Clocking life: William McIlvanney and Jenni Fagan

‘The moment crackled like an electric storm’

Lines like this would be gold dust to most writers, but in William McIlvanney’s books they just keep on coming. This man, the creator of Jack Laidlaw, the ‘father of Tartan Noir’, the man who inspired Ian Rankin to create *Rebus*, seems to use language with such careless skill that you might be forgiven for thinking the words just pour out. Except that the skill isn’t careless: McIlvanney writes slowly, pre-edits incessantly, and says that the hardest thing for him is to believe what he’s done is worthwhile. Last week he joined Edinburgh University Writer in Residence Jenni Fagan in the first of the university’s Guest Writers series at Looking Glass Books.

William McIlvanney grew up in Kilmarnock. He is fiercely proud of his working class roots. Although his ex-miner father thought of books as things to prop up a table leg, his mother and older siblings all read. The house was ‘a throughway for human traffic, a working class Bayeux tapestry’, full of uncles, aunts, cousins, friends. He remembers them all fondly, appreciating their generosity, humour and inventiveness (he recalls a neighbour breaking a light bulb from its socket so that he could light up from the bare wires), their ability to celebrate life in deprivation. Inspired by the teaching at Kilmarnock Academy (‘full of Shakespeare’), at the age of 17 he became obsessed with Ernest Hemingway and for a year tried to emulate him ‘despite the lack of big game hunting in Ayrshire.’ His eureka moment came when he realised that he should instead be writing about the lives that surrounded him; from then on he has had what he describes as ‘a mania to

immortalise the working classes.'

The city of Glasgow (where he went to university, but left unimpressed) features large in much of McIlvanney's writing. He describes it as a 'full frontal city'; Glaswegians are, he says, expert commentators on life, they know who you are and what you are trying to do – they 'clock you.' It's a great city to write about, allowing you to use sharp remarks freely (and McIlvanney is nothing if not good at those) because its residents do that themselves. He likes to observe that if Greta Garbo had moved to Glasgow, she wouldn't have been alone – 'someone would have been saying "come and sit down here hen."'

After graduating, McIlvanney became a teacher just for the money (and it's hard to imagine anyone saying that today…) but to his surprise he loved the job and stayed for ten years. After a year in France, he returned to the same school as a Principal Teacher, and a year later he was coerced into becoming Assistant Rector. He hated being out of the classroom, and insists he was rubbish at admin, 'I couldn't run a raffle.' It wasn't long before the world of education lost him to full-time writing, and whilst that was clearly the right move so far as his readers are concerned, you can't help feeling that talents such as his – the brilliant insight, the dry wit, the transcendent use of language – would still benefit many a Higher English lesson.

McIlvanney, however, was already off (overland) to Argentina, paid by a newspaper to cover the World Cup and loving every minute. Since then he's written novels, short stories and poetry, journalism and screenplays, and won numerous awards including the CWA Silver Dagger and the Glasgow Herald's People's Prize. He's perhaps best known for Laidlaw, but the book he enjoyed writing the most is *Walking Wounded*, a collection of interlinked short stories about contemporary working class life. It's 'the beast I was trying to catch', a mosaic, a way of commemorating the things he

cares about without the constraints of a novel. Listening to him read from two of the *Walking Wounded* stories, *Death Watch Beetle* and *At The Bar*, is an almost filmic experience, so vividly can he convey a character in so few words;

‘He wouldn’t have liked to have gone to sleep in the big man’s head.’

‘Men in here…see their mother’s cutlery drawer as an arsenal..’

‘His eyes were a demonstration waiting to happen.’

With Laidlaw, McIlvanney had the character first, ‘an abrasive, humane collection of interesting characteristics’; he heard Laidlaw’s voice, wrote down the things he was saying, knew he had to face bad things. This man had to be a policeman. McIlvanney never knows a novel’s theme till he finds it, ‘I have to generate my own belief in the book’; even then he sometimes breaks off in disbelief during the writing. Self-doubt is, he finds, a good thing both in writing and in life; it makes them exciting and fruitful. ‘Spurious certainties’ he says, ‘distort our lives’ – or as Laidlaw himself puts it, we need ‘The courage of our doubts.’

McIlvanney still writes ‘painfully’ in longhand, preferring the steady pace at which words pass from head, to hand, to page. The late Margo MacDonald once offered to teach him computers in three days; he refused. His first draft is usually his final one because he pre-edits so much, though he praises the ‘gentle benign’ help he received early on from the late James Hale, a publisher whose approach has been described as ‘unintrusively holistic.’ McIlvanney says writing is as much about self-discovery as telling the story, ‘It takes terrible arrogance to sit down and write eighty thousand words and expect other people to read them.’ Arrogance was not part of his Kilmarnock childhood, ‘we didn’t make assumptions.’ Once he’s happy with the early stages of a book though, his

confidence in it grows.

Asked whether Glasgow's reputation for violence is still warranted, McIlvanney replies that although the image may have softened, the city still has areas of appalling poverty. This is, though, true of most cities – Paris, he says, can be just as frightening if you find yourself in the wrong place. He gives short shrift to the people for whom Glasgow is 'a journey between a wine bar and a theatre', but does feel that the city is gentler than people think; its basic nature has, for him, always been benign. Having said that, he sees no point in prettifying bad aspects of anything, seeing benignity and malignity in all parts of society, 'It's a matter of not losing perspective and hope.'

Citing Camus, Hemingway and Steinbeck amongst his literary influences, McIlvanney always comes back to Shakespeare, 'he's the head man, he explains what it is to be alive and to be human. If you had his works you on your desert island, you could live a full life by proxy.'

Jenni Fagan points out that McIlvanney puts humanity into his portrayal of the working class; the ability to get to the heart of the people is, she observes, hugely important politically. McIlvanney says Fagan also achieved this with *The Panoptican*;

> 'We both try to shine a light in places we should all confront…..it's not another species, it's us.'

(Photos of William McIlvanney by Iain McLean, courtesy of Canongate Books.)