Edinburgh International Book Festival: Ellie Harrison and Jemma Neville – A Tale of Two Cities

We are living in anxious times.

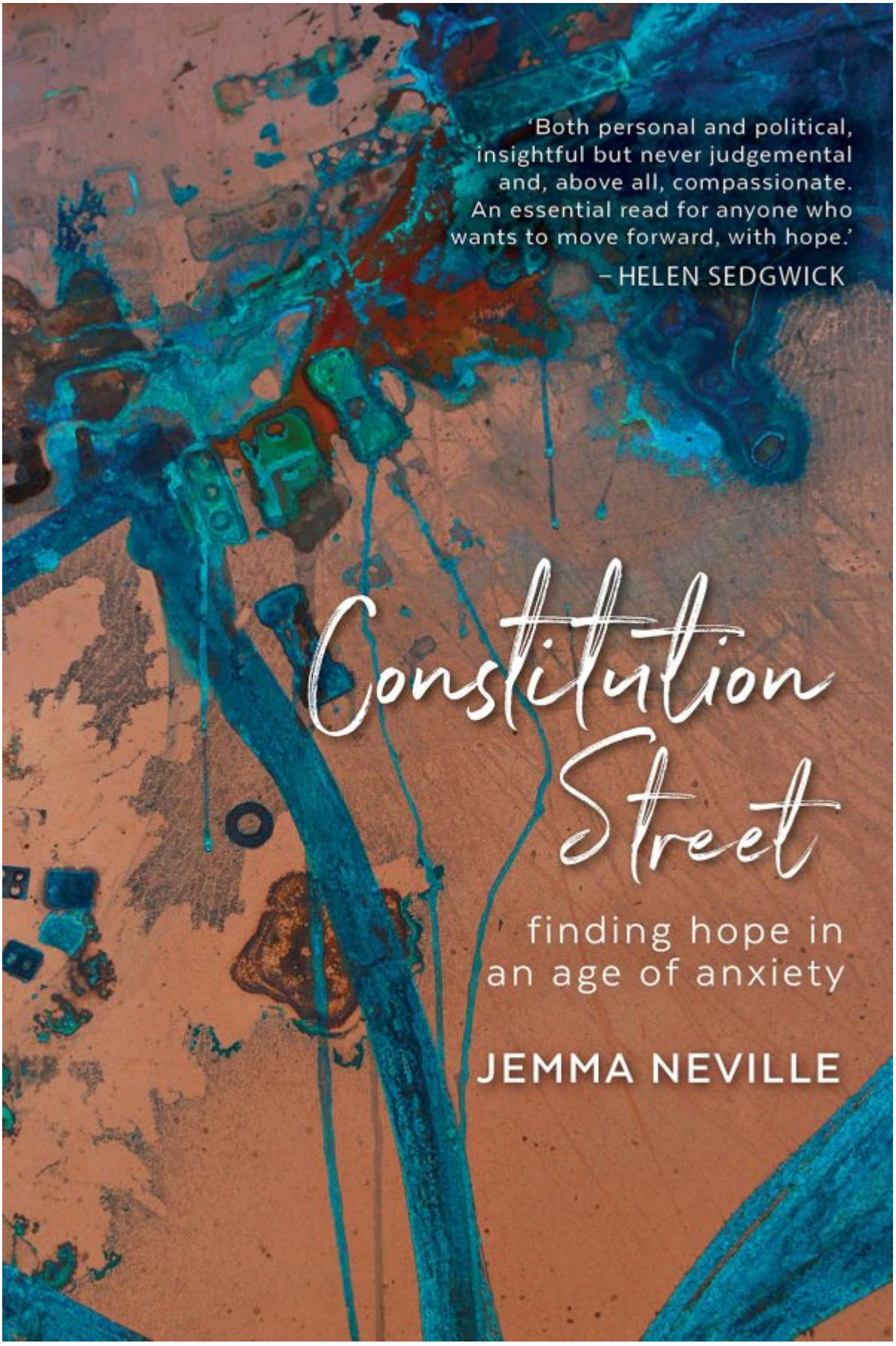
From major issues like Brexit and climate change to personal worries about relationships, money, health and isolation, few of us sleep well at nights. And this, says Jemma Neville, is the classic 'divide and rule' tactic of right wing politicians.

> *They want us to feel suspicious, fearful…to be divided into opposing standpoints when more often than not we have common ground.'*

Neville, a human rights lawyer, is not immune. Speaking with chair Daniel Gray and fellow writer Ellie Harrison at Edinburgh International Book Festival, Jemma explains that she often found herself plea bargaining with her inner demons, 'If I do this, it will prevent that'. She was told she had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Ironically, she knew that her anxious need to control the uncontrollable was bound up with her attachment to people. She wanted them to be OK.

When a friend died, it felt like a wake-up call to stop procrastinating and start writing about what mattered to her. And that thing was people, most particularly the people living in Constitution Street, her home in Leith. The name itself encapsulates different meanings; our health – our personal constitution, our neighbourhood – the people we live among and alongside, but often don't know – and a constitution as a set

of rules to live by. So Neville called her book *Constitution Street: Finding hope in an age of anxiety.*



Constitution Street runs from the centre of Leith to the sea. At one end people are searching through bins for food; at the other, on The Shore, there is a Michelin starred restaurant. When Jemma walked her dog down the street each day, she overheard hopeful stories; neighbours were helping one another. Seeing this as an antidote to the frightening headlines, she started to write those stories down;

> *My attachment to home spread out across my neighbourhood.*

Jemma sketched a map of the street on brown paper and stuck it onto her wall. On it she marked out how various neighbours came into contact with one another;

> *It looked like a crime scene investigation.*

She wanted to know more about these people; what made them anxious? What made them happy? She sent out letters, asking people if she could talk to them for her book. They told her no-one had ever asked them questions like this before.

> *Psychologists say small everyday connections are a strong indicator of health. I was setting out on a constitutional, and like all of us I wanted to love and to be loved by the people I encountered.*

Interaction with our neighbours, Neville says, takes us away from our personal anxieties;

> *The feeling of being listened to is as important as the feeling of being loved.'*

She talked to long-time residents like Margaret, who's been the street's 'lollipop lady' for 43 years, and to new arrivals. She talked to the old, and to the young; she's particularly keen that young people should be heard;

If you live on a street you have a right to affect the decisions that affect it

A project of a very different kind – but one still very much about people and their daily lives – was undertaken by artist and activist Ellie Harrison. A lecturer at Dundee's Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, Harrison's interests focus on investigating, exposing and challenging the consequences of capitalism, in particular over-consumption, inequality, privatisation and climate change, all of which she sees as linked. In 2016 her year-long project ***The Glasgow Effect*** brought her a torrent of criticism and much personal abuse from those who saw the work as a gross misuse of public money (she was funded by Creative Scotland).

Image (c) ellieharrison.com

Harrison describes the project, undertaken for Glasgow School of Art, as a 'durational performance'; she decided not to leave Glasgow, nor to use any means of transport apart from her bike, for a year. She'd been living in Glasgow for quite a while by then, but 'I was always leaving – now I would have to invest all my time and ideas into the city.' She wanted to look at poverty, to investigate why Glasgow's mortality rate is worse than any other British city, including those that share its levels of deprivation and post-industrial unemployment. She was also inspired by Patrick Geddes' idea that we should 'think global, act local'; to build stronger

communities we should shorten supply chains, reduce our need for travel, and relearn important skills locally.

Scottish rapper Loki, aka Darren McGarvey, did not agree. He famously attacked Harrison's project, saying;

> *It's horrendously crass to parachute someone in on a poverty safari while at the same time councils are cutting more and more services for those who need them most.*

McGarvey wrote a book about it: *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (Picador. 2018). Harrison has read it and thinks it's pretty good, but the 'parachute' comment riled her. She'd lived in Glasgow for eight years, and had plenty of life experience before that – did it all count for nothing?

She thought maybe she could write a book too, one saying everything she wanted to say but could not squeeze into 280 twitter characters. *The Glasgow Effect: A Tale of Class, Capitalism and Carbon Footprint* is, she explains, really three books in one – a brief history of neo-liberalism, a look at the poor health outcomes of Glaswegians, and a manifesto for the city of the future – what can we do to sort out all the mess we find ourselves in? What she's tried to do is use her own personal history to show how globalisation, privatisation and other corrupt systems affect our lives.

Harrison draws our attention to the many well-intentioned attempts to fill the void left in Glasgow by departing industry. The 'city of culture', the 'garden city', 'the Glasgow miracle' – none have had lasting benefits for those who need them most. Neville is also interested in how people living in Leith, once the busiest port in Europe, define themselves in a post-industrial age, an age when 'the right to work' no longer seems to exist. Now, she says, people tell her not only what they do for a living but what they do with the rest of their time. Even those who do have jobs are far less

likely to find them fulfilling, and this, she says, is especially bad for women, who may feel that the many roles they have in and out of the home do not count. They have to find a new way to value themselves, to be valued by others.

Privatisation, Harrison feels, is the worst thing that has happened to society in recent years; it’s forced up the cost of everything as shareholders try to squeeze the last penny from what should be shared public resources like energy supplies and transport. The latter is her particular bugbear; she’s the founder of the national Bring Back British Rail campaign, and she highlights the vast fare differences between Glasgow’s privatised buses and Edinburgh’s council-owned network. Denying people the right to travel also denies them the right to participate in the city’s cultural life; again women, many of whom have no other transport options, suffer most, yet very few are on the decision-making public transport committees.

One of the aims of Harrison's project was to address contradictions and compromises in her own life. She calculated the carbon impact of all the journeys she had made since 2004, and noted that that impact was ever-increasing until 2016, when she turned exclusively to her bike. 50% of global carbon emissions are, she says, produced by the wealthiest 10% of the world's population, but this could be addressed if public transport became the affordable norm. She does not see electric cars as the answer to anything; they are too expensive and take up too much space, whereas public transport is a collective resource, and also brings people together, fostering social interaction, celebrating diversity, and helping to alleviate the isolation that blights 21st century Western life.

Neville and Harrison may have approached their subjects from slightly different angles, but in the end it seems to me that

their messages are very similar. Keep trying, keep working to give a voice to those who have none, keep fighting the self-serving systems of the governing elite, and above all keep hoping.

Harrison is involved in several local projects and campaigns aimed at making Glasgow a more equal, sustainable and connected city. Neville still feels optimistic for the future of Constitution Street and its people, because at a local level people are still looking out for one another, still feeding each others' pets, still saying thank you to bus drivers.

> *The most radical antidote towards fear is kindness and hope…hope is always there'*

Constitution Street: Finding hope in an age of anxiety by Jemma Neville is published by 404 Ink.

The Glasgow Effect: A Tale of Class, Capitalism and Carbon Footprint by Ellie Harrison is published by Luath Press Limited. Harrison's new performance/event *Bus Regulation: The Musical*, in which she will re-enact – on roller skates – the history of public transport provision in Greater Manchester from the post-war period to the present day, will be staged at Manchester Art Gallery on 28 September as the closing event of the 'Get Together and Get Things Done' exhibition. Free tickets are available via Eventbrite.

Daniel Gray and photographer Alan McCredie will be talking about Scottish Football Periodical *Nutmeg* at Waterstones, 128 Princes Street, 6-8.30pm on 16 September 2019 as part of Edinburgh International Magazine Festival. Tickets £12, available only from the International Magazine Centre via eventbrite.

Featured image of Jemma Neville: Edinburgh International Book Festival