, as I am suffering now'. Maxwell took this to be a curse and later blamed her for the terrible sequence of events that followed.

One day, while Raine was out for a walk with Mij, she lost the otter and the creature was later found dead, clubbed to death by a road worker. 'Mij meant more to me than most human beings of my acquaintance,' mourned the inconsolable Maxwell. Then, in 1968, a fire ripped through Sandaig, which was uninsured. The fire, which consumed his home and everything in it, also killed another otter, Edal. 'Whether your curse has been responsible for this terrible disaster I don't know,' Maxwell wrote to Raine. 'If it has, I can only say God forgive you.'

Maxwell's final home was Eilean Ban, the lighthouse island and its scattering of rocky outcrops between the Skye village of Kyleakin and Kyle of Lochalsh on the mainland. His plans for Eilean Ban were characteristically ambitious, impractical and vague. He intended to create a small menagerie of wildlife around his last otter, Teko, and to open it to the public, ferrying them back and forth in a small launch. He already had a gannet, two foxes, a tawny owl and some feral goats, as well as Teko, and he had also been commissioned to write a popular handbook on British mammals.

But, by this time, Maxwell was suffering the ravages of a lifelong 80-a-day cigarette habit, which were regularly accompanied by a bottle of whisky. Not long before his third book on otters, *Raven Seek Thy Brothe*r, was published in 1968, Maxwell was diagnosed with lung cancer, and he died in September 1969, aged 55. His ashes were buried on the site of his Sandaig home, where Edal had perished, and the spot was subsequently marked with a rock and a bronze plaque.

Raine outlived him by 34 years, dying at the age of 95 in 2003. She wrote about Maxwell. 'I had not been looking for a lover, nor, indeed, was Gavin ever to be my lover. Had he wished to have been, I would have been happy. And what drew me to him was nothing bodily, but rather the radiance his presence had for me always. What was between us was something else altogether – more to do with poetry than with any personal fulfilment'.

A thrawn hero of our time

Bob Cant on Sydney Silverman

2014

Thrawn is a great Scots word. It translates as a bit more than stubborn; there is an essential non-verbal aspect to it that can best be explained as keeping-yir-heid-doon-in-the-face-of-a-howling-gale-with-nae-laughing. Scots are good at thrawn-ness to such an extent that I cannot recall hearing a non-Scot described as thrawn. In these globally-conscious times, there is surely a place for taking a more inclusive approach to understanding thrawn.

If there was a Thrawn Award, one non-Scot who should definitely be considered for it would be Sydney Silverman, the architect of the 1965 law that abolished capital punishment in the UK. This was never going to be a law that won popularity contests; five years after abolition, 80% still favoured the death penalty; it is only this year that the percentage supporting the re-introduction of capital punishment has fallen below 50% (to 45%).

I take the view that it is not the duty of any state to kill people (outside the context of warfare). It is one of the requirements for countries seeking membership of the European Union that they abolish capital punishment. I remember miscarriages of justice where people such as Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans were hanged for murders they did not commit. Had capital punishment been available in the 1970s, there is no question that the wrongly convicted people whom we know as the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four would have been hanged. I can be quite thrawn when it comes to consideration of the death penalty.

Sydney Silverman was born into an impoverished Jewish family in Liverpool in 1895 and won a series of scholarships that paid for his education up to university level. When the First World War broke out, he expressed his horror at the idea of working-class people from one country killing working-class people from another country. He registered as a conscientious objector and served several prison sentences during the course of the war.

He never forgot where he had come from and, as a solicitor, he won the reputation of a being a staunch defender of working-class people in disputes with their employers or their landlords. He became Labour MP for Nelson and Colne in 1935 and proved to be a strong and popular advocate for his constituents over the next 33 years.

He was very involved in the opposition to the British Union of Fascists but it was only when he realised what was happening to the Jewish population in Germany that he began to support the idea of war against Nazism. He was never an ideological Zionist but he visited Buchenwald at the end of the war and became convinced of the need for a homeland for displaced European Jews. He supported open access to Palestine for all stateless Jews and disagreed vigorously on this with the Labour Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin.

He might have expected to become a minister in 1945, having been a hard-working

backbencher over a 10-year period. The fact that he wasn't may have been due to antisemitism; or it may have been due to his reputation, in Richard Crossman's words, as 'vain, difficult and uncooperative'.

Whatever the reason, he was able, without ministerial responsibility, to devote much of his considerable energy towards single issue campaigns such as the National Council for the Abolition of Capital Punishment (NCACP) and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). He succeeded in pushing a bill to abolish capital punishment through the House of Commons in 1948, but when it was defeated in the Lords, he knew that he was in for a long haul.

As part of his campaign to inform the public, he published a book entitled *Hanged and Innocent* in 1953. In 1956, he succeeded in persuading parliament to limit the types of murder for which people could be hanged. But the compromises involved in that legislation never seemed to convince people that justice was obtained. It was under the terms of this Act that Scotland's last hanging took place; Harry Burnett was hanged at Craiginches Prison on 15 of August 1963. Something like 300 emotionally-challenged Aberdonians turned up to look at a wall, on the other side of which a 21-year-old man with a serious mental illness was legally killed.

An opportunity to abolish the death penalty finally came with the election of a Labour Government in 1964. PM Harold Wilson and several other ministers supported abolition. Yet again, Silverman introduced a private member's bill to abolish capital punishment but on this occasion the backing of the government made all the difference. The bill went through the Commons by 200 votes to 98 and through the Lords by 204 votes to 104. It was agreed that there should be a review after five years but since then no-one has been hanged in the UK.

It is worth reflecting on the remarks made in 1956 by a fellow MP, JPW Mallalieu:

> *Of all the House of Commons personalities, the most irritating is Mr Sydney Silverman. He is a cocky man, who throws his shoulders back as if to swell his chest, and thrusts his now bearded chin outward and upward, as if to give him inches. Indeed, he seems overoccupied with his own shortness. Even his jokes are often outsized, and he follows them with an extravagant cackle, slapping his knee in an ecstasy of delight. But the most irritating thing about him is that, far more often than not, he is proved right. Neither the ability to be right far more often than wrong, nor the ingeniousness and pedantic logic with which he argues his cases, makes friends for Silverman. But his persistence, his courage and sincerity have long ago won him respect.*

The 'passion and tenacity' for which Mallalieu praised him had been evident in his opposition to the First World War, his support for a Jewish homeland and, finally, his opposition to capital punishment. I, for one, am pleased that we live in a country that does

not resort to the death penalty and a great part of that we owe to the persistent campaigning of Sydney Silverman.

I hope that next year there will be proper celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the abolition of the death penalty. His behaviour and his achievements give a good name to thrawn campaigners everywhere.

Karl and Hector

Iain Smith on Karl Miller and Hector MacIver

2014

Karl Miller was born in 1931 in Straiton, Midlothian. As he himself wrote, his parents decided they were disinclined to stay married to each other 'or to me'. An only and lonely child, he was brought up by his maternal grandmother within sight of Edinburgh.

His *Guardian* obituary last month recorded that he won a scholarship to the Royal High School of Edinburgh. The Royal High has belonged for many centuries to Edinburgh City Council and became a co-educational comprehensive school in 1973; in the 1940s it was an icon perched on Calton Hill, a selective, fee-paying, part-residential, albeit municipal, boys' school. Some writers have alleged (probably wrongly) that RHS was the model for the girls' school in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

Karl Miller's debt to his school and to his head of English, Hector MacIver, he acknowledged for the rest of his life. Alan Taylor, in his *Herald* obituary, speculates on the writers who moulded Miller:

> *It was MacIver who left the greatest impression. 'Poetry, for him, was very much a matter of lines, lines to quote, lines to conjure with, and lines to chalk up on the blackboard, lines you could borrow and adapt...' Miller might have [been] referring to himself.*

Many of us remember great teachers of our school days; however not many of us, as Miller did, have signified our debt publicly with a book dedicated to our teacher to which Muriel Spark, Hugh MacDiarmid, Sorley Maclean, George Mackay Brown and William McIlvanney contributed; and which is still in print 40 years later. But then few of us had a teacher who inducted us into journalism by appointing us a joint editor with him of the school magazine; or who introduced us personally to Dylan Thomas, to Norman MacCaig and to Hugh MacDiarmid; or who gave to Thomas some of our teenage poems for comment.

It is perhaps then not so surprising that in 1948 Miller, 'a hardworking scholarship boy, a dux, a valedictory orator, a poet,' left the Royal High to go to the University of Cambridge where, under the tutelage of the then legendary F R Leavis, he took a first-class honours and went on to study for a year at Harvard.

Long before, MacIver had been a young teacher at the Royal High in 1934. But the Second World War came; and MacIver joined the Navy. He wrote modestly but eloquently about convoy duties in the North Atlantic. His command of his (second) language, almost Conrad-like, shines through:

A destroyer, by the very traits of her character, never fails to provide excitement; her movements are unpredictable, her vitality inexhaustible. In the very smoothest of seas, a shiver of life from her engine rooms runs through her whole fabric; she resembles the pulsating body of a greyhound preparing for the chase; and if she decides to turn in her tracks, as she often does, she exercises her narrow circle with the neatness of compass and pencil upon paper.

And MacIver kept building even in war on his literary contacts, contacts that were to enrich the intellectual and cultural lives of subsequent students, not least Karl Miller. Neil Gunn sent letters to MacIver: 'I wrote a book on the herring industry of a century ago, *The Silver Darlings*, and it's to be filmed in the north later this year'.

As did Chris Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid):

Sorry my reply is belated. The trouble is that working as an engineer on munitions, I have excessively long hours and practically no time to myself at all… However hard physical work (hitherto unknown to me) has suited me well enough in every other respect, physically, psychologically and pecuniarily (sic) – and I venture to hope that you have a like tale to tell.

Despite being torpedoed twice, MacIver survived the war. In 1945, he returned to the Royal High School; and it was then that he as teacher and Miller as student first encountered each other. One of the other English teachers in the school, Charles McAra, recalled much later:

Hector MacIver became one of the outstanding teachers of English in Scotland in the two decades immediately after the war. This may sound like a very large claim, but its truth can be supported in three ways: by the achievement of his best pupils; by the intellectual stimulus and pleasure he gave to hundreds of boys who had no pretensions as English specialists; and by the way in which through his own example and enthusiasm he taught a large number of young English masters their job and encouraged them to go on to posts of higher responsibility.

Miller himself wrote about Hector in 1971 that:

When I was his pupil at the Royal High School of Edinburgh, Hector used to tell stories about the faculty of second sight, which seemed to be an important matter, still, in the Hebrides where he grew up… To Lowland school-children, Hector came as revelation: an exile from the Western Isles, from the 'lone shieling of the misty island', he had qualities of dignity, elegance, eloquence and fantasy that seemed not only exotic but literally portentous.

And a *Scotsman* interview of 2011 records some detail of Miller's school experiences:

> *MacCaig had worn the Royal High uniform 10 years before [Miller] but they were still friends, thanks largely to Hector MacIver, the head of English at the school and tutor to poets… Miller got to know both MacDiarmid and MacCaig when he was still at school. 'They were both kind to me, even MacDiarmid, who was an abrasive person. But Norman was an extraordinary creature. I was struck by the fact that he was capable of standing in the wind and rain outside the main Edinburgh Post Office talking about Lorca with a 16-year-old boy for half an hour. Not many established writers would have done that, but he did. He made a huge impression on me.*

One suspects that the 16-year-old Karl Miller may also have made a huge impression on MacCaig. Hector, like many of his literary friends, enjoyed the good life. Miller wrote:

> *According to MacNeice, he may once have been in the habit of sending back his lobster to the counter in the Café Royal if he did not think it came from Lewis – nevertheless the world was his oyster.*

(This is a most unlikely, if fun, story.)

The Café Royal in Edinburgh remains largely unchanged to this day, its rooms haunted by the ghosts of Compton Mackenzie, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas – and Hector MacIver. It was there, again according to Karl Miller, that MacIver one night assaulted the (now forgotten, but then Paxman-like) broadcaster Gilbert Harding for having called him 'a bloody Highlander'.

And much later, as recently as 2011, Miller referred in an essay to a similar issue:

> *Hector MacIver had as much trouble speaking the Scots of Robert Burns as Noël Coward would have had. Highlanders were strange when I was in Edinburgh… My family used to refer to my sophisticated teacher as 'the cheuchter', an ugly word of Gaelic origin which meant a rustic or a hick.*

For both MacIver and Miller, these remained lifelong issues. MacIver was a Hebridean but with an identity more firmly rooted in Edinburgh than in either Stornoway or London, yet friends with Norman MacCaig, Sorley Maclean, W H Auden, Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas; Miller, a lowland Scot with some Irish ancestry, made his entire career firmly in London but was a close friend of Seamus Heaney, of V S Pritchett and of many others.

Karl Miller, as several of his obituaries point out, had tastes that went beyond narrow English literature – an abiding love of football, notably for Tottenham Hotspur and for the

football writings of Danny Blanchflower and of Hans Keller. Hector's cultural interests were not narrowly intellectual either:

> *Ronnie Corbett, a previous pupil of Hector, also became well known as a comedian. When we were first married I had to listen to every Crackerjack programme with Hector, for he was so interested in following the beginning of Ronnie's successful career.*

Corbett and Miller were exact, if unlikely, contemporaries in the Royal High School.

In 1965, Hector took ill. His cat was also ill, as his wife records:

> *When Hector was dying, Peader was terminally ill also, and Hector said to the tiger-striped Peader as she lay on the quilt on Hector's bed – 'Ah, little one, we're both on the way out'.*

In early 1966, Karl Miller visited for the last time the teacher and mentor he had acquired some 20 years earlier. On 30 April 1966, Hector MacIver died. He was 55 years old.

That he is still remembered at all is largely because his reputation was chronicled in the festschrift *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland* (Editor: Miller, 1970; republished 2008 by Faber and Faber). Karl Miller wrote there of MacIver:

> *Published in the honour of Hector MacIver… He was a writer, a broadcaster, a talker, a speaker, and he produced plays. He was a gifted man and a gifted friend… He was not famous in the usual sense, but he made contributions to more than one of the fields under discussion and he did have a kind of fame. It went by word of mouth and seldom reached the newspapers; it was as oral as the world of his origins.*

On 24 September 2014, Karl Miller died. He was 83 years old. He is perhaps best known as the founding editor of the *London Review of Books*. *The Guardian* said:

> *Alan Bennett described the LRB as 'the liveliest, the most serious and also the most radical literary magazine we have'. Over its lifetime, it has elicited contributions from all the best British writers – Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Angela Carter, Martin Amis, Hilary Mantel – and, with its long and often playful essays on every conceivable subject, become an indispensable part of the nation's intellectual life. A main aspect of Miller's editorial genius was his ability, intuitively, to match a book with the right reviewer, whom he had known for years and whom he could persuade to do the thing for pennies as a 'favour to Karl'.*

The enduring reputation of Karl Miller will be as the greatest literary editor of his time, and one of the greatest ever.

Perhaps we should leave almost the last word with the great critic and writer Clive James. Karl Miller, while editor of *The Listener*, is said to have converted James from being a rather indifferent radio critic to being a world-class TV critic. James then promptly left the Listener for *The Observer* for a somewhat more remunerative living and for some great and deserved fame. Miller called James into his office for what would nowadays be called an 'exit interview'. James subsequently recalled:

Falsely assuring me that he lacked the words to express his contempt, he invoked historical parallels with Culloden, Vichy France, the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising and other episodes in which devious opportunism had played a role.

James later portrayed Miller in his satirical poem *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage through the London Literary World* as the fearsome 'Klaus Mauler'.

Miller had clearly learned much from the Royal High School of Edinburgh and from the war-hardened Hector MacIver. What Michael Gove might have learned about intellectual and academic ferocity had he gone to the Royal High School in Edinburgh rather than to Robert Gordon's College in Aberdeen does not bear thinking about.

The man who caught fire

Donald S Murray on Norman Morrison

2016

It all began with the failure of the fire in our sitting room to catch alight.

Uncle Norman took out a couple of broadsheet pages from the *Daily Express*, the only newspaper we could buy at the local shop, and stretched its breadth across the fireplace. It was his way of encouraging the embers we had sought to preserve since the previous night to spark and glow, bringing them to life once more. For a long time, the clumps of peat I had brought in the previous night defeated his efforts. Each one was too large, too damp, taken – in my laziness – from the opening of the stack where wind and rain whipped and soaked them thoroughly.

Slowly, however, fire took hold. Little flames flickered and sparked, their tiny tongues stretching out and expanding in the darkness below the newsprint. Eventually, he pulled the newspaper away, the fire now bright and blazing, smoke billowing into the room.

'Tha e ceart gu leor a-nis,' my uncle pronounced, admiring his own achievement.

I grinned, looking at the newspaper he had used. There was a scorch-mark on the page, a few words toasted and turned brown by its proximity to flame. Ironically, they told the story of a man who had burned himself to death in front of the Pentagon, the headquarters of the US Department of Defense.

The American was called Norman Morrison.

The sheer ordinariness of that name in the landscape of my home district of Ness helped me both notice and recall it. I had a second cousin who bore the exact same Christian name and surname. There were a clutch of brothers a few miles up the road in the nearby villages of Borve and Shader who shared it; their parents clearly lacking the imagination to provide their four sons with any other forename. (One of them drove the bus to school most afternoons and mornings. Another was distinguished from the rest by the fact that he wore glasses.) Down in the Decca Station in Lionel, there was yet another soundalike.

Tormod na Casaig – or Norman Morrison – was employed in some capacity that I imagined – at that time – to be both secret and mysterious, charting the presence of Russian spy planes and submarines in the North Atlantic, rounding, perhaps, the Butt of Lewis on which our red sandstone lighthouse stood. In hindsight, in a time before the arrival of satellites, he was probably on hand to assist ships find their bearings when they veered close to North Rona, skirting the northern edge of the Minch.

And then there was Tormod Ailean, Norman Morrison from our village. I saw him often as either he or I walked down the road through South Dell. Sometimes he would be wearing his suit for either a kirk service or a wake that followed someone's death in the community. He would often be called upon to pray, his loud, sonorous voice trembling with the

responsibility of expressing both grief and sympathy for the family that had lost someone they loved. At other times, I would see him going out to work on the croft or feed his flock of sheep. Mostly, he would be wearing the uniform worn by most men in the district at that time: dungarees, a cloth cap perched on his head, an old Harris Tweed jacket stretched across his back.

Norman Morrison in America also wore a Harris Tweed jacket. He put it on the morning of 2 November 1965, the day he walked with his daughter Emily to the Pentagon, beside the Potomac River in Washington DC.

This was, perhaps, in tribute to his Scottish background a generation or so before; its influence strong in the Presbyterian faith of his parents. It was this that led him to his course of study, both in the College of Wooster in Pennsylvania and what is now known as the Pittsburgh Presbyterian Seminary. It also may have generated the desire to travel that led him to study at Edinburgh University for a term, part of his year-long journey around Europe and the Middle East.

By 1965, however, he had settled in Baltimore, working with the Quaker community there. At the age of 31, he was married to his wife Anne and the father of three children, Ben (6), Christina (5) and Emily, who was only 11 months old when she was taken on that fateful walk to the Pentagon. His final destination was to stand some 40 feet away from the office of another man with a surname easy to translate into Gaelic, Robert McNamara (the son of the sea), who was the Secretary of State for Defense in the government of Lyndon B Johnson.

It was there he performed his final act of protest.

It is not utterly clear what happened. In some accounts, he handed over his daughter Emily to a passer-by before he poured kerosene from a jug upon himself. In another view of the event, he placed the infant on the ground before he set himself ablaze. All the stories mention, however, how people rushed up to him and attempted to douse the flames. They used their hands, briefcases, a newspaper or two.

All to no avail.

It is easier to find out what motivated him.

In his letter to his wife, he mentioned how he wanted to bring an end to the bombing in the Vietnam War by his example, how he could not tolerate the loss of life in the forest and jungle there. This was especially the case with how children were being killed, their homes being burnt and destroyed around them. He mentions, too, the story of Abraham, how the Old Testament patriarch offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, suggesting that – until the last moment – he had intended his daughter Emily for the same purpose, as a way of showing the American people what was being done in their name in the countryside of Vietnam.

Whether his final act was one of madness or not, the subject was one he wrestled frequently with in his prayers. In his own, extreme way, he imitated some of the old men I knew in my youth – whether they were called 'Norman' or not – in the firmness and fervour of his faith, the way in which it caught fire and burned through them...

Spirit of adventure

Barbara Millar on Simon Davidson

2016

Simon Davidson was killed in an accident in Glencoe on 16 January 2016. He was 34 years old. He, with his fellow climber and member of Glencoe Mountain Rescue Team, Joe Smith, were brought back from Stob Coire nam Beith by 16 members of the team, who went out in dreadful weather that night, up to 2,300 feet, to bring the men home.

Simon was born on 25 September 1981, in Middlesex, where he spent his early years living in a houseboat on the Grand Union Canal with his parents – Esther and Conrad – and older sister by one year, Jessica. He was an adventurous spirit from the start and, once the family had moved into a house in Uxbridge, close to where Conrad was based with the Central Band of the RAF, in which he played, Simon would use skipping ropes to ascend to the upper landing of their home, and cushions from the sofa would become sledges to descend the stairs. He also permanently had a small brown leather case packed with essentials for an adventure: a little blanket, an alarm clock, a torch, and his precious Teddy.

His sister has described their childhood as 'idyllic, full of fun and adventure, play and sunshine'. There were weekend walks in the countryside with their parents, looking at wildlife and climbing trees and, much later in life, Simon would often send his mum a photo of some obscure plant or insect and ask: what is this?

In 1989, when he was eight, Esther and Conrad separated, and Esther brought the children back to her native Scotland, initially living in North Berwick, before moving into Edinburgh. Simon attended Law Primary School, where he quickly ditched his London twang, adopting such a convincing Scottish accent that he was asked to read a Burns's poem at a school event. He also joined a Gaelic choir and sang in the Mod. His mother would come across him practising his Gaelic and confessing that he had not a clue what any of it meant.

He also took up the trombone and played with the Scottish National Youth Jazz Orchestra, and was lucky enough to attend the Montreux Jazz Festival with the orchestra when he was in his teens. He also got a taste for heavy metal and rock music and, with friends, he formed several bands with memorable names – Redeem the Dissentery (sic), Degenerate Youth and Hemloc (sic). His mother recalls attending some of his gigs and having to stuff tissue paper into her ears to get some relief. A friend describes his playing – Simon was on drums – as 'talented but unconventional'. More than once, when the band was playing live, Simon would not know what song was being played but would drum on regardless.

Simon left school with Highers, including maths, and decided to complete a maths degree at Heriot-Watt University. He spent most of his first year absolutely loathing his

course and only later realised he had been attending the wrong maths lectures. His mother persuaded him to give up the course and enrol at Telford College, to study other courses which would, incrementally, give him a tertiary qualification. He later went to study at Napier University where he received a first-class honours degree in digital media.

After completing his degree, his mum took him on holiday to Spain but found it most odd that, despite the incredible heat, Simon seemed prepared to risk heat stroke rather than remove his T-shirt. He wouldn't swim, or sunbathe or do anything that might risk exposing his arms and torso. Much later, she discovered he had had an enormous tattoo of a Chinese water dragon and he knew his mum would be horrified when she found out – so he intended to delay the discovery as long as he could.

He went out to Greece with a friend when he was 19. His father was living on the Greek island of Thassos, so the pair had six months working out there, earning their board and lodging by washing up in a restaurant in the evening and hiring out sunbeds by day. They also spent a month helping Simon's father to renovate a house. When they came back, they both realised that no office job, no 9-5, would ever suit them.

Simon started climbing in his early 20s, when the Ratho Adventure Centre (now the Edinburgh International Climbing Arena) first opened, with the biggest indoor climbing wall in the world. Very quickly this turned into a serious hobby, and something Simon focused on. He had always spent weekends in the hills with friends, camping, drinking beer and listening to rock music. Climbing added a new dimension and he relished the challenges and opportunities it offered.

In order to fund it, Simon had to work. During his university years, he had spent the summers working at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, something he loved. Although on one occasion, when he was meant to be supervising the projection of a film, he managed to miss the fact that it was being shown upside-down.

When he graduated, he secured a job with Metro, a technical production company based at the Gyle, where he was able to use his digital media skills to great effect. But, after five very happy and productive years there, he decided his heart was in climbing and he made the decision to leave. He also rented out his flat in Winchburgh in favour of a more peripatetic life, living in his van.

He had a few temporary jobs, cleaning windows and also as an ambulance driver. He liked the job but hated hanging about, drinking tea and eating cake, and waiting for the next call. He did some freelance work with Span Access, a Kinross-based company involved with rope access and rigging, and this enabled him to get some work helping to erect wind turbines.

So where did he climb? He did a wonderful walking and climbing trip in the Pyrenees in 2009, he climbed in the Andes and explored the South American jungle. But his heart belonged to Scotland. He climbed Ben Nevis, always by the most difficult routes, he climbed in Glencoe and the Cairngorms. But his favourite place was the Cuillin mountain range on Skye. He was thrilled by the excitement of climbing and delighted by the

camaraderie he encountered from his fellow climbers. It is a tight-knit community where trust is paramount as, so very often, your life is in someone else's hands, and their life is in yours. Friendships are built and valued. Simon had worked for many years with young people undertaking the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme and he planned to develop his fledgling business – Garbh Mountain Adventures – to offer instruction and family holidays in the mountains.

Simon had completed more climbs in his 34 years than most people do in a lifetime. He loved being out in the winter – ice-climbing had become his speciality. He was experienced, he was meticulous, he was very careful. He understood the mountains, and he respected them. He had climbed with young Joe Smith before. He had climbed Stob Coire nam Beith before. 16 January was a beautiful day – cold and clear – but then a front came over and it began to get dark, much earlier than anticipated.

No-one knows how the accident which killed Simon and Joe occurred. But that Simon died doing something he adored is of comfort to the family and friends who mourn his untimely death.

Last year, he took his mother up Ben Nevis for her first time. When they were on the ben, he pointed out some snow buntings. Esther, his mum, urges his friends, when they see the snow buntings, to remember Simon. 'Carry on climbing, and carry his memory to the highest places.'

The end of a story

Ian Jack on James Davie

2018

Before the venue for James Davie's funeral was announced, I'd never heard of the church of St Vedast-alias-Foster. The City of London has several churches with titles that suggest fancy dress and secret societies as much as the Christian religion, supposing those three things can ever be separated at the higher end of the Church of England. Perhaps St Andrew's-by-the-Wardrobe and St Andrew Undershaft had hidden the light of St Vedas-alias-Foster under a bushel.

At any rate, the facts as I discovered them are that it dates back to the 12th century, was rebuilt by Christopher Wren after the Great Fire, and lies close to Wren's magnum opus, St Paul's Cathedral. As for Vedast, he was an early French bishop who is said to have made a blind beggar see. In Latin, he was *Vedastus* but in Normandy he was known as *Vaast* – a name corrupted in its journey to modern English as Fastes, Faster and eventually Foster. This explains the 'alias' and also the church's address, which is Foster Lane. One fine morning in March, as I walked down Foster Lane towards James's funeral ceremony, I thought how typical it was of him to have led me into such a strange little thicket of history.

I knew him for more than half a century. We met in the features room of *The Glasgow Herald* where, when I first saw him, he was dressed in a green corduroy jacket and a tweed waistcoat and trousers, and smoking a cigarette in a gilt holder. There may even have been a bow tie. All this was striking: in 1965, the editorial staff of *The Glasgow Herald*, like their newspaper, tended to avoid flamboyance.

But an even more noticeable feature of James's appearance was his baldness. This wasn't a condition that could be softened by words such as 'balding' or 'receding'. James didn't have a hair on his head – not even an eyebrow – so that it shone pinkly in the office light, like an impossibly large baby's. He was only 25. There was some suggestion of a breakdown during his final year at St Andrews University but nobody knew for sure, probably because nobody had been bold enough to ask. In any case, it soon proved to be the least interesting thing about him.

The features room was my first encounter with journalism and the five or six people in it treated work in a way I'd never seen before. Was it work at all, in fact, or was it play? Everyone seemed to enjoy being there. Their chief duty, so far as I remember, was to produce a page called *Miscellany* that appeared every Saturday; lesser responsibilities included the supervision of the *London Letter* and other items on the editorial page, and the daily production of a paragraph no more than 70 or 80 words long that highlighted what was worth watching or hearing on the next day's TV and radio. That became my job. My seniors encouraged and corrected me. 'I liked that sentence… but do you know what "decimate" actually means?'

James was the jolliest of these welcoming people, pecking away energetically at his typewriter and always finding something that would make him smile or laugh – an innocent, slightly high-pitched sound that made his eyes tighten and invited you to join in. He was what in those days was called 'well-spoken', with an accent that was neither Kelvinside nor Morningside, though it certainly suggested England rather than Scotland, and a private rather than a state school. In fact, all kinds of influence must have been at work, from his school (Daniel Stewart's in Edinburgh), to an upbringing in Montrose by an Australian mother. There was very little of what we think of as the 1960s in him: he had no interest in rock or pop or marijuana, and his personal liberation came 30 years later.

We became friends. We had a mutual enthusiasm for railways and ships – his father, who died when James was only nine, had served aboard a destroyer in the First World War and later skippered the ships of the Blue Funnel Line – and, beyond those boyish things, for history and architecture and all kinds of oddities. He was intensely sociable. It was thanks to him that I attended my first Sunday lunchtime drinks party, which he hosted at his little Dowanhill flat, and some years later lunched, again adventurously on a Sunday, at a forgotten but once very smart restaurant called Prunier's just up the street from where the Queen Mother lived in St James. This was by way of experiment. James liked discovery – the process of finding something out and then sharing it, which sits at the heart of all good journalism.

We didn't stay long together in the features room. I went off to serve more of my apprenticeship at two small papers in Lanarkshire, while James joined Willie Hunter on *The Herald*'s new daily diary, the Samuel Hunter column. Samuel and Willie were not related – the former was one of *The Herald*'s first editors, a big confident man of 18 stone (and therefore two of the things Willie was not), whose bulky 19th-century silhouette stood at the column's head. Willie and James got on, a perfect match of introversion and extraversion, though the column itself never became to the paper what William Hickey was to the *Daily Express*. *The Herald* had too little confidence in its own inventions and the talents of its staff.

James moved south to the *Sheffield Telegraph*, where he wrote leaders, and then further south to London when he joined the *Daily Telegraph*'s colour magazine as chief sub-editor. The title disguised his responsibility for getting the magazine out in good time and good shape, under an editor, John Anstey, who could be whimsical and despotic, with unpleasant habits such as suddenly firing members of staff by letter to their home address. James coped for several years and then left for the *Radio Times*, where for the next two decades he held various roles, including regional features editor, and where he was probably happiest. But he rarely confined himself to editing. As well as his staff jobs, he wrote fiction reviews for *The Herald* and frequently contributed to a restaurant column, *Eating Out*, which ran in *The Guardian*. He was an amusing and perceptive writer, and could be curious about almost anything.

His enthusiasms by the 1970s had broadened to include cooking and cycling. He

collected cookery books and used their ambitious recipes for his dinner parties, at first in his rented house in south London and later at his flat in the Barbican. His bike took him to the houses of his many friends in London and across the handier parts of the English countryside. In these ways, he prefigured fashion. The word 'foodie' had yet to be born and Lycra had still to replace the cycle clip.

We remained friends. Letters in a lovely italic script came from Sheffield, describing train journeys he'd made and wondering if I might come in his direction. When I did, we went to see Sheffield Victoria station (which closed not long afterwards) and the remains of its grand railway hotel. Later, when we both worked in London, we made an excursion to look at the architecture of Bath, the first of what James promised to be a series of trips to every spa town in Britain, including Matlock, Woodhall and Strathpeffer. None of these transpired, though a rather more surprising thing did.

Sometime in the 1980s, he asked me to be his guest at a meeting of the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks, one of those ancient, back-scratching institutions known to the City of London as a livery company, which have the same purpose (I suspect) as a freemasons' lodge in Kirkcaldy. The dinner was eaten off candle-lit tables in a grand, shadowy hall; everyone there apart from the waitresses was a white male; from worldly conversations with my fellow diners, I gathered that parish clerks believed in good times. The drinking – in the later stages it was called 'promiscuous toasting' – lasted into the night.

'I give you St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe,' the parish clerk of St Botolph-without-Bishopsgate would stand to say, raising a glass. And then the man from St Andrew's would need to stand and do the same for St Mary Woolnoth; and so on and on it went, till something near a full circle of four dozen churches had been made and the whole company was tired of bobbing up and down.

It became clear that James might be attracted to the Anglican church for more than the usual cultural reasons – music, architecture, promiscuous toasting. He might actually be a believer. That seemed too private to discuss at the time, though I think now that the reticence was more mine than his.

In 1989, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Some years later, aware that his mobility was declining, he booked a trip to Australia on the P&O liner *Canberra*, one of that grand old ship's last voyages. We met at his flat after he came back and had a typical conversation that included details of the *Canberra*'s menu and steam turbines, and James's train journey to Brisbane in an elderly sleeping car. Eventually, I got up to go. James asked me to stay a bit longer because he had something to tell me. 'You see, I've decided I'm gay,' he said. I sat down again, and James told me another version of his trip to Australia, one minus the steam turbines and with the sleeping car included only as a venue for a sexual encounter with a man who was similarly disabled. 'There was a tangle of walking sticks in the corridor,' James said, gleeful at the memory, laughing like a man released. He was in his mid-50s before he came out.

James lived with multiple sclerosis for another 20 years and more. Work was the first

thing to be abandoned. Slowly, his faculties slipped away. A mobility scooter replaced a walking stick, his grasp of cutlery grew slacker, books became impossible to hold, his speech thickened towards the incomprehensible. What remained right to the end was his fiercely stubborn and gregarious spirit. Here was a man who never stopped having parties; who could enjoy a party from a bed-ridden, horizontal position; who would beam up at the guests who stared down on him or brushed food from his shirtfront. To be so fond of human society and to have to leave it must be exceptionally cruel.

His wicker coffin went down the aisle of St Vedast-alias-Foster at 9.30 on the morning of 16 March. We sang hymns and listened as soloists in the gallery tackled the *Kyrie Eleison*, the *Agnus Dei* and *In Paradisum* from Fauré's *Requiem*. We heard hand-bells and smelled incense. Later, in the parish hall, we drank tea, ate cake and inspected the photographs of James that were displayed on pin-boards. One of them showed him as a kilted young man. Who could have known, in the features room of *The Glasgow Herald* in 1965, that this is where one of our stories would end?

James Coutts Davie was born on 2 February 1940 and died on 1 March 2018. He is survived by his sisters, Marie and Ann, and by his civil partner, Michael, who cared for him until his death

In admiration of my father

Lucy Russell on Professor Willie Russell

2018

Professor Willie Russell was a remarkable and outstanding man, self-effacing and humble, despite his lauded contributions to science, politics and to the Boys Brigade. He was born into a working-class background living in a tenement block in Glasgow, with a room and kitchen, sharing an outside toilet.

His father died when he was seven years old and his mother, suddenly widowed with no income, had to find work to support them both. She started out as a cleaner at Kelvingrove Museum and ended up being in charge of the publications desk. Her own passion for knowledge and education was passed onto her son, whom she recognised as being a bright lad, and he gained a scholarship to attend Allan Glen's School in Glasgow. From there, he went on to graduate with a degree and PhD in organic chemistry from Glasgow University.

In 1959, after two years national service as a chemist working in Royal Ordnance factories, followed by two years in the research laboratories of J&P Coats Ltd in Paisley, he made a return to academia and took the bold step in changing fields from chemistry to the expanding discipline of virology. Joining the newly formed Medical Research Council and the University of Glasgow's Experimental Virus Research Unit, he used electron microscopy to investigate the structure of herpes viruses and showed that its genetic information was DNA, rather than RNA, as had been previously thought.

He married our mother, Dorothy (nee Brown) in 1962, who was a medic, having met each other in church whilst students at Glasgow University. In 1963, they moved to Canada where he took a position in the Ontario Cancer Unit in Toronto, and in 1964 moved to London where he became the first non-medical researcher in the Division of Bacteriology and Virology at the National Institute for Medical Research.

My brother and I appeared during this period, our father juggling being a wholly hands-on father with his research work and Boys Brigade commitments. He liked to cook, and his undisputed sweet tooth resulted in there always being Scotch pancakes or scones for tea on a Sunday, plus rather daring experiments (which he attributed to being a curious scientist) involving delicious (ahead of their time) pasta dishes, and a bbq spare rib sauce that had the house rockin' due to the tangy aromas. He was also fabulous at children's parties – ours were undoubtedly the best on offer, with daft games, memory contests and an abundance of naughty sweet things. His was a genuine love of, and identification with, younger people – already tried and tested within the Boys' Brigade – and his skill was that he could maintain playfulness at the same time as discipline.

He joined the 227th Glasgow Boys' Brigade company in 1942 which was known for its fine brass band. There, he learned to play the cornet, then the tenor horn and finally, the

euphonium. It was somehow inevitable that he should become an officer in the company, then band officer and thereafter company captain. Over a span of 40 years, he served the Boys Brigade movement, at local, battalion and national level. The movement gave him his lifelong love of music and his interest in public service. It also laid the foundations of an inquiring and practical Christian faith that was to prove such an influence on young men for years to come.

As children, it was difficult to fully appreciate the scientific work our father was doing, and how significant the discoveries. We knew that he became interested in a wide range of topics – all of them incomprehensible to a non-scientist. In 1977, he became editor of the *Journal of General Virology*, the same year in which he was appointed head of the Virology Division, which he served until 1982.

That same year our mother Dorothy died, following a subarachnoid haemorrhage. She was working as a GP in Edgware at the time and her premature departure at the age of 49 shocked everyone who knew the family, and had an impact on myself and my brother who, at ages 16 and 14, witnessed her death. Within the same period of time, both grandmothers also died, leaving a gaping void. It was not an easy period in our lives and our father, uncomplainingly, coped with the painful aftermath of three deaths in a row.

However, looking forward, and always positively, he sought an opportunity to make a fresh start and to go back home to Scotland. He applied for, and was appointed, chair of the Department of Biochemistry at the University of St Andrews, in which he established the Virology Unit that continues to thrive to this day. Always a man of vision, he handpicked scientists from London who were colleagues he knew he could trust to work together successfully as a team.

As well as continuing his own research, he also mentored many PhD students who went on to have successful careers in science. A colleague said: 'He cared about the quality and standard of the teaching to our undergraduates. To that end, however busy he was, he insisted on playing his part in our teaching programmes. No-one could have wished for a more helpful, kind and approachable boss'.

From his youth, my father was a committed Christian socialist but it was not until he was living in London that he joined the Labour Party. He was active in the Hendon North constituency party, standing for Barnet Council and being nominated by the Labour Party as a school governor. He was also a keen supporter of the campaign for the advancement of state education.

After his move back to Scotland, he was twice chair of North East Fife constituency Labour Party, rescuing it from the brink of extinction in time to fight a vigorous campaign in the 1992 General Election. A dedicated internationalist, my father was also chair of the Mid Scotland and Fife European constituency Labour Party, where one of his colleagues recalls his skill at holding together a disparate body: 'He was authoritative and gentle in dealing with individuals – but he was in charge!' He persuaded people to act in concert by his example, by reasoned argument, and by the love and respect inspired by his transparent honesty.

In the 1990s, his energy and leadership were of critical importance in founding Scientists for Labour. He was the organisation's first chair, holding the post until 2010, which involved him in repeated journeys to London, which enabled me to catch-up with him. His wisdom and common sense, and the wide respect in which he was held within both the scientific community and the Labour Party, were invaluable as Scientists for Labour struggled ('sometimes successfully', as a colleague recalls) to educate the Labour Party about the importance of science.

He lobbied for adequate funding for scientific research and education, encouraged fellow-scientists to contribute their specialist expertise, and was particularly determined and courageous in his demand that policies in highly contentious areas such as nuclear power and animal experimentation should be based on scientific evidence. Gordon Brown recently said of him: 'I know the incredible work he did to promote science and also progressive causes. As an academic and as a humanitarian, I was always in debt to him for the way that he supported forward-looking policies that had always, at their centre, a better future for our country and the world generally'.

When he retired in 1995, he became emeritus professor and continued to develop his many research interests. He moved to Crail, where he lived with his second wife until last year, and where he was an enthusiastic participant in church and festival activities. He joined the bowling club and was its president for two years, while retaining his membership of the St Andrews Chorus which he enjoyed so much.

A particularly vicious attack of shingles in his right eye (he himself remarked on the irony of his being felled by a virus, having worked with them all his life), followed by some inexplicable falls, left him weakened and growing in fragility. He was lovingly attended to by my brother Iain, myself, and our step-sister Maggie. Despite his general frailty, his spirit of positivity and of generosity was an inspiration to those of us who were close to him. Oft said expressions were 'Dinny worry about me', illustrating his desire never to be a burden to anyone, and 'I'm making progress', even when, latterly, he clearly wasn't.

A close friend, who is a poet, described him beautifully three months ago as 'looking chirpy and bright-eyed, like a human robin'. This describes the essence of the man who was so well-loved and respected by many, perfectly allied to the giant footprint of achievement, example and goodness that remain an inspiration to all whose lives were touched by his. He died peacefully in his sleep on 31 October at the age of 88, with my brother by his side.

A reputation in recession

Gerry Carruthers on James Bridie

2018

Recently in an exchange with that excellent novelist, James Robertson, over Burns's use of 'ithers' in *To A Louse*, I mentioned that even the great James Bridie gets this wrong: it should be 'others' in Burns's poem. Most Scottish writers should not be trusted with historic Scottish literature. As an academic, the fallacy that increasingly annoys me is the equation of Scottish writers' knowledge of Scottish writing just because they are a part of it.

One day I will write a piece that provides lengthy chapter and verse on this: the bad judgement about, the poor editing of, Scottish literature by a legion of Scottish writers. But for now, the point I'd want to make is that Bridie is not one of those Scottish writers usually mistaken about Scottish literature. His 'ithers' slip is a mere aberration.

James Bridie (1888-1951) is one of Scotland's most successful cultural activists and her greatest dramatist of the 20th century. These days, however, his work is seldom performed. His is a name almost 'disappeared' when people speak about Scottish culture, literature and drama. Bridie's reputation has been in recession for a long time.

From a bourgeois background, a scion of the family involved in 'Mavor and Coulson' manufacturers of mining engineering equipment, Osborne Henry Mavor (as Bridie was born) studied medicine at Glasgow University. In his professional life as a consultant physician, he goes down in Scottish literary history – notoriously – as his country's only writer to enjoy regularly the services of a chauffeur. His rich earnings though do not match anything like those of several other Scottish writers, including his near-contemporary A J Cronin or Ian Rankin today.

Bridie more evidently than a Cronin or a Rankin is also part of the establishment. Founding chairman of the board of Glasgow's Citizen's Theatre in 1943, Bridie was also influential in the movement that was to lead to the Scottish Arts Council (much later Creative Scotland) and he played a strong hand in the establishment of the Edinburgh International Festival in 1947.

A powerful driver in the landmark revival-performance of David Lindsay's *The Thrie Estaitis* at the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh in 1948, Bridie was also in his home city the brains behind the establishment of Glasgow's Royal Conservatoire's College of Dramatic Art in 1950. He wrote the screenplays for Alfred Hitchcock's *Under Capricorn* (1949) and *Stage Fright* (1950), and the then developing director very much wanted Bridie to join him in Hollywood, a proposition that the Scotsman for various reasons turned down. How can a man who achieved so much, and I have yet even to mention his own clever, witty, profound, often spectacularly absorbing dramatic work, be so seldom noticed in Scotland today?

Apart from his unfashionable middle-class credentials, Bridie does not fit within the

usual Scottish literary canonical parameters as he is neither a nationalist nor a socialist. Early on though, in the 1920s, he was involved with the Scottish National Theatre Society, the most important result for Bridie personally being that it was here that he began a long and fruitful professional relationship with the English theatrical director, Tyrone Guthrie. Bridie's dramatic themes though were often Scottish, for instance, Burke and Hare in *The Anatomist*, produced by Guthrie for the London stage in 1932, Scottish medical inventiveness in *A Sleeping Clergyman* produced in Malvern in 1933 or *Calvinism in Mr Bolfry* in 1943, a great hit again in war-time London, and a text which marks part of an ongoing collaboration between Bridie and that genius of a Scottish actor, Alastair Sim.

If some contemporaries were perhaps resentful, suspicious even, of a Scottish writer cutting a figure abroad (in England and America), there are those latterly who feel they have Bridie bang to rights because he disliked the work of Ena Lamont Stewart, whose *Men Should Weep*, a tale of unjust urban squalor that in its day (1947) failed to impress anyone very much. Bridie though is sometimes cited as having single-handedly sunk Lamont's career simply because he disliked the play and didn't want himself to stage it.

Hugely successful as playwright, as an arts administrator and – it should be said – an innovative visionary, none of this seems to count much in the face of Bridie's ill-fitting political phizzog. An important book that we need in Scottish cultural history, is an applied biography of Bridie's influential and sparkling career, both as artist and as policy and institutional maker and shaker. There is, however, no such sign of any such study, and there may again be a fairly clear politico-cultural reason for this absence.

One might suspect that Bridie does not swim well amid today's 'mainstream' art-theatre since our man was a dramatist of ideas and that really won't do with a current plethora of plays that peddle cheerleading identity politics, or agit-prop, where one is told what to think about politics, or class, or gender, or sexuality and where one can leave one's brain at the box office to be collected (if you really need it back) on the way out.

Bridie is a great dramatist of ambiguity, essaying the potential egotistical mania in the genius of the man of science, who might bring great advancement or ruin to his species; himself an atheist, Bridie in his dramatic work contemplates alternatively the mind-expanding advancement and the fanaticism brought to us by religion; or he essays simultaneously the transcendent beauty of art and the pettiness of the artist. His is a drama where all humans and all institutions are more or less in a permanent state of existential crisis. Bridie sets out endless questions rather than providing easy-to-digest answers for the metropolitan chattering classes, and goodness and the nefarious exist in more or less constant equilibrium in his work, both equally entangled and even mysterious at their roots.

Bridie's is a drama that does not work in today's contemporary culture which often has such shallow certitude about what is sociologically right and wrong. Bridie's frequent dramatic meditations on the difficulty of both goodness and evil have become sadly unusable and this, it might be argued, is a sign of our own contemporary existential impoverishment.

Remembering William McIlvanney

David Cunningham

2018

I first met Willie on a snowy day in Glasgow. I was writing a profile of him for the British Council, which was staging a literary festival in Sofia, Bulgaria that he had been asked to attend. I'd never interviewed anyone before, let alone an author I admired so much, so I was terribly nervous.

To keep calm, I walked into town from the West End, going over my questions in my mind. Having set out far too early, I bypassed Sauchiehall Street and chose a longer route over Garnethill, where the tallest buildings were stark against the white sky, like etchings on a canvas otherwise left blank. We were in that moment of rueful surfeit between Christmas and New Year. But we were in the midst of a larger pause too: between the Wall coming down and the Towers coming down, with a Labour Government in Westminster and a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. The future looked promising, if a trifle dull.

We met in the old Ailsa Bar at the Central Hotel. With its plentiful ashtrays and tartan upholstery, it felt like a bastion against the impending advent of universal smoking bans and polished floorboards. The first thing that really struck me about Willie was how handsome he was and how indifferent to the fact he seemed. If he'd been an American writer, he would probably have been lured onto the screen sooner or later, like Sam Shepard. His only comment on this was to amusedly recount the analysis of his public persona once supplied by a Scottish academic: 'You're not bad looking. You appear to be successful. And you've got a mouth on you. And they don't like that'.

He was open and approachable with me from the start, kindly pretending not to notice that the British Council had apparently dispatched a 10-year-old to interview him. (Though I had gained my PhD a couple of years earlier, I hadn't managed to find a university job and was earning a parlous living as a part-time bookseller and part-time literary journalist.)

As the snow resumed outside, we settled in with a whisky each and began. I still have the tape somewhere, buried at the back of a cupboard. I sound squeaky; he answers my questions in his ruminative baritone. An Ayrshire boy myself, I instantly recognised his accent as conveying the best of us: Scottish clarity and firmness interwoven with Irish musicality – not a bad description of his prose, in fact.

I'd first read him at university, when he was somewhat out of fashion – criticised, in the aftermath of *The Big Man*, for glorifying violence and being obsessed with an unreconstructed version of working-class masculinity. The way my fellow students dismissed him for being insufficiently postmodern was enough to get me interested. Reading his non-fiction collection *Surviving the Shipwreck* as I stood amid the library stacks, I also discovered that he'd lost his father to cancer in his first month at Glasgow University. I'd been through

exactly the same experience myself. These are the kind of coincidences that strike you as deeply significant when you're young and raw and brimful of foolishness.

I went on to read *Docherty* and the *Laidlaw* trilogy. Scottish literature at the time seemed rather thin-lipped stuff: preoccupied with social realism and harbouring a parsonical suspicion of anything imaginative or overtly eloquent. But there was a Lawrentian richness in his books; both in his prose and in the unreserved attitude to human experience. Occasionally, his similes and metaphors seemed to crowd upon one another, creating the sense, for the reader, of toiling across a landscape that was all peaks – but not often, and it was a fault of generosity rather than meanness.

Because the purpose of our interview was to introduce him to an audience that hadn't really heard of him, I couldn't guide him down any obscure paths. We had to tour the familiar landmarks instead: the Kilmarnock childhood as the son of a miner; the admired debut with *A Gift from Nessus*; the Whitbread Prize for *Docherty*; the move (so startling back then, but amazingly prescient too) from literary to genre fiction and back again. But I was also able to ask him about a personal favourite – the short story collection, *Walking Wounded*. I felt that, like John Updike or James Kelman, he was, in some ways, at his best in his short stories. The ordinary lives he portrayed were seen more vividly for being caught and held in a narrower spotlight.

'I'm haunted by more ideas than I'll ever realise,' he said, of the short stories. 'I always want to write about ordinary lives. But sometimes it's hard to put such lives into elaborate plots because their essence is casual. So the intention was to bring together small moments in such lives with the unifying theme that we are all, to some extent, walking wounded. I don't know if you know the character of Eumaeus in *The Odyssey*? While Odysseus goes off and has all his adventures, Eumaeus stays at home. He's a swineherd. He keeps pigs. And I've always wanted somehow to write a *Eumaeus*: the story of the person who stays behind and lives the apparently mundane life in which there's still a great deal of simple heroism… I believe in the dynamism and articulacy of working-class life. I've been accused, in writing about Tam Docherty, for instance, of creating a man too good for this world. But I think that's rubbish. There's a tendency, amongst those who wish to appear very relevant and "with it", to look for the worst in any situation. That's a libel on human nature.'

I felt compelled to ask him about his depiction of violence. He looked briefly exasperated ('not this again!') but offered a fine defence: 'I portrayed violence for what it is, which is abhorrent. But by actually taking it seriously, not exploiting it as entertainment, I was accused of cashing in it. Many modern depictions of violence in fiction, like in Tarantino's films, raise no moral questions at all and no-one says a word. Sometimes it has appeared to me that people have seen the opposite of what I'm trying to do in my books, especially in Scotland. W H Auden said that the bad reader reads metaphors as literal and the literal as metaphorical. In *The Big Man*, the bare-knuckle fight with Dan Scoular and Cutty Dawson was a metaphor for Thatcherism: the idea that we're all in a race, so let's help ourselves and it doesn't matter if the weakest fall by the wayside'.

When it came to recent political developments, he was positive but realistic, his comments tinged with a droll scepticism that made me warm to him even more: 'I believe that devolution is a worthwhile experiment, especially if it leads to independence. At the very least it allows Scotland the chance to move away from blaming England for all its troubles. Scotland is one of the oldest countries in Europe but until recently it has been like a geriatric teenager, unable to make its own decisions. And, let's face it, we could get repetitive strain injury from patting ourselves on the back about how much nicer and more tolerant and progressive we are than the English. If we were independent, maybe we'd finally get to put that assumption to the test – find out who we truly are'.

We were there in the Ailsa Bar for three hours, all told. I still count it as one of the best afternoons of my life; certainly one of the most privileged. I went off and wrote up the interview and sent him a copy. I also, shamelessly, sent him a couple of my published short stories. To my surprise, having read them, he asked me if I wanted to meet again a couple of months later. Same location, same walk into town – but a drenching, stormy day this time, with the streets like rinsed canyons and all but the nearest buildings frail in the mist.

Off duty, I was slightly less nervous, but I wish I could have given him better arguments. I had already waded through a fair bit of crap in my young life. Yet it seemed that nothing could banish my essential air of bland cleanliness; or an ingratiating manner that would have made Uriah Heep blush. And, in spite of some bright spots (*London Magazine*, *New Writing Scotland*, Radio 4), I was still very uncertain about my credentials as a writer of fiction. So I tended to just nod along with whatever he said, when I'm sure he would have preferred some contradiction.

I next saw him, unexpectedly, in Sofia itself. I say 'unexpectedly' because I wasn't supposed to be there – my task had simply been to interview the attending Scottish authors in advance of the festival. But someone dropped out, so I was invited at the last moment.

He and I got to Sofia before everyone else and I tagged along with him for a day as he spoke to various local journalists. Peak surrealness arrived with our joint appearance on Bulgarian breakfast television, perched side-by-side on a polyester sofa. He was great company and we both loved the city centre, with its neo-classical architecture, chestnut-lined streets and Byzantine ruins.

In the evening, we had dinner in the hotel. Perhaps due to the powerful Melnik wine we consumed, I actually offered a few opinions of my own. In particular, I advanced my theory that Glasgow-born producer Kenny McBain had been more influenced by *Laidlaw* than the ostensible source material when establishing the rich, measured, reflective tone (revolutionary at the time) of *Inspector Morse* on television – not least in its sense that the true mystery at each episode's heart was the detective himself; like Laidlaw, Morse was more character study than crime fiction. He seemed interested to hear this. And even though the saga of trying to get *Laidlaw* on screen had been a painful one, he shared a good Sean Connery story.

During the long period when Connery was trying to turn the first book into a film, he

and Willie would meet in a variety of unlikely places. Their assignations at Edinburgh Zoo are well known, but Willie also once found himself at Gleneagles, where Connery was playing in a celebrity pro-am. As they trudged around the course and discussed the project, Willie was treated to an example of the movie star interacting with his fans. Standing on the seventh green, he was spotted by a group of businessmen on the nearby eighth tee who clamoured loudly for his autograph. He acquiesced, grudgingly. There followed an awkward silence, in which both parties remained immobile on green and tee – until Connery growled: 'Well, I'm not fucking well coming over to you'.

The festival itself was held in the baroque gloom of the old military club on Tsar Osvoboditel Boulevard, near the mighty Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Spectres of the old days lurked everywhere – not least in the form of the little old lady who sat scowling at you, awaiting a tip, as you entered and exited the toilet. The simultaneous translations and the earpieces we had to wear, which constantly fell out, made the whole thing feel like a hastily convened UN summit.

Willie was brilliant in all the sessions he participated in – thoughtful and receptive, without a hint of superiority or condescension towards anyone. Taking part in discussions with titles like, 'Writing in a Time of Political Change', he was able to speak eloquently about Scotland, while acknowledging that our recent experience of such change paled in comparison to that of our hosts, who were still up to their necks in post-Cold War consequences. Listening to him, it occurred to me again that he had that quality you most expect to find in writers when you're young and naïve, but rarely do: soulfulness.

I tried to make some kind of meaningful contribution myself. But an uncomfortable feeling persisted that I was a man way out of his depth, taking part in an aquacade when I should have been discreetly signalling to the lifeguards for help.

My discomfort was reinforced by some of the other Scottish authors present, who seemed to think that I had elbowed my way into this gig and treated me accordingly. The real low point came at a lunch where one of them, in a voice loud enough to ensure she was heard by everyone present, turned to me and said, 'So, tell us all, David, how have you managed to make so little go such a long way?' Afterwards, Willie took me aside and told me not to worry about it. 'My mother would have just told her, plain and simple: "That's not what you do to people",' he said.

Back in Glasgow, I only saw him a few more times, usually in a pub near the Mitchell Library after he'd done an event at the book festival. He tended to be surrounded by fans in these circumstances, but we chatted a bit. I'd managed to get a novel for teenage readers accepted, albeit for a modest advance, by a well-known London publisher and he was pleased for me. Although I'd been writing this kind of stuff – adventure stories in imagined settings, I suppose you'd call them – for as long as I'd been writing anything, I knew I'd be accused of going 'populist' and he sympathised, remembering his travails with *Laidlaw*.

Much more importantly, I'd also been reading *The Longships in Harbour* and wanted to ask him about his poetry. I admired its blend of lyricism and social commentary, along with

its commitment to traditional forms. I felt it exhibited the same strength as his stories – paring back his style so that you could see its virtues even more clearly, while the imprint of its generosity remained. He seemed pleased to talk about this. As with all authors better known for other things, I think he felt that his poems were somehow at the heart of who he was.

My novel came out and received some good reviews, but I was dropped by my publisher for achieving only 'respectable' sales. Essentially unemployed, I got a new job in a small web business as a content developer. For a long time, a foolish sense of humiliation about my writing career made me reluctant to keep in touch with old friends from the literary world. As a result, to my regret, I didn't see Willie during the final years of his life, when he was gradually rebranded as the 'father of Tartan Noir' – a horribly limiting label, in my opinion, which does scant justice to the depth and sensitivity of his work.

But I remember, with great affection, the last exchange we shared, since it was so characteristic of him. Leaving the pub, I pointed out how great it was that he was so unambiguously valued at last, without any envious sniping at his charisma or the pleasures offered by the unapologetic richness of his prose. He looked around the crowded room and gave me a conspiratorial smile. 'Oh, aye,' he said. 'My halo's got a halo these days'.

The humanity and talent of Hugh McIlvanney

Gerry Hassan

2019

The tributes paid to Hugh McIlvanney spoke volumes for the influence of the man, his writing and humanity. They were laced with recollections and memorable stories of late nights, pressurised deadlines, and long conversations – often involving drink. They came from far and wide across the spectrum, including Donald Trelford, former editor of *The Observer*; Alex Ferguson, ex-manager of Aberdeen FC and Manchester United FC; Graham Spiers of *The Times*; Liam McIlvanney remembering his uncle; stars such as George Foreman and Gary Lineker – and even Nicola Sturgeon.

McIlvanney wrote on sport for over 50 years, starting at the *Kilmarnock Standard* in the 1950s, having a spell at *The Scotsman*, before moving to *The Observer* in 1962 where he spent 31 years, and then moving to the *Sunday Times* where he remained until his retirement in 2016. In that time, he covered some of the most memorable football and sporting moments, from Celtic winning the European Cup to the Ali v Foreman 'rumble in the jumble'. But he also covered more – addressing, for example, when sport and politics mixed at the Mexico Olympics in 1968 and Munich Games in 1972, when in both cases disaster and death struck.

In amidst the powerful testimony of McIlvanney's prose and his care for detail, accuracy and the semi-colon, was a discernible lament for the passing of a now lost world. This centred on numerous areas: a golden age of journalism and long-form essays; a time when writers could get access to some of the greats and then get unguarded copy free from the constraints of PR advisers; and an age of working-class self-education and advancement without forgetting about who you were and what was important.

McIlvanney was born and grew up in Kilmarnock and attended James Hamilton Junior Secondary School and then Kilmarnock Academy, the latter which his younger brother William also attended. This was a school with the claim to fame of having two Nobel prize-winners (Alexander Fleming and John Boyd Orr) – which only Eton shares the honour with in Great Britain. There is, in the fulsome tributes, an awareness that McIlvanney's death, along with brother Willie in 2015, marks the final denouement of a past Scotland. This is a land in which working-class communities, through education and the social challenges people faced, created men and women with strength, purpose and a wider sense of responsibility.

It is not an accident that the greatest football managers Scotland ever produced: Matt Busby, Bill Shankly and Jock Stein, came from the same sort of environment as Hugh. These were granite men, built by the coalface of the Ayrshire and Lanarkshire pits and their cultures, and they never forgot the sacrifice and discipline that defined where they grew up.

Alex Ferguson said when recalling McIlvanney: 'Hugh came from the same mining areas, just the same as Jock, Matt and Shankly… They were a breed of really clever, intelligent people… most of them self-taught, but they also had to climb through the economic areas they came from'.

There is also the death of a certain kind of Scottish man. McIlvanney possessed an inner authority, certainty and moral compass – all of which informed his view of the world. He shared this with the above figures and the likes of Jimmy Reid – communitarian, believing in solidarity, and being contemptuous of those who forgot their roots and the values which helped create them.

Fundamental to McIlvanney was the power and sound of his voice. It had a distinctive ability to command attention that many will attest to in terms of conversations and arguments over the years. It had a centredness and rootedness, that besides its gravel intonation made you stop and listen, making McIlvanney ideal for TV and radio.

One underlying thread in the memories of McIlvanney has been that he knew how to conduct an argument. This meant you had to choose your ground and case with him carefully because if he felt you weren't being serious, or were too flippant, he could pounce. Liam McIlvanney wrote movingly in *The Guardian* of family occasions and the 'downsides to a life lived at this pitch of intensity [and] apocalyptic flytings, with curses and denunciations ringing out of the wilderness…'.

This quality, well known amongst many Scots in the not-too-distant past, and one I can distinctly remember as part of my own childhood in Dundee, covering seemingly every big subject under the sun, and of course, football, highlights the diminishing quality of public debate and conversation – a point brought further home in the last week by an exchange between Andrew Neil and Brexit-supporting James Delingpole on BBC's *This Week*. Delingpole was rightly savaged by Neil for propagating a 'no-deal Brexit' he knew little about, yet was happy to advocate without any care for repercussions or who it could hurt. Subsequently, he took to the uber-right-wing media site Brietbart, who he works for, to make the case that 'one of the reasons Oxbridge graduates tend to do well in this shallow culture of ours: their education essentially entails spending three or four years being trained in the art of bullshit'.

This is how far we have fallen across Britain: arrogant, not that bright, nearly always privately-educated Oxbridge men are happy to dominate public life, with the media sounding off with an effortless belief in their self-importance on subjects they know little about. Brexit has been nirvana to such types, but it has been a long time brewing and is far removed from the deeply considered and reflective views and writing of McIlvanney.

Hugh and Willie McIlvanney were driven by something nobler and more important than the vices of James Delingpole or the virtue signalling which now shapes so many exchanges. They had a quiet sense of who they were, and the responsibilities and expectations which came with being a public figure who had influence. They knew that their words mattered. They were driven by an understanding of right and wrong, in believing some things were

just immoral and unethical, such as stigmatising and demonising poor people, and felt there was no way this could be excused no matter which party was doing it.

In recent times, the only other Scottish writer who carried such a clarity of purpose with a way with words was the late Ian Bell, and McIlvanney's death – combined with Brexit and the rise of right-wing shock jocks – shows how far public debate has become debased. But if Hugh was, in the words of Liam, 'the last of the big land animals', this shows the long descent in Scottish journalism and intellectual life. Who are our moral guardians and guides today who will reflect back to us the collective stories we want to tell and ask us if that – in all honesty – is really us? There are voices who can speak to the public mood on a single issue, or for a fleeting moment, but perhaps voices such as Hugh McIlvanney are no longer possible.

In today's world, even a male voice could not be as male as Hugh – or Willie – were. But they both touched so many of us emotionally, connected us to a higher plane, had an inner beauty which came from the values they believed in, and wrote and spoke in a language of poetry. Where are those much-needed qualities in our public life? How do we encourage them to grow in, or return, to Scotland?

It isn't an accident that McIlvanney's talent went way beyond writing on sport, but to the heart of the human condition, writing some of his moving pieces on the death of people he knew such as Jock Stein, Matt Busby and the Welsh boxer Johnny Owen. I first came across his writings in the unraveling of the ill-fated Scottish expedition to Argentina in the summer of 1978, which was filled with such high hopes for Ally's Tartan Army. The story is a familiar one, but it was given a sort of noble grandeur in failure by McIlvanney, as well as searching to answer the question: why did football matter so much?

His most evocative piece of this period, *A Case of Kamikaze in Cordoba* (the stadium where Scotland played their first two games against Peru and Iran and were humiliated – and also the famous victory against Holland), is worth quoting as he surveys the debris after the first two matches:

> *If there is ever a World Cup for self-destructiveness, few nations will have the nerve to challenge the Scots. It seems astonishing that the race has never produced a kamikaze pilot, but perhaps the explanation is that all the volunteers insisted on attacking sewage farms.*

Then he went on to ask what is it with all this investment of hopes and dreams in football when there are more important things in life:

> *Some of us have been acknowledging through most of our lives that the game is hopelessly ill-equipped to carry the burden of emotional expression the Scots seek to load upon it. What is hurting so many now is the realisation that something they*

believed to be a metaphor for their pride has all along been a metaphor for their desperation.

Even 40 years later, the passion and insight in these words ring out. I remember as a teenager reading them in *The Observer*, and they affected me in a way, along with George Orwell and P G Woodhouse, which made me realise the power and joy of writing, and inspired me to take up writing, starting a music column in a community paper.

Hugh, along with his brother, lifted us up. They took us to a higher plane where it was possible to discern the huge emotional, moral and philosophical issues that humanity faced. This has a particular Scottish story – but is a universal one.

Look around the world. Look close to home. Look at your home town, your neighbourhood and your street. We owe it to Hugh and Willie and countless other brilliant working-class voices and talents of the past and present not to be quiet and to dare to point out the inadequacies and moral bankruptcies of so much of modern life. Daring to say enough is enough, in the corridors of power and polite society at home, and further afield. Now that would be a fitting tribute to Hugh and Willie, and one I am sure they would appreciate.

A woman of wit, empathy and imagination

Gillean Somerville-Arjat on Joan Ure

2019

Last Saturday the sun came out and I took the bus to Glasgow. A joyous buzz infused the air. Pigeons on the ground, gulls in the sky. Crowds swarmed past Donald Dewar, stolidly costive on his plinth, staring down the canyon of Buchanan Street. The musicians, too, were out. I passed three solo concerts, surrounded by appreciative audiences. The singers' voices resounded over the hubbub. It was an open your heart and sing kind of day.

I was on my way to the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Royal Exchange Square. The occasion, a tentatively entitled literary event (*A Nudge to Joan Ure*), was a celebration of the life and work of the Scottish poet/playwright, born Elizabeth Carswell in 1918. It was organised by Professor Alan Riach of Glasgow University and Alistair Peebles who runs Brae Editions, a small poetry publisher in Orkney. In December last year, he brought out a collection of Ure's previously unpublished poems, *The Tiny Talent*. Three actors, Alison Peebles, Barbara Rafferty and Deirdre Murray, had also been invited to read from Ure's work. The event was held in the colourful studio on the top floor of the gallery, overlooking the city's spires and rooftops. Alasdair Gray was in the audience as well as other people who had known or worked with Ure.

I knew of Joan Ure. I have a copy of a limited edition of five short plays of hers, no. 119 of 350, published by the Scottish Society of Playwrights in 1979, a year after her death. I hadn't looked at it for some time and when I returned to it found a bookmark after just one of the plays. I hadn't really 'got' her. So I was seeking enlightenment.

The event started with readings of her poems, Professor Riach setting them in context and providing a commentary. For me they came across more as feminist *cris de coeur* than what I would call fully achieved poems, though the best of them expressed a poignancy that was moving. I later discovered that she said she didn't write poems, that her 'poems' were 'pieces for acting'. This made much more sense. They are raw, angry cries from women feeling unheard, sidelined, dismissed, ignored, having to hide their creative talents at a time when keeping a tidy house was considered more important. A huge outpouring of distress and frustration.

Ure suffered much before beginning to make a name for herself in the final years of her life. Obliged to leave school in her mid-teens, when her mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis, she would herself catch the disease and eventually die of it. Her teachers wanted her to stay on and go to university, but her father said no. Alasdair Gray has another terrible story of her, aged seven, showing her mother a story she had written which she was proud of, and her mother burning it when she wanted to punish her for some misdemeanour. Joan had wept. It was hard in mid-20th-century Scotland for a woman to become a playwright.

It was hard enough for a man. Scots were not perceived as bankable. You had to have a steely determination to make your way, and women had even more prejudices to overcome. Ure's plays are short and lack plots. They're about issues, couched in dramatic encounters or monologues, debates 'within a single consciousness'. What Professor Riach calls 'endorsing the ideal while exercising the human'. They remind me somewhat of medieval flytings, like the argumentative poems of Henryson and Dunbar.

Something in it for Cordelia has Lear and his daughter at Waverley Station after a performance of Shakespeare's tragedy at the Edinburgh Festival, waiting for a train to take him to a new idyllic life in the Highlands. She'll travel by bike to save on fares. As he whinges in his wheelchair, she makes a spirited attempt to manage his ingrained patriarchal attitudes. In contrast, a monologue, called *The Hard Case*, has a man so distressed by the fatalities that followed a crush of fans at the end of a Celtic-Rangers match at Ibrox in 1971, that he smashes a shop window in the centre of Glasgow and is put on trial for it. A single actor plays the man, the policeman who arrests him, and the judge who decides his sentence.

But if producers were reluctant, Ure had her admirers: Christopher Small, a former editor of *The Glasgow Herald*, and Stewart Conn, who produced several of her plays for radio.

Scotland has changed much since and new generations of women playwrights, like Sue Glover and Rona Munro, have become visible and successful. Sometimes writers fall out of favour for a reason. Male writers do too. I applaud this attempt to revive interest in Ure, but I'm not convinced it will capture more than academic interest. That does not mean she should be forgotten. A thoroughly researched literary biography is overdue.

There is wit, empathy and imagination in her writing. She had a sharp ironic intelligence. She was tuned into the 1970s decade of feminism and made her mark, but that context has dated. Her plays are wordy and need explanation. As a woman, however, she is fondly remembered. Deirdre Murray and Barbara Rafferty recall her kindness and elegance. She was complex, enigmatic.

The academic, Jan McDonald, summed this up: 'To friends, colleagues and performers in her plays, she was beautiful if painfully thin, of a charmingly benign appearance, exquisitely if eccentrically dressed, wholly self-absorbed and unfailingly manipulative'. To achieve what she did, given the hurdles she had to overcome, was no mean feat.

DUNDEE

Cinema and the poor

Bob Cant

2014

Keep the Home Fires Burning was one of the most popular songs of 1914. Had there been music charts back then, there is little doubt that it would been at number one for weeks on end. Penned by Ivor Novello, a 21-year-old gay Welshman, its appeal lay in the message that people at home could do things to support all the young men who had headed off to defend their country's values, in places whose names they could barely pronounce.

There are no records about the level of its popularity in Dundee but I suspect that there might have been some scepticism about the appropriateness of these lyrics. The suggestions of stability and comfort which lie in the word *home* were no more than dreams for many Dundonians.

Recent historical research has cast new light on both the scale of housing problems in early 20th-century Dundee and the response of Dundonians to their ill-treatment at the hands of landlords.

Eddie Small's biography, *Mary Lily Walker, Forgotten Visionary of Dundee*, introduced me to a *Report on Housing and Industrial Conditions in Dundee* which was carried out in 1904-1905 for the Dundee Social Union. Half of the houses in Dundee at that time had only two rooms, proportionately worse than any other Scottish city. There were also 813 one-roomed houses with more than five people living in them.

Of the 5,888 houses which were studied in depth, not one had a bathroom. The stench from the deposit of human waste was said to be 'overwhelming'. One property that housed 177 persons had no sanitary accommodation at all; another, with 346 tenants, had four privies; yet another, with 215 tenants, had one privy. Many people kept their own dogs and cats in these properties and, along with the uninvited rats, this added to the general squalor of the situation.

Despite Walker's report, however, Dundee Council failed to instigate any significant housebuilding programme. The effects of continuing overcrowding and municipal neglect can be seen in the infant mortality rate; it rose from 133 per 1,000 in 1905 to 156 per 1,000 in 1911.

Dr Ann Petrie recounts the story of resistance to ever increasing rents in her study, *The 1915 Rent Strikes: An East Coast Perspective*. Housebuilding had ground to a halt before the war even began and the lack of housing stock gave landlords greater power over their tenants. Despite the widespread hardship caused by increases in the cost of living, Dundee landlords increased rents in 1915 by between 5% and 10%. What distinguished this rent strike campaign from previous ones was the scale of organisation; the powerful Jute and Flax Workers Union advised their members not to pay the increases and they presented the

issue to the Dundee Trades Council (DTC), which took on a leading role in mobilising support.

There were at that time 43 unions affiliated to the DTC and they gave their unanimous support to the strikers at a congress in November. A number of political parties involved in the DTC, such as the Independent Labour Party and the Scottish Prohibition Party, were already critical of the war; they saw the attempts to increase rents as another example of the way in which the war was being used to drive down the living conditions of working-class people. The message of the campaign began to move beyond the behaviour of landlords and Nicholas Marra, one of its leaders, called for housing to be made 'the business of either the municipality or the government'.

Some landlords, obviously oblivious to Ivor Novello's patriotic message, sought to evict the families of serving soldiers for failure to pay their rent; in one case, eviction was only delayed when the serving soldier in question made an appearance before the bench in the uniform of the Highland Light Infantry. As more notices to quit were sent out to rent-striking households, the campaign intensified; posters declaring that 'We Are Not Removing' began to appear in many windows, a fundraising flag day was organised and a boycott began of shopkeepers who were also landlords.

Several thousand postcards were sent from the city to the Prime Minister, Asquith, to remind him that Scotland was in revolt. The message from Dundee and other Scottish cities was heard at Westminster and the Rent Restrictions Act set rents at pre-war levels for the duration of the war and six months afterwards. A sticking plaster measure rather than a radical reform but a definite victory for the rent strikers.

At the end of the First World War, the return of democratic elections must have posed problems for politicians like David Lloyd George. He decided to recapture the popularity of his more radical days and return to a politics which sought to enhance the living conditions of working people. 'Homes fit for heroes' became his most successful slogan and it enabled him to retain power, albeit in an uncomfortable coalition.

Dundee saw the development of Scotland's first municipal housing scheme at Logie in 1919; based on the Garden City model, it was the first of several such schemes in the city. But the rents were such that they were beyond the reach of most textile workers and labourers; some schemes such as Beechwood were built without any shops and the travel costs involved in doing the messages added another strain to the cost of living.

In fact, people had to wait until the end of another war for the implementation of the kind of house-building programme that they had dreamed of. Nye Bevan was Minister of Housing (as well as Health) and he ensured that the soundly-constructed homes built in the 1940s provided the kind of stability and opportunities for well-being which had eluded working-class people since the Industrial Revolution.

During the housebuilding years of the Attlee Government, many people must have believed their accommodation problems had been eliminated permanently. Few, if any, could have imagined that a welfare law would lead housing associations in 2013 to consider

demolishing houses solely on the grounds that they had the wrong number of bedrooms.

By the 1930s, Ivor Novello had turned his back on producing patriotic songs and he became well known for writing musicals, such as *Glamorous Night* and *The Dancing Years*. Escapism was the name of his game and many Dundonians allowed Novello's musicals to help them forget the social nightmare that resulted from the austerity programmes of the day.

Dundee, with 31 cinemas, was some kind of film-going capital; when Green's Playhouse opened in 1936, it had a capacity for 4,000 customers and was the second largest cinema in Europe. For a couple of hours at a time, Ivor Novello could help Dundonians to enjoy a degree of warmth and intimacy that was still denied to them at home.

The Glass Bucket

Bob Cant

2016

I discovered the Glass Bucket by chance. I had just missed a bus and I didn't fancy hanging around in Dundee bus station for an hour. So I walked up St Andrews Street and within a few hundred yards I found a pub: no music; no pictures on the walls; lots of small tables with uncomfortable stools; a subdued atmosphere.

Because it was so close to a bus station, the Glass Bucket, unlike most pubs in the 70s, lacked any regular local clientele. What the customers here had in common was a desire to catch a bus to their own small town. Or so I thought. Once I had been in there a few minutes, I realised that some of the men there did seem to know each other; some of them displayed considerable curiosity about other male customers as they walked through the door; sometimes conversations were struck up between men who had previously given every indication of being strangers. There was a steady choreographic flow of men as they moved around the pub to position themselves next to other men with whom they imagined they might have something in common. Surely discussion of the intricacies of the timetables of buses to Alyth or Carnoustie was not worthy of such precision, such finesse?

Gradually, I realised that I had stumbled into a place that was the nearest to what could be described as a gay pub in Dundee. If you had asked the bar staff if this was a gay pub, they would have denied it; all the unaccompanied men could have told you a different story, but many of them would have denied it as well. The very concept of coming out had not yet reached this part of Scotland. It was rather different from the louder, more ostentatious bars and politically contentious meeting places that I was becoming used to in London. But, in Dundee, in 1972 this was the place for gay men to go to if they wanted to meet other gay men. Quietly!

The law criminalising all male homosexual activity was, of course, a factor in intimidating gay men. Some years after my first visit to the Glass Bucket, two men in Dundee were sentenced to a year's imprisonment for committing sodomy in a cubicle in a public convenience but that was an isolated incident. While a handful of men knew about legal persecution, everybody who experienced any desire for other people of the same sex knew about shame; there was the inner shame that you might feel about having an inferior sexuality; there was the more public shame that would pursue you and your family if your sexuality became public knowledge. Shame was found in other countries but Scotland was particularly noted for the unforgiving nature of its Presbyterian shame.

At first, I thought the silent, ultra-cautious behaviour of the men in the pub was indicative of their shame but over the years I changed my mind about that; there were no

helplines in those days and, if you had got through the door of the pub, you had, somehow or other, come to terms with the implications of shame; you might find the atmosphere rather more constrained than you would like but you would accept it because you didn't want to rock the boat; you didn't want to be barred from going there. Far clearer examples of unresolved shame were to be found on the street outside, among the men who were too terrified to cross the threshold; the proximity of the pub to the bus station could provide a good excuse as to why they might be going in there. But so overwhelming was the guilt about the nature of their sexual desires that they couldn't even lie convincingly about their reasons for visiting the Glass Bucket. A lot of ashamed isolated men tramped up and down St Andrews Street, again and again, night after night, torn between desire and terror.

Later on in the 70s, a pub called The Gauger opened on the Seagate, about the same distance away from the bus station as The Glass Bucket. Another world! The music was deafening – you could probably hear it on the Perth Road. It let itself be known as a pub that welcomed both gay men and lesbians. In fact, the pub was divided into two areas, so that there was a kind of sexual segregation. The area with the pool tables seemed to be entirely occupied by short, eh'm-no'takin-nae-shite-frae-naebody lesbians; the area nearer the bar was the preferred area of the gay men, many of whom were drinking at a speed that suggested they were in a competition; Neddy Scrymgeour's heart would have been broken. The Gauger seemed to represent the future of gay venues. Shouting and limited physical contact became the norm. And, like it or not, more people went in there than ever went into the Glass Bucket; so, that was a bit of a setback for the prevailing climate of shame.

It was easy to have quiet conversations in the Glass Bucket and easy for your neighbours to overhear them. I recall hearing a conversation one night between two Dundonian men about the same age as myself. They had clearly known each other well in the past. One of them was explaining that they wouldn't be able to spend time with each other, now that he had a wife and bairn. No identifying words like 'gay' or even 'homosexual' were used but this was clearly a conversation between two men who had once been close; they might even have been lovers. There was no anger; no tears; no recriminations; just an air of sadness. The unmarried one appeared to accept the situation; they continued sitting quietly with each other and they were still doing so when I left to catch the bus to Kirkbuddo.

The Glass Bucket pub is no more; there is now a cafe on the site. I went to look for a photographic image of the pub as it was back in the 70s because I thought it might be of interest to the organisers of LGBT History Month. But image there was none. Back in the 70s, the Glass Bucket had succeeded in being invisible, except for those who needed to know about its inner life, and the invisibility continues today. I hope that some of the former customers are able to share their memories of the times when they put shame behind them and walked into a pub to meet people like themselves.

'Cool Dundee'

Gerry Hassan

2018

2018 will be the 'Year of Dundee'. There is excitement and expectation in the city. After years in the doldrums, Dundee has been punching above its weight for over a decade. It's not just the anticipation of the V&A's public opening on 15 September, the city has been picking up international attention and plaudits. These include 'Scotland's coolest city' (*Wall Street Journal*), the 'coolest in Scotland' and undergoing a 'renaissance' (*Condé Nast Traveller*), 'Britain's coolest city' (*GQ magazine*), and one of the top 10 global destinations for 2018 (*Wall Street Journal*).

Dundee has changed, lots of positive things have been happening, and more is on the way. Yet, it is also true that Dundee has historically been neglected by large parts of Scotland, from being overlooked to being patronised. How often have I heard the line, 'I have never been to Dundee; I have just passed through it without stopping,' as a friendly Aberdonian recently said at a party in Edinburgh? Dundee planners have even made this easier as the Kingsway provides an easy bypass cutting through the city.

My Auntie Betty, in her 80s, and an astute observer of all things related to the city, commented last weekend that 'Dundee has always been a Cinderella city. Edinburgh is the capital, Glasgow is always buzzing with things going on, and Aberdeen had the oil'. Is it possible that Scotland's central belt tunnel vision, which is really a Glasgow-Edinburgh focus, will ever give Dundee a chance to shine and be noticed?

How sustainable it is for Dundee to keep talking itself up and to be constantly praised? What happens after the V&A opens and the novelty has passed? Doubts have already been raised about the ambitious first year visitor figures of half a million, but they aren't really the issue. More important is what happens after that, including the relationship of the V&A to other institutions and local people. Will Dundonians see their own stories and themselves in the new building? Will they have a chance to find their own voices, or will well-meaning curators tell them that they know better?

The V&A development has been a big gain for the city, but it has to be a catalyst in a wider account. It may be the crown jewels in the waterfront redevelopment – itself the second largest public infrastructure project in Scotland after the Queensferry Crossing. Dundee has consistently had an ongoing relationship with its riverfront, in attempting to revive it and reconnect it to the city centre at least since the 1980s – with obvious lessons for Glasgow and the dead river that is the Clyde flowing through its centre.

How do we realistically measure what success could look like and feel to a city like Dundee? This is a city with wonderful things going on. There is the new railway station hotel being built, the Malmaison Hotel in the decade-long derelict Tay Hotel, the award-

winning Verdant Works, the refurbished McManus Galleries, Dundee Centre for Contemporary Arts (DCA), Dundee Rep, as well as two universities and the reputation the city has for life sciences and the games industry. Then there is the remarkable Breakthrough Dundee scheme present in every secondary school, supporting and mentoring disadvantaged children and offering the sort of intensive support which might just make a difference.

None of this has come by accident. Dundee has a civic leadership who are unashamedly champions for the city. Scale means that public bodies choose to work together rather than engage in turf wars, and geography, which can work to the city's disadvantage, has retained its uniqueness. Dundee is still like nowhere else in Scotland – a city shaped by the legacy of jute, feisty women and men who were, in periods of unemployment, relegated to 'kettle boilers'. It has evolved a genuine culture and ecology of public and private co-operation, investment and innovation, which has paid dividends.

The world has stood up and taken notice. But some of it is in a predictable and problematic way. The low cost of Dundee housing is understandably used to attract international experts with the quality of life argument, but the city booster/gentrification model is invoked by all despite it being bust. *The Times* was at it only last week, declaring: 'The sun continues to shine on Dundee', and used celebrity Lorraine Kelly's house going for £825,000 as some kind of mark of progress.

Previously, *The Times* ran a full supplement in its *The Future of Scotland* series on Dundee. Despite the presence of Dundonian Kenny Farquharson, their version of the city was entirely institutional and made up of public and private big-wigs. What was missing, as they are from many public conversations, were the voices of Dundonians who don't belong to a public-private partnership, local chamber of commerce, and haven't established a high-tech start-up. One civic leader in the city said to me 'what we are offering is a trickle-down version of the city, the economy and the city', and wondered aloud about 'how this was going to reach the part of Dundee which lives north of the Kingsway'.

For those who don't know the reference, the Kingsway, as well as being a 1930s bypass through the city, acts as a kind of economic and social apartheid and quasi-Berlin wall, with most of the communities north of it being the large-scale post-war council estates from St Mary's through Fintry, Douglas and Whitfield.

Dundee has some difficult economic challenges to face and turn around. A recent study of UK cities by the Centre for Cities found that the city's employment rate of 64.1% was the lowest of any UK city and that 9,800 local citizens of working age would need to find employment to bring the city's employment up to the UK average. Numerous other data show the city's comparative disadvantages.

According to 2016 data from the Centre for Cities, Dundee has the lowest weekly workplace earnings of Scotland's four biggest cities – £493.60 – compared to £564.60 for Edinburgh and £500.90 for Glasgow. It has a higher official unemployment rate (3.23%) in relation to Edinburgh (1.52%) and Glasgow (2.68%), and a higher youth claimant count

(3.16%) – Edinburgh being 1.41% and Glasgow 2.81%. The city has made significant progress in some areas and is no longer the teenage pregnancy capital of Scotland, but has a deep-seated drugs problem which has already seen a dozen drugs-related deaths in January this year, compared to 38 for all of 2016.

It has the least qualified workforce of the four cities, with 37% having NVQ4 qualifications or more, and proportionately the smallest private sector (with the public sector 40.3% of the local workforce). On the plus, house prices at an average of £130,260 in 2015 are significantly below Edinburgh (£239,895) and Aberdeen (£222,411), showing that the Dundee pound can go further than other local currencies. More recent research also found that Dundee had the fourth highest ultrafast broadband connection at 92.9% in the UK – only surpassed by Worthing, Luton and Cambridge – while Aberdeen was last.

With all of the above, Dundonians have shown their capacity to adapt, survive and thrive. The *Condé Nast Traveller* lauding of Dundee, written by local writer Danny Wallace, noted that Dundonians are 'friendly, forward-thinking people', a sentiment that resonates with my Auntie Betty who believes that 'they are the most generous and friendly about'. It is to be applauded that Dundonians tell themselves such uplifting tales about themselves, but there are also other characteristics to the city.

Dundonians have a natural scepticism and a propensity to be able to identify people peddling false gods or claims – whether they are homegrown or passing through. Traditionally, local people have always had a questioning attitude to power, shaped by the experience of once omnipotent religion, bad employers and the scale of poverty the city was once known for.

It wasn't an accident that some of D C Thomson's most famous cartoon strips such as *The Bash Street Kids* or *Dennis the Menace* were defined by conflict with authority. Indeed, Dundee being a left-leaning city for decades had a long-running quarrel with D C Thomson (due to their anti-union employment practices and right-wing editorialising). This stand-off has now been buried with D C Thomson embracing the city (and investing in the Breakthrough Dundee programme), while locals have learnt to love them.

2018 is the year of Dundee, as London and international journalists drop in and describe the city in clichés, in terms such as 'A little pot of gold at the end of the A92' (*The Guardian*), 'Dundee is the new Glasgow' (*Sunday Times*), or 'Bilbao on Tay' (*The Times*). Let's hope some at least capture the unique characters of the city and its many characteristics.

Scale gives Dundee some advantages but also limits its potential. Cities and city-regions work by their mix, diversity and cross-fertilisation, and on an European scale, never mind global, all of Scotland's cities need to see themselves as city-regions. Salutary to note that an influential Scottish economic report from 1970 envisioned a Dundee of the future of 300,000 people – when it is now currently half that size. What could a Dundee city-region look like and is it possible today or in the near future?

The issue of local leadership and government is pivotal. Dundee has created all kinds of

clusters and networks, but local government in our country is hamstrung, tied down by decades of centralisation from an untrusting centre – whether Westminster or Holyrood. Who will have the confidence to let our local democracy be free, flourish, experiment, and even at times learn to fail, and thus, adapt?

Finally, all of this is predicated on the challenge of the economy and employment of the future. Dundee has done lots of the right things this last decade, but we have to address what we do after manufacturing and the mass employment of plant industries like Timex and NCR have passed away (the latter still having a small presence in the city).

Dundee shows what can be done in the existing economic, social and local governance environment. But it leaves unanswered the big questions that we have to address at a Scottish, UK and international level. How do we pay our bills in an increasingly ultra-competitive world? How do we create and share wealth? And how does the Dundee of the future belong as much to those living north of the Kingsway as to those already advantaged?

Dundee has a long way to go

Bob Cant

2018

Dundee is not the first city to take a cultural path to regeneration but the newly opened V&A museum may change Dundee's profile beyond all recognition. Just as the Guggenheim Museum has become an icon of Bilbao, and the Opera House an icon of Sydney, Kengo Kuma's new museum may take on a similar role for Scotland's fourth city. Perhaps a globally-recognised icon is what the planners were hoping for – *American Vogue* is already of the view that 'Dundee is one of Scotland's most exciting places to be'. Aye, weel, maybe.

The museum itself is certainly exciting, as well as architecturally ambitious. Perched on the banks of the Tay, just next to *HMS Discovery*, it seems to act as a pyramid of optimism for the city and its hard-to-impress citizenry. Last week, during the tattie holidays, scores of Dundonians, of all shapes and sizes, were queuing round the block for a chance to visit the much vaunted museum. Walking into the entrance hall does take you into another world. The slanted wooden layers rising from the floor right up to the ceiling echo the concrete furrows on the exterior of the building.

There is no panoramic view of the Tay, but in the midst of the wooden layers there are small but and ben-sized windows which give tantalising glimpses of the river as you climb the stairs to the design galleries. You are given the chance to discover the Tay from a variety of unusual angles. The entrance area has a compelling impact that draws visitors in and invites them to leave the noisy world of everyday life behind.

The design section contains a mass of artefacts from the worlds of engineering, fashion, furniture and healthcare, as well as artworks from D C Thomson's *Beano* and more recent computer games. There are so many of them that the area has a slightly cluttered feel to it – in contrast with the elegant simplicity of a room created by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The Oak Room was part of the Ingram Street Tearooms in Glasgow and, after being in storage for over 40 years, was re-constructed for the V&A. On the same floor is a space where people can come along with their sandwiches and connect to their electronic devices with no questions asked; similar in some ways to the social functions of a public library.

Despite the fact that the opening of the V&A has enabled media folk around the world to 'discover' Dundee, the museum is only the latest chapter in a process of regeneration that has been going on for some 20 years. Since the departure of the jute and marmalade industries, as well as the closure of the Timex factory, the city has been hard-pressed economically and its population has fallen from a peak of 180,000 in 1971 to 150,000 today.

The two universities have been major drivers in the efforts to reconstruct the city anew. Dundee University has become a world-class leader in the field of bio-technology, and its

Drug Discovery Unit has been involved in the development of drugs to combat a multiplicity of diseases. Abertay University has taken a leading role in computer game design and is probably best known for spawning *Grand Theft Auto*. There are now many more employment opportunities to keep young Dundonians in the city and to attract others to move there. Dundee Contemporary Arts and the refurbished McManus Galleries have joined the Dundee Rep and the thriving music scene in Lochee to generate more space for cultural activities and creative dialogue.

While the opening of the V&A is a significant achievement, it is far from being the end of the story; it is just one part of an innovative development that will seek to enhance the place of the Tay in the life of the city. With funding from the likes of the Cities Development Fund and Scottish Enterprise, the next 10 years will see the emergence of a thoughtfully designed Waterfront project with the V&A at its core. A hotel is already partially built; there will also be retail units and housing for people with a variety of income levels.

There are often problems about the unintended consequences of such major developments. The Project for Public Spaces is very critical of the relationship between the Guggenheim and the rest of Bilbao. While the museum has enhanced tourist numbers to the city, they see the building as an interruption on the landscape which also degrades the civic and cultural life which pre-dated it. The seven-year-old Turner Gallery in Margate has succeeded in bringing more visitors to the town, but that focus has been criticised for failing to engage with local artists and thus undermining the sustainability of the project.

Dundee Council and the regeneration team have, from the beginning, been clear that they did not want there to be a dislocation between the museum area and the older parts of the city. Given the high levels of poverty in the city, concerns were expressed about the decision to dedicate £80m of funding to one building rather than improvements in the daily lives of Dundonians. With this in mind, there was a commitment on the part of the council both to prioritise local employment and suppliers and to ensure that any contractors paid the Scottish enhanced living wage. They wanted the relationship between the V&A and the rest of the city to be a friendly one. Dundee's existing cultural life was acknowledged and community choirs, such as Loadsaweeminsinging, featured prominently in the opening ceremonies. There were to be no barriers, physical or cultural, in the emerging new Dundee.

Although I was born in Dundee, I never lived there, but I knew it well enough to be aware of the seemingly never-ending cycle of demolitions and subsequent urban developments. I am too young to remember the pillars of the old Dundee Town House, but I can recall the opening of the Angus Hotel as well as its demise. How safe is any building in the city from the hammer of the demolition squad?

Having visited the V&A and understood the aspirations for the Waterfront, I feel optimistic that this project has the potential to transform the whole of Dundee for the better in the long-term. But it will still be some time before we can be sure that the roots of the project are strong enough to enable Dundee to flourish.

Dundee: the place to be in Scotland?

Gerry Hassan

2019

Dundee is the talk of the town. The once forgotten city of Scotland – certainly in the eyes of the Glasgow and Edinburgh chatterati – is now widely celebrated and recognised. It is winning piles of awards and attention, the latest of which being named *Sunday Times* 'Best Place to Live in Scotland', with Dundee High School-educated Andrew Marr stating that 'Dundee is certainly a very good idea'.

Dundee's moment in the sun is well-deserved and has been a long time coming. There is an undoubted buzz, dynamism and can-do attitude which defines much of the city and its civic leadership, and as a Dundonian, I take great pride in my hometown being noticed and winning lots of accolades. As the *Sunday Times* states: 'Scotland's sunniest city is making one big collective creative roar'.

The expectation, and then arrival, of the V&A has undoubtedly acted as a catalyst, but it is *more* than that. There is the now familiar list of being a UNESCO City of Design, the work of the DCA and Dundee Rep, the remaking of the McManus Galleries and the development of world-class tourist experiences such as *HMS Discovery* and Verdant Works. Then there is the pioneering games industry, science and innovation, and stellar work of Dundee and Abertay universities, along with Duncan of Jordanstone, all of which work in partnership and have local, national and international footprints.

This is a positive story and one of change, achieved by a civic leadership – including the council, public institutions and wider bodies like Creative Dundee – who have pulled together to create a changed mindset for the city and have had a huge impact. As one civic leader commented: 'The culture needs to be communal and supportive rather than ultra-competitive'.

Yet, at the same time as Dundee rightly wins lots of applause and attention, the wider economic and social challenges which the city faces cannot be ignored. While Dundee is one of the most creative cities and places in the UK, a city with one of the highest levels of PhDs per head in the UK, it is also one of the most unequal: a place where one can thrive as a success, but which is as grim as it is elsewhere if you are poor. One local councillor states: 'I worry about what happens when the hype dies. Once you've been cool, how do you cope with not being cool?'

Dundee has some significant economic and social challenges. It has a 65% employment rate – the second lowest such rate for any UK city according to the Centre for Cities; the second lowest rate of business start-ups, and the lowest weekly earnings of any of Scotland's four biggest cities.

Dundee's poverty levels are a salutary reminder that hardship and systematic exclusion

can still sit next to growth hubs, creativity and the buzz of being hailed as the 'new' – with the latter often used as an excuse to forget and marginalise the parts of the city which do not meet the new 'official' success story.

This is something most of the thoughtful public leadership in the city are well aware of, as one local representative puts it: 'We can talk about PR and reputation but we have one in four kids living in poverty; massive underemployment; the council targets an unemployment figure that is completely meaningless because we have the highest proportion of citizens disengaged from the labour market of any city in Britain'.

The other side of the city is barely touched by the 'new' Dundee with its V&A and well-intentioned outreach programmes. The high levels of poverty and disadvantage are not aided by a heroin problem in parts of the city, long-term population decline from the early 1970s until recently, and an economic and social divide between north and south of the Kingsway which has become in effect a sort of impervious Berlin Wall in terms of social mobility. It wasn't always thus, as I can reflect, having grown-up north of the Kingsway, in the council estate of Ardler in the 1970s, witnessing an explosion of working-class ambition and aspiration, at a time before mass-unemployment and deindustrialisation kicked in during the 1980s that parts of the city have never fully recovered from.

It is important to reflect the many Dundees within the council boundaries and not to pose one set of experiences. Dundee has changed for the better in numerous ways in recent times, and the vision and pragmatic can-do approach of local leaders is impressive and delivering results.

Many people in city institutions know the limits of the current paradigms they are operating in. Take the V&A coming to the city. It has created a new locus and a powerful tourist magnet while also inspiring lots of local interest. Yet, the V&A franchise model brought to the banks of the Tay is one whereby cultural regeneration promises great things, but rarely actually delivers. Culture on its own seldom turns around a city and solely drives economic growth. There are no real examples of this anywhere in the world: an unfortunate reality which is eventually going to be reflected in the glossy cultural strategies which seem to promise city renewal, almost everywhere, through arts, culture and creativity.

Underpinning these assumptions is an economic model which not only doesn't work, but never has: it focuses on the winners in the economy, and attempts to aid the excluded and displaced through training and skills. This focuses on such nebulous ideas as the knowledge economy and creative classes: all of which are discredited ideas left over from the New Labour era. Ten years after the crash, local economic agencies as well as national governments in Scotland and the UK and elsewhere, still cling to this mindset, despite a wider political awareness of its shortcomings, for want of any other detailed prospectus.

In this age of competitive funding and positioning about so much, Dundee should rightly be proud of having made its mark and its many achievements. However, the limits of these undoubted successes in changing the lived experiences and opportunities of so many people in the city should also be acknowledged.

I am proud of the positive changes which have happened in Dundee over the last few years. They show both what can be achieved at the micro-level, but also the wider problem of macro-reality. Beyond the obvious limitations of focusing on awards and lists which have a flavour of the month quality, there is the bigger concern about how do we make a sustainable version of the economy and society which provides sustenance and livelihoods for the vast majority of people?

This is a conversation which *Sunday Times'* lists not only do not answer, but actually point in the entirely wrong direction on: to a short-termist, consumerist, debt-ridden, environmentally destructive version of the economy. Instead of promoting such a vision of society, we have to start investigating and promoting a fundamentally different idea of the economy: one which isn't based on financialisation of every aspect of our lives, getting individuals and households into debt which is one of the drivers of the UK economy, and which has a version of growth and success which blithely writes off a large section of the population as permanently unproductive.

That vision of a different kind of economy cannot wait on national governments finally getting it. It has to come from citizens, campaigning groups, NGOs and local government shifting their thinking from the unsustainable growth model, and instead finding different, more human and progressive ways of measuring the success of the economy. It has to celebrate the authentic, the unique, the profoundly local, and a version of creativity that isn't about some spurious creative class, but the full range of the human imagination and possibility, including what we want the purpose of our economy, society and cities to be for.

Dundee could be the future, showing how far the old new can take you, and the ultimate emptiness of things like *Sunday Times'* list-ism.

Dundonians have seen little improvement

Josh Moir

2019

Let it be known that I have always had a thing for libraries. I remember, much akin to one of my first literary heroes, Matilda, the feeling of freedom and excitement I had when I received my first library card. I felt like worlds had opened up to me; the energy of knowledge waiting to be discovered crackled unseen yet palatable under my fingertips as I trailed the aisles of books looking for whatever I would learn next. I was convinced there was magic in the air.

The Whitfield Library, where I received my beloved library card, was almost a microcosm of the housing scheme itself. Behind an austere, almost Soviet facade was a warm gentle beating heart. It exists only in my memory now, subject to the folly of the mind, and no doubt the interior was not as comfortable as I remember. The carpet, likely rough and industrial compared to the comforting plush of my childhood memories, the tall thin windows serving no purpose but to accentuate the gloom with dramatic slashes of light as opposed to giving everything the tobacco-coloured cast I remember so well.

I remember once going on a school trip, walking the 200 metres from my primary school gates, in boy-girl-boy-girl pairs and hand-in-hand like animals making the short trip up the gangplank to the Ark. Those school gates have also been demolished now, lost in the deluge of progress.

Inside the library chaos reigned and while my class around me all ran in circles or giggled at illustrated biology textbooks, I was pouring over the shelves of books, irritated that my sanctuary had been defiled. I wasn't allowed to check any books out that day, while my classmates stood in line to check out books picked seemingly at random – I had already reached my limit and couldn't take any other new adventures home.

My obsession with libraries didn't end there. When I finally reached high school – which as I write is currently still standing, although its future remains uncertain due to an instigated fire some months ago – I became a resident of the library. I would spend hours there: before school, between classes, during lunch and even long into the afternoons, until the librarian would lock the doors and wearily send us on our way.

I credit that high school librarian for the man I am today, giving me recommendations which satiated my need for stories featuring characters who resembled me in some way. In the post Section-28 society we were living in, these recommendations would have been illegal some five or six years prior.

Now that the deluge of rejuvenation is sweeping Dundee, with the arrival of the V&A, many architectural delights are popping up all over the city. In Whitfield we have the imaginatively named 'The Crescent' as our proposed new community hub. An antiseptic

crescent-shaped creation, situated on Lothian Crescent, and it is here our new 'library' is based.

The new library seems more like an afterthought by the architect. A few book shelves and computers in a corner off the main entryway. Any comfort or encouragement for people to get lost in other worlds and spend some time seems to be overwritten by a longing for them to just get lost. It is this loss of comfortable community spaces which has locals, not just in Whitfield but across Dundee as a whole, crying 'gentrification'.

Interestingly, it is the loss of another old library which has pulled this argument firmly into the zeitgeist. The Reading Rooms, once a local library and now a dance music venue which has been host to some of the largest names in the DJ world (I depend on friends for this information as dance music is something which has largely passed me by. An encyclopedic knowledge of Alice Deejay's debut album does not a dance music fan make), has now closed its doors for good and has fans of the venue and the talent it hosted launching petitions, as the masterminds behind it look for other avenues and indeed other locations.

Some of the questions being asked are leaving residents baffled. While Dundee City Council talks about revitalising the city, the residents are left seeing very little real improvement. Under the most challenging retail environment possibly ever seen, many retail units are left empty, seemingly abandoned, until the next chain restaurant comes sniffing, resulting in an almost perpetual carousel of food and drink establishments.

The attitude of Dundee City Council, as it attempts to negotiate this new phase in its history, feels very much like a city trying incredibly hard to compete with the big boys. However, having 30 years of shared history, I can't help but think that this seems more like a council with big ambitions playing at dressing-up old enough to get into a nightclub. It's just a shame all the nightclubs are being closed down.

INVERAMSAY

The road to Inveramsay

Kenneth Roy

2011

In rural Aberdeenshire, in the 1920s, a railway clerk from the village of Rayne left school at 14, woke up three years later, and realised that he had been asleep all his young life. He made up for lost time by reading everything he could lay his hands on.

I met the railway clerk in R F Mackenzie's autobiographical travel book, *A Search for Scotland*. One paragraph lodged in my mind and, every time I read it, I'm moved by the particular scene it depicts and the lost world it represents:

> *At Inveramsay, the junction where a branch line to Macduff left the main Aberdeen-Inverness line, he [the railway clerk] and a shunter shared a two-roomed shack which they called 'Utopia.' One had of it was partitioned off for sleeping. In the other half there two chairs, a table, scores of books later gathered into shelves, a paraffin lamp and a paraffin stove that went glug-glug as occasionally we sat into the night discussing everything in heaven and earth.*

R F Mackenzie, then an undergraduate student at Aberdeen, was one of the guests invited into the shack, along with other passengers from the exposed platform at Inveramsay. Thawing out before an open fire fuelled with engine coal, the guests often got more than they bargained for. Once, the railway clerk demanded to know of the local minister how he explained the difference between the first three gospels on the one hand and St John's Gospel on the other; what Luke meant by 'The Kingdom'; and what proof he had that Matthew the publican and Matthew the evangelist were one and the same person.

Mackenzie wrote: 'No quarry was too big for these railway highwaymen to swoop down upon, firing explosive ideas that they had drawn from the arsenal of Wells and Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill and following up with some incendiaries of their own manufacture'.

Thinking about Inveramsay over the years, I had come to see it as a metaphor rather than a place. Then, one day, when I thought I was in danger of losing the metaphor, I decided to find the place.

Inveramsay

'Can you point me in the direction of Inveramsay?'

'Never heard of it,' replied the cheerful woman in Mackay's department store in Inverurie.

She turned to her colleague at the check-out. 'Ever heard of a place called Inveramsay?'

'Isn't that near Insch?'

According to the map, it could not be more than three miles from where I was standing.

I crossed to the library and requested a book on the social history of the district, one which included an account of Inveramsay. There appeared to be no such book, but the librarian offered to consult the local history section (not based in Inverurie, but at some unnamed HQ) who would fax me anything they found. (Either they found nothing or they ignored the request – I'm still waiting for the fax.) But then we decided, the librarian and I, that it might be worth looking up railway histories for some mention of Inveramsay.

This inspiration led me to H A Vallance's *The Great North of Scotland Railway* and its chapter on the development of the branch line from Inveramsay to Macduff (initially only to Turriff), which opened in September 1857. Mr Vallance is a great man for the facts, but the poetry of the railways somehow eludes him. He sees nothing in the least lyrical about the Great North of Scotland Railway, about which the only thing that was great (for it was the smallest line in the network) was the fantastic romance of the whole adventure.

Mr Vallance's book reproduces a table which practically breathes steam:

The Macduff section	**Miles**
Inveramsay	0
Wartle	3 3/4
Rothie Norman	7 1/2
Fyvie	10 3/4
Auchterless	14
Turriff	18
Plaidy	22 1/2
King Edward	24 3/4
Banff Bridge	29 1/2
Macduff	29 3/4

Four trains, with connections to or from Aberdeen, were provided in each direction between Inveramsay and Macduff. The trains called at all stations, and the journey time varied from 1 hour 30 minutes to 1 hour 50 minutes. 'I thought it would last forever,' wrote R F Mackenzie. He wasn't talking about the journey, but about the Great North of Scotland Railway. But it didn't. It lasted for scarcely more than a century; it was merely a hiccup in the long stretch of history. The Inveramsay section closed to passengers on 1 October 1951. 'Today,' Mackenzie observed, 'the branch lines are grassed over, eroded by rain and gravity like Roman roads and earthworks'.

And few in Inverurie even know of the Utopia on their own doorstep.

I had the good fortune to be assigned by Kenny's Taxis a driver in late middle age who used to be a postman in Chapel of Garioch, close to Inveramsay. I asked him to take me to the platform, advising him that it must be the actual spot and not somewhere roughly

adjacent. He nodded gravely, and we drove in silence along a straight, flat road flanked by gentle countryside. The A96 to Inverness, he informed me.

After a few minutes, we drew up outside a cluster of houses.

'Why have we stopped?'

'This is Inveramsay. That was the stationmaster's house and those were the railway workers' houses – numbers one to six. We have to cross the road to reach the platform.'

The seven houses have been gentrified and sold off. What remains of Inveramsay is gone in a blink. It is so insignificant a location that Aberdeenshire Council has not thought it necessary to erect a road sign formally announcing its existence. The cars roar deafeningly northward.

Utopia is long gone. They dismantled the line with indecent haste soon after the withdrawal of the service, and demolished the station buildings at the same time. But the foundations remain: we were now standing unmistakably on what used to be the modest platform of a rural railway station, reduced to a tangle of weeds and broken wood. I walked from one end of the platform to the other, back and forth. Presently, I sensed that the taxi driver was beginning to fear for my sanity. 'Are you doing a survey?' he asked. 'Yes,' I said. 'A sort of survey.'

It was here, between trains, that the unsuspecting minister scraped the snow from his boots, drew a chair up to the fire, and was startled to be asked if he had ever committed adultery; here that the provost of Inverurie was challenged to say how many tons of coal Britain exported every year; here that the railway clerk committed to memory a double column about India in *John O'London's Weekly* in preparation for a long debate with a Church of Scotland missionary; here that scripture was intelligently quoted, politics disputed, Shaw prefaces dissected; here, in the shack at Inveramsay, that a young R F MacKenzie witnessed a Scotland in slow transition from religious certainty to political idealism.

Mackenzie is sparing in his information about the leader of the cultural revolution in rural Aberdeenshire. He never names the clerk. All we know is that he was a member of a large family, and the only one of that family to break free. He packed in his job and high-tailed it for London, where he got a job as a barman in Putney. For his independence of thought, his irreverence, his restlessness of spirit, he was remembered in the district as an affa lad.

You couldn't reproach him for his desire to exchange Inveramsay for the fleshpots of Putney, for this was a young man who would have been eager to enlarge, not only his enquiring mind, but his experience of life; and he came to discover that, occasionally, experience could be more enjoyable and more reliable than theory. In Putney, having devoured articles and books on 'the problem about sex', he found that, when he tried it for himself, there was no problem about sex. Did he ever return to Inveramsay? Mackenzie doesn't say. It is possible that he vanished into the anonymous vortex of London and was never heard of again. As for Utopia, it would appear that Inveramsay possessed not so

much as a pub or a shop or a church (though Mackenzie and he did go sermon-tasting most Sundays); and I expect attractive women would have been in short supply. Inveramsay was really nothing more than a platform, an idea and a passion. They have built national theatres on less.

Springburn

Whatever happened to that spirit of independent enquiry? An obvious, if unsatisfactory, answer is that it was formalised in the great scheme of post-war education. Mackenzie was dismissive of that lazy assumption. He believed that we all start as questioners, 'burrowing into everything', but that education bears down us from a very early age, channelling our thoughts just as agriculturalists, channelling the course of a river, build solid defences against any random outbursts. An outburst of thought, of questioning, could be equally random, until the minority set in power over us, directing the flow of a community's thoughts, moved in to restore the current to its old, safe channel.

This speculation takes me to the poorest constituency in Scotland, Glasgow Springburn, where the governing minority has so failed the people that the number of school leavers with no qualifications is 300% higher than the Scottish average, teenage pregnancies are 60% higher, deaths from lung cancer 94% higher, the incidence of heart disease 40% higher, the number of people on income support 130% higher, the unemployment rate 140% higher.

On this hot spring day, questions were certainly being asked, though not in a shack and not by the people who live here, but by social workers from a charity concerned with regenerating Britain's poorest communities. I was myself stopped, outside the shopping mall, and asked for my opinion of the place. I might have said that, despite the physical squalor and the mounds of litter on the streets, the ghastliness of the shops, the poverty etched on the faces of the inhabitants, the overpowering factual evidence of deprivation, Springburn felt curiously alive – in a way that, say, Auchinleck is not alive and Alloway is not alive. Instead, I admitted that I didn't live in Springburn.

'And what,' I asked, turning the tables, 'are people generally concerned about?'

'Oh,' she said, 'drugs, violence, the usual things'.

The listening charity had set up a stall in the street with tables and chairs for conducting interviews. People wandered up, sat down, were gently encouraged to talk. One middle-aged man said his car had been stolen five times since the beginning of the year. Buildings were being burned out, windows smashed, and there were no policemen on the beat – none. His tone was one of despair and resignation. It might well be the prevailing one. Springburn, like Inveramsay, was a creation of the industrial revolution – it made railway locomotives for the world – but now that it no longer makes anything very much, it is one of those Scottish communities that seem to have no particular reason left for existence.

I went to the library looking for clues that might make sense of modern Springburn. I asked, just as I had in Inverurie, for books about the social history of the area. 'We don't

have any,' came the reply. 'What, none?' I asked in astonishment. 'We used to refer people interested in local history to the museum, but the museum's shut.'

So, let's imagine (for it is at least conceivable) that a modern equivalent of the railway clerk, thirsting for knowledge, having been let down by the Scottish educational system but anxious to improve himself, entered Springburn public library in search of enlightenment. What might he find? Among 'recent additions' to the stock: Steve Devereux's *Gun for Hire*, the autobiography of Reg Kray, and Nancy Cartwright's *My Life as a Ten Year Old Boy*; on the few shelves marked 'Literature', *The Faber Book of Murder*, *Trevor McDonald's World of Poetry*, and *World Famous Weird News Stories*; hundreds of CDs and videos, and among the current periodicals, *Hello*, *OK*, *House Beautiful*, and *The Beano*.

> *The history of human mental development has been a history of removing the human mind farther and farther away from the reality of the world we live in.*
> Jeremy Rifkin, *A New World View*.

As recently as the early 1960s, they were still building objects of power and beauty in Springburn. It is not so long since the best brass bands in the country played regularly in the park here; since the railway unions organised indoor picnics cum concerts known as the Sighthill Shunters' Soiree and the Collars Painters' Soiree; and since Signalman James Gibson – a blood brother of Inveramsay's inquisitive clerk – gave a lecture to the Caledonian Railway Debating Society on *A Philosophy of Life*. All this vitality, all this energy, suggests that people in Springburn once did things, happily accepting responsibility for the running of their own community.

Yet, so brutally has the civic memory been expunged, we have a public library deprived of any evidence of the men and women who lived and worked here. That is not merely a disgrace, but actually rather sinister: how much farther is the human mind to be removed from reality – and why? When I took the trouble to travel several miles across the city (as few in Springburn could be expected to do: for one thing, there is the question of expense) and asked in the Glasgow Room of the Mitchell Library for books about the history of Springburn, the librarian fetched from a stockroom no fewer than nine titles.

Why are books about Springburn not on open display where they belong – in the local public library? And the obliteration of the community's memory is not only brutal but complete – for, as the librarian alerted me, the museum next to the library, a small but valuable local asset, closed in March after the City Council withdrew its funding. The room stands empty, while (I am told) local groups are priced out of the limited accommodation still available.

As I was leaving Springburn library, an assistant handed me a newsletter published by Paul Martin MSP, entitled *Constituency Update*. Mr Martin's is one of the mugshots on the library's noticeboard, which lists five MSPs and MPs and six councillors, all of whom claim to be representing Springburn's interests. The number of politicians serving the area

appears to have increased in inverse proportion to the decline in the economy and self-confidence of the district. Now there's a political line-up the size of a football team, yet it is doubtful whether many in Springburn are aware of their names, such is the general loss of faith or even interest in the capacity of politics to change lives.

Mr Martin's newsletter makes depressing reading. Under the heading, *Paul Martin Calls for New Approach to Health in Springburn*, there is a brief account of the Public Health Institute's statistical analysis of the constituency, beginning with the following statement: *Paul Martin has told the experts behind the damning report about Springburn Constituency: DON'T TELL US WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW. GIVE US SOLUTIONS.*

Setting aside the abrasive tone and the sub-tabloid prose, I read the 200 words of text for an explanation of Mr Martin's new approach to health. I found none. If Mr Martin does have such a new approach, perhaps he should call a meeting in the former Springburn Museum and tell us what it is. If, however, the best he can manage is to blame public health statisticians for the wretched condition of his constituents, perhaps he had better just admit that he is impotent to improve the situation. It wouldn't matter much one way or the other, so low are the expectations of politicians among the poor.

As his life drew to a close, R F Mackenzie was still looking for an answer to the question: from where did the railway clerk of Inveramsay draw his inspired questioning of everything? (He might have asked the same question had he known of Springburn's Railway Debating Society). It was Mackenzie's instinct – it was indeed the theme of his book – that, with encouragement, many young Scots of the present day would become lively enquirers and questing spirits. Yet he despaired of Scottish education's inability to make sense of young people's experience and give direction to their lives.

He believed that children should be taught an integrated account of how the world of their great-great-grandparents grew into the world of their grandparents and into their own world, and that this should be explained in clear, concrete terms. How, for example, the railways came and gave to a region like rural Aberdeenshire a sense of community previously felt only by the parish. Or how a former weaving village in the East End of Glasgow was made and then broken by the steam engine. Mackenzie believed that, presented with the story in such a way, young Scots would begin to explore; begin to ask those basic questions that so intrigued and excited the railwaymen of rural Aberdeenshire, and of urban Springburn, 80 years ago; even begin to make Scotland a clearinghouse of ideas.

Mackenzie's romantic vision was of a new cultural revolution that started in the country – perhaps in a place as overlooked as Inveramsay. But the revolution might just as well be launched in Springburn, the poorest place in Scotland, with a few symbolic gestures that needn't cost much. The park where the bands played should be restored to its former glory, the museum reopened, the public library given some decent books. If you say this is well short of a revolution, you have obviously never been to Springburn.

The railway clerk

Barbara Millar

2015

Inveramsay was Kenneth Roy's inspiration for founding the Young Scotland Programme – a forum for debate and dialogue – in 2002. But he never dreamt that he would find out the identity of the Inveramsay railway clerk until, 13 years later, SR columnist Barbara Millar with the help of a genealogist tracked him down.

'I have often thought that youngsters seldom appreciate the true quality of their parents,' the letter begins. 'Your father was a man of many parts.'

The letter was written by Bella Law to her only daughter, Isobel, known to the family as Lizi. There is no date on it. But she clearly wished her children to understand and acknowledge their father's qualities. 'First and foremost,' she writes, 'he was an intellectual, had a wide knowledge of poetry and literature (self-taught), was a lover of beauty and nature, and also passionately interested in politics'. The letter continues:

> *When a young man, he was an ardent socialist, a rebel against the establishment, dreaming always of a brave new world. He and my brother Bill loved to heckle the speakers at political meetings, which they attended far and wide in the north of Scotland. Lord Boothby, an Aberdonian MP, enjoyed many a heated argument with the pair of them. I once went to a meeting with them where they practically monopolised his attention.*
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> *He deluged the Aberdeen Press and Journal with letters and articles on politics, Scottish country life and philosophical musings on life in general. He wrote some beautiful poetry but, unfortunately, because of our wandering life, most of his outpourings have been lost. He wrote under the initials AGL or Utopian. This latter nom-de-plume originated from a small wooden house he and Bill shared while they were both working at Inveramsay. They called it Utopia, enjoying a free, idyllic life while living there, hence the name. They were kindred spirits and shared many interests.*
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> *It was there that I first met your father. I was 19, he was 21. Ina, later Bill's wife, kept house for her father, who was stationmaster at Inveramsay. It was while staying with her on holiday that our romance started, and blossomed. And so, you are our beloved daughter, and I your loving mother.*

Allan Gray Law, Inveramsay railway clerk and 'Utopian', was born on 7 May 1907 at Kirkton of Rayne in rural Aberdeenshire, one of 11 children – seven boys, four girls – born

to William Wilson Law and Margaret Murray, coming after William, Mary, George, Annie, Lil, Sandy, Hector and Millie and before Harry and Alistair. Later in life he dropped one of the 'Ls' from his name in favour of 'Alan'. The family was brought up on a farm – Sunside of Rayne – where William senior bred heavy horses.

When he was around 14, Alan took it into his head to cycle to London, just to have a look at the place. This stood his youngest son, David, in good stead when he wanted to do the same in reverse – to cycle from London to Scotland – when he was 15, many years later. He felt his mother could scarcely refuse, knowing that her husband had done this when he had been even younger than her son was.

Alan attended Rayne North School, leaving at 14, taking a first job delivering telegrams. He recalled delivering them to 'the big hoose' – Pittodrie House, now the Pittodrie House Hotel. The house's 2,400-acre estate extended to the summit of Bennachie, which dominates this part of Aberdeenshire, and was of great importance to Alan and his wife in later years, a place they often climbed, even in the dark. The original house, at Chapel of Garioch, six miles from Inverurie, had been built in the late 1400s. In 1896, it was bought by shipping magnate George Smith, and he would have most likely been the recipient of the telegrams delivered by the young Alan.

In 1910, three years after Alan's birth, Robert F Mackenzie, writer and radical educationalist, was born at Garioch. His father was stationmaster at Wartle, an intermediate station on the Banff, Macduff, Turriff branch line. The next station to Wartle is Inveramsay, and this is where Alan took up employment as a clerk when he was 20, appointed on 27 September 1927, having previously been a junior clerk at Oyne. In his book, *A Search for Scotland*, Mackenzie recalls his encounters with this clerk and his friend, the shunter, who shared the two-roomed shack they called Utopia, furnished with 'scores of books' on history, physics, economics, politics, religion, philosophy, astronomy, literature. It is no coincidence that Mackenzie came across Utopia – he and Alan were contemporaries, born within a few miles of each other, and both involved in railway life.

In fact, it was a very tight-knit community. As Bella's letter to Lizi explained, Bill Drummond, her brother, older by nine years, was the shunter at Inveramsay. He married Ina Dawson, the Inveramsay stationmaster's daughter and Bella married Alan, the railway clerk. Bella Drummond was also from a large rural Aberdeenshire family – she was one of 10 and her father, William Drummond, a farmer, was himself a very erudite man. Bella, always very bright, had the opportunity to go to university. She was primarily interested in literature but, according to David Law, she was not allowed to choose her subject at Aberdeen University – she was told by the authorities she was to study zoology. She didn't particularly enjoy the subject and stuck the course for only a year before leaving, but she continued to write stories and poetry right up until she died, two months short of her 99th birthday.

Her brother Bill, the shunter, she described as 'a great character, with a heart of gold, an inexhaustible fund of jokes and anecdotes'. Bill Drummond played the mouth organ and

piano and acted in amateur drama. In a letter to his future wife Ina, 'my dearest little kid', written from Inveramsay, Bill tells of a night when they were plagued by 'forkies' (forkie-tails, or earwigs). 'What a night we had with forkies, the nasty brutes,' wrote Bill. 'I wish I could invent something to exterminate the lot. Alan is just terrified of them, and sags when I kill one with my finger.'

Later in the letter, Bill talks wistfully of 'the old story of going abroad' which, he says, 'has been coming into my head pretty often lately. I was reading an article on life in Tasmania and, really, it is the only thing I can think of. This life here is too cramped. I don't want to boast, but I have always had the feeling that I am fit for a better life or, to put it differently, would like something which would require more endeavour, more brain work, and something to really attain in the end, and, as you know, there is no outlook for me here'. But Bill never did get to Tasmania. He became the stationmaster at Tillyfourie and died at the age of 52.

Alan did, however, move on. He resigned from the railways in 1930 and went south. He and Bella were married at Chelsea register office on 7 August 1937. By then he was living in Sydney Street, Chelsea, with the occupation of assistant in a travel agency. Bella was a nurse, living at Hither Green Hospital in Lewisham, having trained at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. David Law recalls that his mother said that R F Mackenzie would visit the Laws when they were first in London, but there is no evidence that he saw the Laws again after the 1930s. In *A Search for Scotland*, he claims that Alan was working in a bar in Putney, but David Law says he has no knowledge of this. Alan was, however, managing a Bata shoe shop in Harrow between 1938 and 1939.

By this time, the Laws had started their own family – Michael was born in Shepherd's Bush, West London in 1938, Isobel (Lizi) came along in Perth in 1939, Alan followed in 1941 and David in 1945, both born in Turriff.

Throughout the 1940s, the family was rather nomadic. Alan had moved into the work which would occupy him for the rest of his life – working on the financial and admin side of civil engineering projects, a reserved occupation during the Second World War. He started with a company building the military airport at Fairford in Gloucestershire and subsequently moved around a lot with his work, so Bella often returned to Scotland to live on the family farm with the children, with various aunts, uncles and cousins always around. Michael, their eldest, worked out that he went to 27 different schools during his childhood.

Alan travelled widely, his passport bearing stamps and visas from all over the Middle East, Africa, South America and beyond. He was involved with the building of Mulberry harbours, the portable temporary harbours developed by the British during the Second World War and used to facilitate the rapid off-loading of cargo on to the beaches during the Allied invasion of Normandy. Later, after the war, he was involved with helping to clear the River Seine of bombs. His company put water into Abu Dhabi, built the Port Talbot docks, worked on the Suez Canal, built the harbour at Aden, bridges in the Caribbean.

At the end of the 1940s, he was out in Africa, on this occasion with all his family. His

company was part of the ill-fated Tanganyika groundnut scheme – a project set up by the British Government to cultivate tracts of what is now Tanzania and grow peanuts. Britain was still subject to post-war food rationing and short of cooking fats. The idea was to turn the groundnuts into vegetable oil, so heavy equipment was brought in on the single dirt track from the port of Dar-Es-Salaam to clear a huge area of land.

What no-one seemed to have worked out was that groundnuts needed 20 inches of water a year in order to grow. The area chosen was subject to drought, particularly since the rainforest had been cleared to cultivate the nuts. The scheme was entirely abandoned in 1951, after making huge losses and costing the British taxpayer dear. When they returned to Scotland, Bella very much missed her eight servants.

The family was reunited some months later when Bella and the children joined Alan in Strood, Kent, where his company was building the oil refinery on the Isle of Grain. The children immediately took the rise out of their father's Anglicised accent. His soft voice and lovely accent had become very English, David recalls, and 'we made a big thing out of this'. The family continued to move around, following Alan's contracts. He was always restless, David says. 'In some respects, perhaps he should never have married and had a family.' There were four moves within Strood and Rochester, then to Bromley, where Bella used Alan's bonus to buy a house, the first they'd ever owned. Alan wasn't particularly impressed by this purchase – but his family says he was never good with his own money: he was generous and would give it all away. He did like nice things, though: a good suit, with waistcoat, topped off by a Trilby. He also had a beautiful calf-skin cigarette holder, bought by Bella from Bond Street – he was never without a cigarette.

Alan's work also took him to Egypt (travelling by Sunderland flying boats), British Guyana, Canada. He was exceptionally well-travelled, and he remained well-read. The young man who had given recitations at the Rayne Mutual Improvement Society's 'Converzatione' evenings in the 1920s and 30s, and who had later taken a soap box to Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park to share his radical views, kept a well-stocked library at home. 'We had so many books at home,' says David. 'My parents worshipped them, and a lot of my education – I was a sickly child – was reading everything we had in the house.' And as for Alan's continued ability to argue, David adds: 'He could argue very convincingly that black was white. And, when you believed him, he would argue, just as convincingly, that white was black. He never lost the power of oratory. He wasn't good at everything, however. He was a terrible driver and acknowledged that he was absolutely useless at DIY'.

He and Bella left Bromley and moved to Winchester for his last contract and this, says David, he referred to as his 'golden years'. He loved the job, he loved the countryside and the history of the area. Their daughter Lizi and her daughter Luci also moved in for a while, which he was so happy about. But Alan Law never told his children about Utopia. He never spoke about that time in the shack at Inveramsay railway station, the heated exchange of views with Boothby in the press, and with others who would turn up to debate on any subject under the sun, well into the night. He died on 27 September 1979 at Peppard

Hospital, aged 72, from the prostate cancer he had lived with for a couple of years. He was buried at Peppard, near Reading, where Bella joined him many years later. At his funeral service, the clergyman said: 'I didn't know this man, so I can't really say anything about him'.

And it wasn't until 2000, years after Mackenzie's death in 1987, that anyone in the Law family heard of the book *A Search for Scotland*, in which Alan plays a small but highly significant part. Harry Law junior, son of Alan's younger brother, Harry, wrote to his aunt Bella out of the blue. 'Whilst in Aberdeen some months back, and in conversation with my brother-in-law Ronnie Beattie, I made mention of my Uncle Alan,' Harry wrote to his aunt. 'Ronnie responded by producing *A Search for Scotland* by R F Mackenzie, in which reference is made to Uncle Alan. I was so intrigued by this I have endeavoured to find the book in question, so far without success'.

Ronnie posted his copy to Harry, along with a note: 'I am now reading a book on Mackenzie's life by Peter Murphy and, in it, he says "another potent factor on Mackenzie's life was an unnamed railway clerk who was brought up on a small farm at Kirkton of Rayne". Your Uncle Alan was obviously a fascinating character'. He certainly was. His influence has extended far beyond his early rural Aberdeenshire realm and has survived for many years after his death; he did not live to know that the spirit of independent thinking exemplified by the railway shack at Inveramsay inspired the establishment of the Young Scotland Programme. He is no longer 'the unnamed railway clerk'. He is Alan Gray Law, a truly remarkable man.

Contributors

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