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BRING ME THE HEAD OF IRVINE WELSH!
Fiction and Politics in Modern Scotland

I Historic Nation

The old firms – Chambers, Collins, Oliver and Boyd – are long gone, but that curious implant in the Scottish body politic, the Edinburgh Book Festival, pulsates through the late summer. Sophie and Sarah, up from London, bear-lead authors about Charlotte Square and three or four of the native *literati* gather to discuss 'Whither Scotland?' before a raging mob from Jenners' tea room. Off the cobbled streets of the Old Town a fictional history shows its sores and ghosts to listless children, while old open-top buses wheeze past stand-up comedy venues. Forty miles south, quiet towns with closed factories and shops remain unvisited. Forty miles west only the deafening carillons of the ice-cream vans break the gloom of the schemes. At Holyrood another chunk of parliament is lowered into place and the cost ratchets up. This is Edwin Muir's 'difficult country'.

What has miscarried? Is Scotland tiring down? Realising that the break-out to self-rule simply exposed the way it had become accustomed to impotence and failure? Certainly, press and media don't conduce to optimism, as they did only a decade ago. The *Herald* newspaper, after several hard financial knocks, has vanishing down the thrapple of Gannet Inc.; Gus MacDonald, once purposive, is ejected from Downing Street, his STV has succumbed to the *Gleichschaltung* of ITV. The *Scotsman* continues to enjoy the bounty of the Barclay Brothers and to thole the tired tropes of Andrew Neil. The BBC peddles 'Castaway' and 'Monarch of the Glen' to make up for Simon Schama. The rest of the culture creaks away: Scottish ballet lurches from crisis to crisis, orchestral attendances drop, Parliament pigeonholes the national theatre, the last big Scottish booksellers go bust. Scottish films, churned out in some quantity, rarely achieve commercial release, let alone success.

The premises of Scottish devolution were not those of 'the better government of Britain'; they were nationalist. But the product of a peculiar nationalism. Founded on a brief burst of economic and social success, keen marketing, and a general absence of orthodox patriotism between 1745 and 1914, Hume, Adam Smith, Burns and Scott captured the world, but 'the people below' were kept firmly down by a diet of religious division, football, patriotic kitsch, and (literally) lethal food. Devolution was supposed to provide remedy, but down is where they have stayed. A Rowntree Trust report showed that those on the poverty line (60 % of average income) were a quarter of the population, up three points on 1997. And, this time, few signs of vision are coming from Scotland's rulers.

II Literary Nation

Something close to this despair marked a wintry piece by Andrew O'Hagan in the *London Review of Books*, reviewing Neal Ascherson's *Stone Voices*. Where Ascherson cultivated an optimism of the will, O'Hagan seemed to see only a coalition between immaturity and entropy. This provoked a spirited counter-attack. Had he not ignored Scotland's bustling literary scene: James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Ian Rankin, William McIlvanney, O'Hagan

himself, and Irvine Welsh? And that, perhaps, is the problem...

Literary Scotland conveys activism but not much encouragement: a message put over with some acerbity at the 2002 Charlotte Square bash by Robin Frame and Kenneth White, implying that 'gritty urban realism' had lasted long enough. Not so, said Mr Urban Grit himself, Irvine Welsh, who put it down to jealousy – 'this bastard's making too much money' - and launched his latest, *Porno*. Of which more later.

Income, one imagines, is quite secondary to James Kelman, perhaps ScotLit's most representative figure. His *oeuvre* radiates the alienation of people to whom society is at best a conspiracy: a curious mirror-image of the near-autistic capitalist individualism that Thatcher never ceased applauding. Kelman's forebears seem existentialist: Camus or Beckett. Punctuative expletives stress the pain of existing, the impossibility of ever making sense of the place: a stance which even Kelman's mentor, Philip Hobsbaum, seems to have got tired of. Meanwhile Professor Cairns Craig, the movement's critical *animateur* in the 1980s, as editor of The History of Scottish Literature, seems to have lapsed into a sort of psycho-social determinism in which Scotland's predestined fate doom can never be driven away by learning anything from history.

No amount of clever literary effort can disguise the fact that Scotland's writers have to deal with a divided, decaying post-industrial society: from Kelman's metaphysical purgatory to the 'Unthank' of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1982): somewhere far away from the smart parties of Festival City, or the spick-and-span little burghs where 'settled Scots', early-retired, go to play golf and spoil grandchildren. Where does post-modernism end, and post-lapsarianism begin? Economic depression and the chaotic first years of the Parliament have released a lot of Scotland's caged demons. Half a century ago a now-scarcely-read author, J.D. Scott, suggested that behind every successful Scot lay the fear of

... Great-uncle Sandy, an old terror who still wears enormous boots and steel-rimmed specs and speaks as broad as the North Sea, who will insist on coming downstairs at tea parties and shaming everybody by talking about the days when he and grandpa sold vegetables off a barrow. In England they'd have him locked up in a bin.

Sandy's dealings were in mercenaries or tobacco, liquor or drugs. Over the years, his ploys have got darker. Scotland's rest-and-recreation based economy is predicated upon gross inequality: at one end the Skibo Castle people, at the other a post-professional, underpaid, servitor class, tenuously connected by a politics of quick profit and conspicuous consumption. Not far, in fact, from that of Balzac's Comedie Humaine in the French Restoration between 1815 and 1830. Fathoming the place requires the detective-work of his Vautrin, but the sleuth can also, like Vautrin, be changed by it.

Heisenberg rules? Earlier in 2002 Arthur Herman, of the Smithsonian Institute, claimed How the Scots Invented the Modern World and was fêted in Edinburgh for doing so, but contemporary Scotland's problem is that of inventing anything significant, in an ailing 'screwdriver' manufacturing sector, cloned from abroad, and hopeful but lamentably underfunded initiatives in software and biotechnology. Manufacturing erodes, while a complex service sector shades off into criminality of one sort or another. This pathology confronts John Rebus, a figure as characteristic of this turn-of-the-century as another

Edinburgh-born sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, was of the last.

III Criminal Nation

Ian Rankin's detective is certainly no lifestyle model. A dozen years off retirement, divorced, alcoholic, deterrent to the surprising number of professional women who want to save him from himself, Rebus roams Edinburgh, from pub to slammer to chip shop, with occasional excursions to neighbouring planets - Fife or Glasgow - in his Saab, working for a police establishment he doesn't trust, and up against a Scots establishment as riddled as an Emmenthaler cheese.

Probably by now open-top buses are doing tours of Rebus City, taking in Fettes Row (the bunker in which Lothians and Borders Police lives), Torphichen Street and St. Leonard's police stations, the Oxford Bar, the Royal Oak. Rankin conveys this urban essence of glistening cobbles, council houses, formica bars, parking lots, and the behaviour and reactions of its people, almost completely by dialogue. His Edinburgh is precise, but scarcely ever delineated: maybe a reflex of how well-known the Festival has made the place, but more likely because, like R L Stevenson in *Jekyll and Hyde*, he has made his characters into the essence of the divided town, embodying as well as peopling the classy quadrants and the reeking slums.

Rankin has spoken of his – unexpected but logical - debt to Anthony Powell, the ability to make his cast change over time, be appraised from different angles. There is nothing particularly new about DI Rebus as a character. Twenty years ago, when Rankin started writing about him, similar 'procedurals' went down mean Glasgow streets: Edward Boyd's *View from Daniel Pike* and Frederic Lindsay's *Brond* and *Jill Rips*. There are some generic similarities to William McIlvanney's gumshoe, Jack Laidlaw, the troubled (divorced, alcoholic, etc.) descendant of his monument to working-class community, the eponymous Tam in *Docherty* (1975). In fact McIlvanney's *Strange Loyalties* (1990) could in some ways be a key case: in which Laidlaw's sifting of the facts around his brother's suicide discloses a primal crime which destroys a group of men – almost a generation - apparently destined for success.

Rankin is, like McIlvanney, from a mining community, bearing the traces of a strenuous self-education in which an MA was only a launching-pad, but while McIlvanney's style is almost confessional, Rankin's is as pared-down as Muriel Spark (whom he started by doing a PhD about). Somewhere in the background of both is Scots academe's Uncle Sandy, a distillation of the trolley-load of archetypes carted about by Sir James George Frazer. Both are complex and allusive writers, but their preoccupations inhabit a range of essentially moral concerns haunting Scotland since Scott and Hogg, whose contemporary calibrations run from the conservative humanism of Allan Massie to the uninhibited black comedy of Christopher Brookmyre.

More relevant to the economics of the contemporary scene is, however, a quite different proposition: the all-raving, all-swearing, all-snorting Irvine Welsh, Master of Business Administration and writer of 'books for people who don't read books'.

IV Unliterary Scotland

First, however, a notion of milieu. In Glasgow many of the grand bank branches have been converted to classy megaboozers by a dour entrepreneur called Stefan King. Deceptive places in which a chance to chat to an academic colleague in a setting out of 1904 St Petersburg turns into in a deafening Kulturkampf between Muzak-with-attitude and a sisterhood of graduate ravers in the next alcove. Were these the readers that Welsh and his clever marketeers had in mind? Or do the Works of Welsh from Trainspotting to Porno turn up on the shelves of fortified wee shops in Pilton? In a recent article in the magazine Cencrastus, Elsbeth Findlay described Trainspotting readers as 'recreational schemies' out for a vicarious shot of underclass Gothic. Irvine Welsh MBA is what they get in place of the socialist austerity of John MacLean MA, in post-devolutionist, post-modern Scotland.

That Glasgow episode seemed to nail the Welsh clientèle, and a Scottish Enterprise handout aimed at Germany back in 1995 gave more of the game away. In areas like computer technology Scotland could offer 'refreshingly cheap' qualified workers: programmers on a salary of around £ 12,000 a year, a pool fed by a higher education system expanded in numbers but not in endowment. Exactly the sort of person forced – in Trainspotting's opening words - to 'forget starter homes' because they can't afford them. Not just Findlay's middle-class slummers, but a new maybe-poor conscious and worried that they might end up there – if not down among Welsh's quasi-academic dropouts, then in contention with them, in media, social work or wherever. They had to wise up. This was something John (been there, drank that) Sutherland noted about 1970s best-sellers: in between the shooting and the shagging, the books were expected to educate.

V MacSturbation

The contrast between the projection and reception of the latest Welsh offering, Porno, was instructive. As recognisable as the inflatable woman on the cover, the author's cranium was everywhere in the posh papers, posed against some 'gritty' background of barbed wire or dossers' blankets but, on closer inspection, our man was seen to be wearing a two-piece suit. The Scotsman published an extract with an awful lot of asterisks.

The scenario of the interviews seemed the same. Young gel from Features – 'I had two bottles of good Sancerre in the fridge' – got to meet Welsh, who seemed more Sartre than Heathcliff, even quoting Basil Bernstein. Book got fair reviews from the London scribes. Things were a bit different in Scotland: a caution from the doyen of Sunday Herald columnists Ian Bell – 'If someone says Welsh is an interesting writer, they have a case. If they claim he's a great novelist they haven't read enough novels'. This didn't stop Prof. Willy Maley of Glasgow from claiming Welsh as an outstanding, mature, presence, well back on form, but S.B. Kelly in Scotland on Sunday thought him a one-trick pony, and looked forward to a quick remaindering.

Moment of truth. Having struggled through what's a very long book, Kelly's right. The heredity seems in one direction from American tough-guy pulp: Charles Bukowski, Dan Fante and more recently gangsta rappers with similarly percussive vocabularies and established teeny clientèles in the 'burbs. What Bell called Welsh's 'torrential monologues' are really rapper's riffs (thin on descriptive prose: never a Welsh strong point, this involves rending gear-changes into Dave Spart mode) and he and they possess marketing savvy in abundance: bad boys tolerated by the right-wing media because, as Findlay noted, their values are fundamentally competitive and acquisitive. There was a Scottish foreshadowing

of this in MacArthur and Long's No Mean City in 1934, romanticising Glasgow gangsterism. It has endured: look at any week's stories in the Daily Record. As for content, glancing at the cover of Porno, Billy Connolly cracked the joke, years ago:

Inflatable women? This wan, ah blew her up, an' then ah gied her a wee love-bite.
She farted an' flew oot the windae.

Welsh adds a further five hundred pages.

This industriousness gets praised by the likes of Maley for authenticity. A more specifically Scottish input is the old enemy, the Kailyard. It's not just that Welsh's ménage resembles Oor Wullie, Soapy Souter, and Fat Bob when the lights go out, but that the original Kailyard – Barrie, Crockett, MacLaren – was fundamentally to do with shrewd marketing in London of a caricature Scotland. Content was cut to suit, and sometimes, as with Barrie's Sentimental Tommy and Tommy and Grizel, cut imaginatively and self-revealingly. Remove the market and the genre imploded. In the Observer Burhan Wazir, writing more about author than book, echoes Maley: authenticity again. Huh. Go through the various Welsh interviews and a palimpsest emerges. Trainspotting came from doped-up writings of c. 1986, but Welsh says that he spent much of that decade raving away in Manchester and London. Scenes from thereabouts find their way into Ecstasy and The Acid House; their student-milieu verbiage is more of a constant than the working-class Edinburgh patois he gets praised for.

Even among the plaudits, the young Glasgow writer Louise Welsh in the Independent restrained herself. 'Welsh is a prime satirist and like the best satirists, he gives society a reflection of itself. He successfully places the Scottish landscape in a wider political and geographical context'. Still, she couldn't thole his female lead:

But why has he chosen to view it through the confused gaze of Nikki Fuller-Smith? A wet-dream fantasy; body-dismorphic bulimic; An English girl with a daddy complex and an allowance, she describes being a poor student as a racket. Nikki disturbs the balance of the book, hinting at a colonial corruption absent from the rest of the novel.

Nikki supplements daddy's cash by doing 'hand-jobs only' in an Edinburgh sauna (a notion of autonomy in the least likely milieu: Welsh must truly be fiction-dependent). She's either pure Cosmo girl or Welsh is a Master of Business Irony. I suspect the former. Yet she has about a third of Porno's narrative, and the only slightly less phoney Sick Boy Williamson another third. The old Leithers are lucky to get cameo roles. Spud tries history-writing, is spurned by bourgeois publishers, (Edinburgh is, thanks to Iain MacDougall, the centre of 'people's history', but let it pass) and lapses back on the dope. Begbie kills someone else. Renton, vanished to Amsterdam for an (incredible) ten years, lays the girl he laid in Trainspotting and buggers off with her and the money.

So there's no change, then? Trainspotting made a hit because its stories were direct recorded conversations – the more restricted the Bernsteinian code, the livelier: all of us have met our Begbies after closing time and, mostly, survived - without the usual Scots literary filters. Its reputation really took off with Danny Boyle's film (a sequel is apparently being planned). Later-period Welsh shows sedulous aping of his betters: phonetic spelling

derived from Tom Leonard, punctuation pictures from Alasdair Gray, who had already worked the theme of porn to death (and serve it right) in 1982 Janine; percussive obscenities from Kelman; 'stories' from Jeff Torrington, but without the Runyonesque bar-room flow. But while that lot were playing to literate, textually-aware audiences (Scotland's unmuzaked bars still have the honed blade of the Glasgow Empire: 'If they like you, they let you live.'), Welsh's market remains captive: the inarticulate twentysomethings, call-centre folk, cyberserfs, unsmug unmarrieds who infest Kay's fun-palaces. These are books for shriek-level dialogues in happy hours, dance chill-outs and binge-drinkies: punters not up to the culture, but out to show, very loudly, that they can match it. Welsh is to this lot what, in his happier days, Jeffrey Archer was to Mondeo Man: the jammy bastard who did well.

The result is innocent, infantile even. Alex Trocchi rewritten by Enid Blyton: Five Get Shagged In Leith. We get page after page of fucking-on-film (according to Welshie, a swelling area of Scots do-it-yourself: no mention of drawbacks like HIV, or even the fact that in any low-grade Scots boozier bondage would come with sectarian strings attached) but things have gone sadly downhill in the arousal line since John Cleland retired his Big Red Engine. The rightist Washington commentator Andrew Sullivan has praised the export potential of Brit bad taste and sure enough, like De Mille, Welsh unstintedly shows what we're not supposed to do. An extended and detailed multiple rape in Marabou Stork Nightmares, punctuated by moral finger-wagging, is paralleled by another, hideous from beginning to end, in Porno, which involves and demeans Spud, the only one of the original Trainspotting who remains in any way a believable native. It happens on the site of the new Parliament at Holyrood, which might be awfully symbolic if there were a smidgen of political depth to the book.

There is not. One would not deduce from this rumpy-pumpy romp that Edinburgh prostitution lies in the hands of East European gangs; that heroin and crack are huge enterprises dominated by Glasgow millionaires, in cahoots with hard men from the Ulster ghettos: that an interlinked criminal network exists which takes in saunas, tanning studios, security firms (protection rackets), minicabs, house-lettings, loan sharks, pubs, clubs – with links to local government and Holyrood and Westminster politics and a turnover of L 2-3 billion a year. All unsuspecting of their doom, Welsh's little victims play, and play, and play with themselves.

VII Oot the windae

So we don't get any Jack London stuff promising social vengeance: Welsh is as political as P G Wodehouse. Old Red's at least residually there in Rankin, perhaps too much so. Where can Rebus go, after blowing a corrupted Scottish Office apart in Let it Bleed? Not a good career move; and given Rankin's realist mode, not a career move at all. If such questions are to be asked, and politicians done-over, the business is best sited in comic melodrama. Something that young master Brookmyre delivers with flair, wit and style in Quite Ugly One Morning, Boiling a Frog, A Big Boy Did It and Ran Away, etc. All with the good taste of a High Street midden, but few writers have ever given the slimeballs of Scots populism and the tabloid press such an outrageous and well-deserved pillocking.

In Welsh's case, voting doesn't matter. Put your cross against a Big Brother candidate, he told one of the London broadsheets, it'll do more good. Time was when he was seen as a

funder, if not a founder, of the Scottish Socialist Party, fronted by the blessed Tommy Sheridan, and the hope of real victims, living in real schemes. But that was before Ibiza and Islington. More recently, responding to Frame and White, he has campaigned for 'stuck-up' Edinburgh to remember its 'working class heroes' Les McKeown of the Bay City Rollers (we hoped we'd forgotten them) and the 1970s boxer Ken Buchanan. For the ship of the Scottish state, Welsh will be, at best, its Ice Cube. The worrying thing is that, with London coverage of Scottish affairs now minimal, Sophie and Sarah and other engineer of the media machine, as well as a metropolitan establishment not averse to running a Tartan Caliban as a means of keeping the Jocks in their place, will put him on a sort of life-support system. They would do what's left of the Union a favour by pulling the plug.

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