

O'Hagan's diagnosis of dark times

The [25th Anniversary Angus Millar Lecture](#) took place on Monday evening at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, on Queen Street.

The speaker at the RSA Scotland event was the acclaimed Scottish novelist and essayist **Andrew O'Hagan**. O'Hagan gave an incisive lecture on "Art, Literature and Truth in the Era of Fake News, Algorithms and Artificial Intelligence", with veteran journalist Magnus Linklater chairing the event.

O'Hagan, author of the recent *Caledonian Road: A Novel*, spoke about the many dangers our society is facing, in a sometimes bleak narrative. However, his aim was not to engender a sense of hopelessness, but to instil in his audience a clear sighted sense of the reality, from which resistance could be built.

A core theme of the lecture was that artists and writers were at the *front line* of this resistance, battling for the values of truth and reality in a world of algorithmically derived fake news and disinformation.



Andrew O'Hagan, RSA Scotland.

Media failures

O'Hagan referred to his coverage of the Grenfell disaster as an example of some of the issues we face in the media. Much of the media coverage was, O'Hagan felt, marked by pre-existing positions. Different elements in the media wanted to tell the story they expected to tell. O'Hagan talked to about 300 people involved in the disaster. That gave him a much more nuanced picture of the realities, not captured in some of the simplistic coverage.

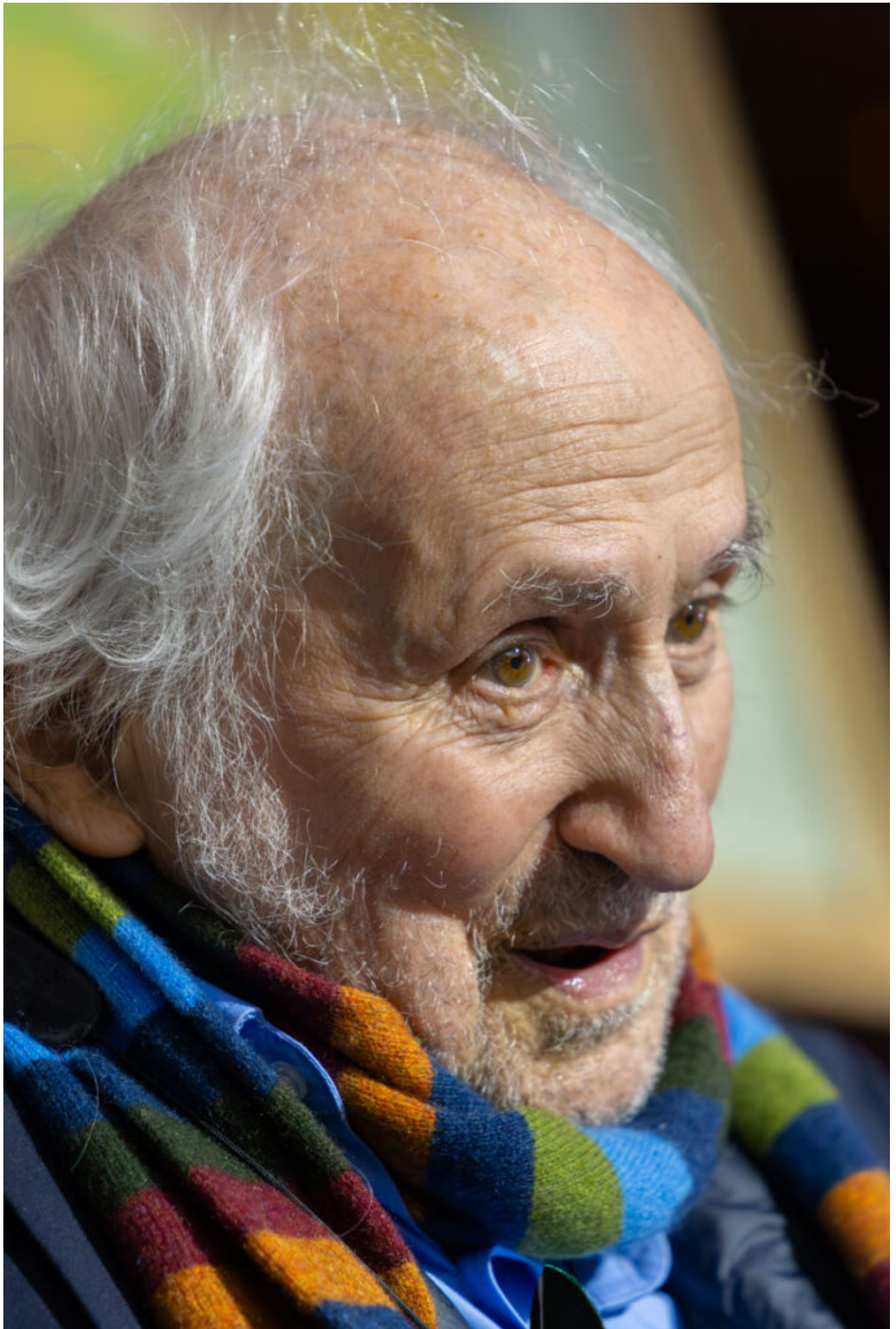
The coverage of Grenfell was emblematic of "an ideological war over facts". Those in the media needed to uphold higher values, while readers needed to be careful of media that feeds their prejudices. We need media that remains truthful in its coverage. In his lecture and his essays (such as those collected in his superb 2008 collection *The Atlantic Ocean*) he has demonstrated the power and importance of documentary

witness.

Alarming algorithms

Central to O'Hagan's argument was that algorithms merely built *on what has existed*, leaving out true invention and imagination. That is what the true artist provides; visions of the world beyond what has already been thought and written. He made regular reference to Robert Louis Stevenson, who once lived just across Queen Street Gardens at 17 Heriot Row. From there you could see the lights of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. Stevenson's family of course were deeply involved in the provision of light, creating lighthouses such as that on Inchkeith Island. O'Hagan used this metaphor of spreading light to underscore the power of the imagination in seemingly dark times.

The apparent dark era of the rise of populist autocrats was likely to hold a new cultural renaissance. O'Hagan felt that Scotland was likely to play a leading role in this, given its propensity to resist, its "survivalist instinct". In this, he echoed recent public utterances by the likes of [Richard Demarco](#). For Demarco, the example of the Edinburgh Festival, born following a period of disastrous conflict, remains an inspiring one. Demarco argues that Scotland needs to rediscover the values which produced the Enlightenment and the Edinburgh festival in order to counter the political and environmental threats we face. In placing an emphasis on the leading role of art and literature, Demarco and O'Hagan share a great deal.



Apocalyptic miasmas

For O'Hagan, many of the trends that concerned him were evident at the recent Republican Party Convention in Milwaukee. There he had witnessed much intolerance and ignorance praised as "a form of character". The event was "a dark moment for human subtlety". What was absent was any discussion of art and culture. There was no place for that among the "apocalyptic miasmas" of the MAGA movement. There, there was no space for uncertainty and nuance. We are in, O'Hagan believes "an immoderate century". What really concerned him was the way that Trump's lack of interest in the truth had now become normalised.

For O'Hagan, much of this can be laid at the door of social media and those who control it. Sold as a great opening up of communication, the truth was it had largely been an opening up to "lies and misinformation", and extreme content. It was driven by the conglomerates in order to "sell you things by creating a new reality".

Hollowing out

Rather than promoting genuine connection across boundaries, it had merely "fragmented people into groups" resulting in a public discourse "driven by hatred". We were now suffering the effects of this "fragmented polity", with "our conception of we...becoming narrower". We were witnessing a "hollowing out" of human nature, journalism and literature. At their best, journalism and literature could be an antidote to social media, but this was becoming less evident.

In a powerful section, O'Hagan talked about a young life deformed by social media. The young person had spent too much time "impersonating his own life" rather than actually living

it. He had created a “fiasco of life”, in which there was no time for the “non-digital”. Would such people actually grow up?, wondered O’Hagan.

O’Hagan had found it very difficult to properly communicate with this young man. When the young man told O’Hagan that he had found love with another social media addict, O’Hagan was stuck for a response. He resorted to Chat GPT to fashion his message. The response to this was that this was “the loveliest message he had received”.

Rage against the dying of the light

O’Hagan took from this the machines “can make us unlike ourselves, make us untrue”. These machines were “inherently fascistic” in that they stripped out humanity. The machines were focused on improvement and efficiency, but knew nothing of the world “beyond profit” or compassion. “compassion is expensive and inefficient”. In contrast, much art and experience was “simply beautiful” not useful in any obvious or financial way.

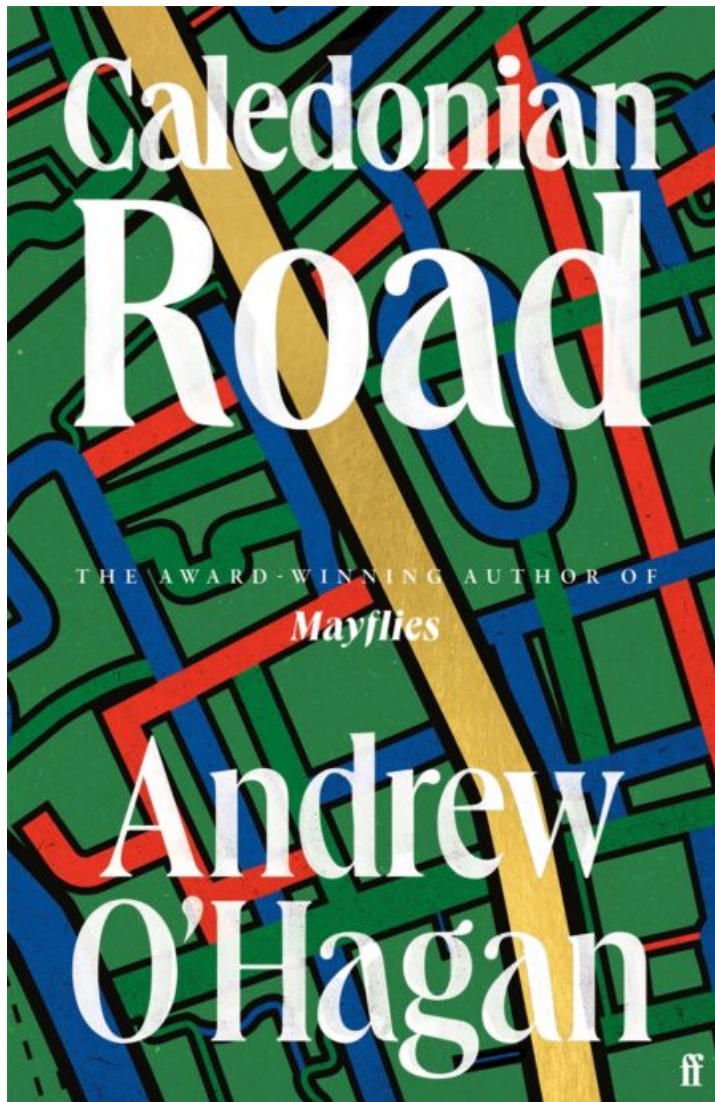
Because of their crucial role, artists needed protection in order to “resist that which flashes out the human spirit”. He ended by quoting Dylan Thomas’s famous lines about resisting and raging “against the dying of the light.”

O’Hagan’s faith in art and literature was the positive thread throughout the lecture. He looked forward to troubled times giving rise to “the flowering of artistic endeavour”. Asked by an audience member about the role scientists could play in this, O’Hagan referred back to the ‘Two Cultures’ debate in the late 1950s/ early 1960s involving people like C.P. Snow and F. R. Leavis. This had focussed on an apparent divide between the scientific and cultural realms, a divide many see as still a major aspect of British intellectual life. O’Hagan hoped that both sides of this divide would contribute to the resistance.

Diagnosing the darkness

Given the location, O'Hagan felt like a doctor diagnosing the problems, and providing warnings. Above all, that "the machines are not our friends". He was confident that there were many people "ready to resist". As in the past, dark times could come to an end. He looked at the example of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. When writing about the dark realities of Khrushchev's Soviet Union in the 1970s, he could not have imagined that it was on the verge of collapse. In short, in order to find the light "you have to recognize the darkness".

O'Hagan did admit that there, on the surface, was some degree of contradiction between his status as a novelist, who is constantly creating something which is untrue, and the seeker of truth. This truth seeking aspect is clearest in O'Hagan's much praised long form journalism in the *London Review of Books* and elsewhere.



O'Hagan's lecture emphasised the role of the literary writer in public debate. His words had a clear impact on the audience, which was hushed and reflective. This was a product of the interesting subject matter but also the writer's craft evident in his choice of words.

O'Hagan's lecture was a fine example that the world of literature can have a positive impact on the battle for truth in dark times.