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# **The Crisis of Capitalism in Interwar Glasgow and its Realistic Representation.**

**Candidate: Sylvia Morgan B.Soc.Sci., B.A.(Hons), M.Ed.**

**Matric 0412445**

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy**

**University of Glasgow**

**Department of Scottish Literature**

**and**

**Department of Scottish History**

**Faculty of Arts**

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## Abstract

The dissertation examines the economic and social consequences for Glasgow of the global crisis of capitalism known as the 'Great Depression', and how this is represented in five realist novels published during the 1930s. It argues that the interwar era was a time of both cultural renaissance and political revolution. It was a liminal moment in Glasgow's history, defining economic and social conditions in the city for most of the twentieth century. It was also a significant phase in the development of the narrative of the city, creating a new form of literary representation of Glasgow, and a new genre of urban realism in Scottish literature.

### The Novels

*Hunger March* (1934) by Dot Allan

*Major Operation* (1936) by James Barke

*The Shipbuilders* (1935) by George Blake

*No Mean City* (1935) by Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long

*Gael Over Glasgow* (1937) by Edward Shiels

**The dissertation will ask and attempt to answer, the following questions:**

**Chap 1 Second City** How was the interwar era a defining moment of revolution and renaissance in the history of Glasgow, and in the development of the diverse representations of the city? Do the five realistic novels have value as documentary evidence of life in Glasgow during the interwar era?

**Chap 2 City in Crisis** What do the novels reveal about the effects of the crisis of capitalism of the Great Depression during the interwar era, the reasons for the economic decline of Glasgow as Second City of Empire, and how realistically do they document the subsequent social changes and political consequences when compared with contemporary journalism?

**Chap 3 City as Protagonist** How realistically do the tropes used to signify the city in the novels, and the representations thereof, correspond to contemporaneous non-fictional depictions of social conditions in Glasgow during the interwar era?

**Chap 4 Revolutionary City** Did the crisis of capitalism and the phenomenon of Red Clydeside create the necessary and sufficient conditions for a radical political revolution in Glasgow during the interwar era, and what evidence is there for this in the novels and in contemporaneous and subsequent political analyses?

**Chap 5 Consciousness and the City** Was false consciousness a major reason for the failure of the ongoing class struggle to evolve nascent revolutionary potential in Glasgow during the interwar era, and how is this supposition substantiated in the novels?

**Chap 6 Liminal City** Why did the former Second City of Empire, and the novels that represent it so realistically during the interwar era, enter into a state of permanent liminality?

## **Abbreviations**

The novels will be referenced throughout the dissertation using the following acronyms:

HM - *Hunger March*

MO - *Major Operation*

SH - *The Shipbuilders*

NMC - *No Mean City*

GG - *Gael Over Glasgow*

### **Other acronyms used:**

ILP - Independent Labour Party

BSP - British Socialist Party

SLP - Socialist Labour Party

NUWM - National Unemployed Workers' Movement

NSS - National Shipbuilders Security Limited

TUC - Trades Union Congress

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Thanks to David for seeing things I could not.

Thanks to my colleagues for believing it could be done along with the day job.

## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature .....

Printed name .....

Date .....

## Chapter 1 Second City

### Context of the novels

#### Introduction

The era between the First and Second World Wars was a defining moment in the history of Glasgow, and in the narrative of the city. It was a time when the once powerful 'Second City of Empire' was losing its status and transforming into the post-industrial city it was to become for most of the twentieth century. It was a period of economic crisis and depression created by the inherent instability of capitalism and the shifting demands of the global economy, similar to that occurring at time of writing in 2009. The interwar era gave rise to the phenomena of the Scottish Cultural Renaissance and the revolutionary Red Clydeside. The argument taken in this dissertation is that prevailing socio-economic conditions set the context for a particular form of literary representation of Glasgow during the 1930s, creating a new genre of urban social realism<sup>1</sup> in Scottish literature: what became known as 'the realistic proletarian novels of Clydeside'. The aim of the dissertation is to examine this literature for its historical value as documentary evidence of Glasgow during the interwar era.

The dissertation examines the five novels, with interwar Glasgow as both their subject and date of publication, that realistically represent the effects of the Great Depression on the city and its people<sup>2</sup>. Through a comparative analysis with non-fictional texts in the form of contemporary journalism and autobiographical writing, it will investigate how realistically the social and political consequences of the economic crisis of capitalism in interwar Glasgow are represented in these five novels published during the 1930s. The novels are *Hunger March* (1934) by Dot Allan, *Major Operation* (1936) by James Barke, *The Shipbuilders* (1935) by George Blake, *No Mean City* (1935) by Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long, and *Gael Over Glasgow* (1937) by Edward Shiels.<sup>3</sup> The five realistic novels are examined here in terms of their specific sociological context, and the methods by which they reinforce and reproduce, or subvert and

<sup>1</sup> The term 'social' realism is employed in the dissertation, rather than 'socialist' realism - now tainted with negative connotations of the literary doctrine contrived by Stalin, Gorky and Zhdanov for the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers.

<sup>2</sup> It is only the five novels examined here that fall within this particular narrow definition.

<sup>3</sup> The tropes of the novels' titles signify: MO – Glasgow society in need of a major operation to make it well; HM - first recorded hunger march of Jacob's sons to Egypt [Genesis]; NMC - 'I am Paul of Tarsus a resident of no mean city' [Corinthians, Christian Bible].

challenge, the dominant class structure of the period. The relationships of power suggested by the texts are deconstructed, with reference to the ideologies and institutions, and also the political, economic, social, and aesthetic concerns within that historical moment. The underlying assumption is that all representations contain revelations about economic forces and social hierarchies, individual struggles and larger class interests, which serve to bestow or divest agency in relation to certain social groups.

The terms ‘Glasgow’ and ‘Clydeside’ are both employed throughout the dissertation. By the interwar period, the conurbation around the Clyde was Scotland’s largest and most industrialised area, stretching forty miles along the Clyde river valley, from the Firth of Clyde on the west coast eastwards to Wishaw in Lanarkshire. The industrial towns were either contiguous or separated only by narrow strips of rural land. There was the phenomenon of ‘Greater Glasgow’ at this time, a result of the desire of Glasgow Corporation to absorb surrounding communities. Govan, Partick, and Pollokshaws were separate but adjoining towns until 1912 when, along with other areas, they were incorporated into Glasgow’s boundaries, boosting the city’s inhabitants to over one million and making it the most populous city in the United Kingdom after London.<sup>4</sup> Therefore definitions of ‘Glasgow’ are subject to ebb and flow, much like the river at the centre of the city’s geographical and historical existence.

The spatial and temporal character of the city was intrinsically bound up with the River Clyde. The river runs through the city and deep in the collective consciousness. ‘The Clyde made Glasgow and Glasgow made the Clyde’ is a popular saying.<sup>5</sup> The river shaped the shared identity of the Clydeside communities, it underpins the region’s history, it was Glasgow’s gateway to the world, and so functions as a protagonist in its own right in the novels and in reality. In *Glasgow’s River* Brian Osborne emphasises the role of the Clyde:

as a unifying force, as a corridor at the heart of a major region, as a means of communication and as a focus for the identity of the area, its character and culture .... The phrase “Clyde Built” has always had an association with quality and with the Clydesiders’ pride in the work and life of their river.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Maver. Pers. Comm. University of Glasgow. January 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Opening words of ‘Seawards the Great Ships’, Scotland’s first Oscar winning documentary film about the Clyde, and also quoted in numerous sources.

<sup>6</sup> Brian D. Osborne, and others, *Glasgow’s River*, (Glasgow: Lindsay Publications, 1996), p.100.

How was the interwar era a defining moment of revolution and renaissance in the history of Glasgow, and in the development of the diverse representations of the city?

## Historical Context

The historical narrative of Glasgow has evoked various binary representations in the popular imagination:

- Second City or Cancer of Empire
- Workshop of the World or the Workers' Republic of Clydeside
- Worst slums in Europe or Best Built Suburbs in North Britain
- No Mean City or Glasgow's Miles Better
- Urban Kailyard or Gangland Glasgow
- Dear Green Place or Vomit of a Cataleptic Commercialism
- Scottish Renaissance or Scottish Revolution
- Semi-Subaltern or Servitor Imperialist
- Merchant City or Heartland of Municipal Socialism
- Post-Industrial City or Permanently Liminal

During the twentieth century, Glasgow's image in slogans and stereotypes fluctuated: from the 'Second City of the British Empire' and economic workshop of the world, to the home of mass unemployment and social anomie; from 'Red Clydeside'<sup>7</sup> and imminent worker revolution, to 'Glasgow's Miles Better' and European City of Culture in 1990. Glasgow is a city internationally famous for the friendliness of its inhabitants, their sense of humour and celebration of language; and yet is also known as the home of poverty, unemployment, religious sectarianism and bad housing. It is a city that recurrently reinvents its own image, and nevertheless may also be enduringly entrapped in the liminal instant of its economic decline.

So what is the truth about Glasgow? Like all great iconic cities the reality is to be found in the complexities of its history rather than the simplicity of its projections. Many of the lasting stereotypes of the city were created during the

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<sup>7</sup> It is not known exactly when or how the term Red Clydeside came into being. The Clydesiders spoke of themselves as 'The Clydesiders' not 'Red Clydeside'. It possibly originated with Arthur Shadwell, a liberal who wrote a series of articles in Journals and Newspapers about 'the Bolshevik Menace'. (Pers.Comm. Seán Damer and Irene Maver, 14 May, 2010)

interwar period, a defining moment both in the economy and culture of Glasgow and in the narrative of the city. This dissertation argues that Glasgow's recent history should be understood in the context of the global crisis of capitalism during the 1930s: what became known as the Great Depression. Almost a century later it is revealing to look at the ways in which the city was depicted textually in the novels of the time; and to examine the realism of these representations by comparing them with contemporary non-fictional representations.

Marketed in the late twentieth century as Europe's first post-industrial city, Glasgow had also been one of Europe's first great industrial cities, perfectly placed in terms of conditions conducive to early capitalist development, therefore in a unique position to develop its industrial identity by the late eighteenth century. There were three crucial reasons for this situation: the proximity of Glasgow to the natural resources of coal and iron required for heavy industry; capital accumulated by the mercantile class, chiefly in the tobacco, sugar and textile trade with the colonies; and access to unlimited supplies of cheap labour necessary for the accrual of surplus value and thus profit. This last factor was created by the economic forces both pushing the traditional peasantry off the land - famine and land dispossession known as the 'Clearances' in the Scottish Lowlands, Highlands and Ireland; and pulling the nascent urban proletariat towards the cities in the hope of sustenance in a wage economy. This reserve army of labour subsequently developed into one of the most skilled industrial workforces of the world in the engineering and shipbuilding workshops of Clydeside.

The beginnings of the transformation of Glasgow from 'dear green place' to industrial powerhouse can be traced to 1800 with the advent of the steam power revolution.<sup>8</sup> The radical demographic and structural changes that occurred are reflected in both literary and artistic representations of the city from the time. Smoke billowing from factory chimneys and crowded urban landscapes became intrinsic to the representative imagery of nineteenth century Glasgow. As with many cities in the United Kingdom the industrial area of Glasgow was concentrated in the East End of the city, particularly Calton and Bridgeton, although also in Anderston and the Gorbals west of the city.<sup>9</sup> These became the

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<sup>8</sup> 1800 was the year the patent expired on James Watt's steam engine.

<sup>9</sup> The prevailing winds blow from west to east in the UK.

areas most affected and impoverished by the economic effects of the interwar Depression.<sup>10</sup> The East End of Glasgow was also characterised by a strong Scottish presence and a radical left wing political tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Glasgow's success as a shipbuilding city was made possible by the city's early phase of industrialisation, originally based in textiles, and subsequently evolving into a second more sustained phase of heavy industry, and then the development of shipbuilding along the Clyde from the 1830s. New technology, along with the abundance of iron and coal in the Lanarkshire area adjoining Glasgow, promoted iron production from the late 1820s and steel production from the late 1870s. From the mid nineteenth century the journalistic tropes used to describe Glasgow's mining and heavy industry emphasised strength and reliability, and a particular pride in 'Clyde-built' (an image drastically debilitated after the First World War). For example Robert Gillespie wrote in 1876:

neither the Clyde nor Glasgow would be what they now are were it not for the vast mineral fields which lie north and south of the river, and which yield such ample and unfailing supplies of the backbone of civilisation - iron, and of coal the material from which is drawn the nervous power to vivify that backbone.<sup>12</sup>

An important contributor to the promotion of Glasgow's shipbuilding industry in the nineteenth century was the ongoing project, improved by Victorian engineering, of widening and deepening the Clyde (not a navigable river for large vessels in its natural state). Irene Maver argues that the imagery of the Clyde's expansion was most important for perceptions of Glasgow's industrial development - the idea of the channelling of the river for commerce and the common good.<sup>13</sup> By the 1870s the Clyde was being hailed as the great generator of Glasgow's prosperity, a linkage emphasised at the time by Gillespie, along with deference to Glasgow's status as so-called Second City:

What the Nile was to Egypt, the Clyde is to Glasgow. It is the source in a large measure of that prosperity which has raised, in recent years, a town once of comparatively minor importance to the lofty position of "Second city in the Empire".<sup>14</sup>

Comparable eulogistic references to Glasgow's status as 'Second City' are provided by James Hamilton Muir in 1901, in an evocative description of the

<sup>10</sup> For a full discussion of the economic history of modern Glasgow see Anthony Slaven, *The Development of the West of Scotland, 1750-1960*, (Routledge & Kegan: London, 1975)

<sup>11</sup> Documented by David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt*, (Harrap & Co: London, 1935) pp.1-10

<sup>12</sup> Robert Gillespie, *Glasgow and The Clyde*, (Robert Forrester: Glasgow, 1876) p. 25

<sup>13</sup> Irene Maver, *Glasgow* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000), pp, 45-46 and 122-23.

<sup>14</sup> Gillespie, *Glasgow and The Clyde*, p.24

importance of the shipbuilding industry to the city. The buoyant imagery is in contradistinction to the downswing in journalistic descriptions and popular perceptions of the city during the interwar period, particularly that of the 'Condition of Scotland' discourse (discussed later in this chapter). Muir describes how consciousness of the shipyards dominated Glasgow and its inhabitants at the turn of the century:

We believe, every Glasgow man of us, that our shipbuilding is a thing to be talked of, and a most honourable and dignified business to have for the chief industry of a city. Sheffield is known to the world for cutlery, Birmingham for pedlars' wares and nails and bullets, and Manchester for "Manchester goods." But Glasgow is the maker of ships, and her sons are proud of their seemly product ... of more moment to Glasgow than her other industries, her college, her cathedral, is the building of her ships.<sup>15</sup>

There was of course a great deal more to Glasgow's economy than shipbuilding, the complexities of which are discussed in Chapter Two of the dissertation. But the city was identified, and identified itself, as a significant shipbuilding city, and the skill and expertise involved in the production of grand ocean-going vessels became an emblem of pride and power for the city and its workers, themes also explored in Chapter Two of the dissertation. The mining, metal-working, and shipbuilding industries nurtured a tradition of radical politics in Glasgow and the surrounding areas. It was this context which was to produce many of the Red Clydesiders, along with the perceived potential for revolution in interwar Glasgow, discussed in Chapter Four of the dissertation.

Politically, Victorian Glasgow had been dominated by free-trade Liberalism - representing class cohesion, not class conflict. Maver argues that this was a reason for the marginalisation of Liberal politics in the 1920s when class politics came to the fore.<sup>16</sup> But even before that, the internal problems in the Liberal Party encouraged the emergence of what Iain Hutchison, in an analysis of the growth of socialism in the Glasgow, refers to as 'a new socialist strand .... appealing to the working classes of the city'.<sup>17</sup> The Scottish Labour Party formed in 1888 and five years later joined the British-wide Independent Labour

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<sup>15</sup> James Hamilton Muir, *Glasgow in 1901* (William Hodge & Co, Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1901), pp. 116-18.

<sup>16</sup> Maver, *Glasgow*, p.120.

<sup>17</sup> Iain Hutchison, 'Glasgow working-class politics' in R. A. Cage (ed.), *The Working Class in Glasgow, 1750-1914* (Croom Helm, London, 1987), pp.98-141.)

Party (ILP).<sup>18</sup> Until 1914 the ILP ‘was easily the largest socialist organisation in Glasgow’ according to Hutchison, with branches of the ILP in most districts of the city.<sup>19</sup> Many of the well known Clydeside interwar politicians emerged from an ILP background of ‘municipal socialist’ politics in the Glasgow Corporation. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, housing was a big campaign issue for the ILP. The Clydeside Rent Strikes of 1915 shifted the balance of power against the private landlords and in favour of municipal housing, but entrenched problems with housing continued during the interwar period. Maver argues that the need to solve the ‘slum question’ was an issue that came to have iconic status for socialists.<sup>20</sup> It was also an issue that continued throughout the interwar era, as discussed in Chapter Three of the dissertation.

The economic powerhouse that was Glasgow throughout the nineteenth century became one of the areas in Britain worst affected by the Great Depression of the twentieth century. Due to a peculiar confluence of historical causalities Glasgow began to face an economic slump from 1921, with devastating effects on its heavy industry and shipbuilding-based economy. The complex reasons, if not the remedies, for the periodic crises that occur within a capitalist economic system are perhaps better, if still imperfectly, understood in 2009 than they were in the interwar era. From the various interpretations at the time, it is possible to distil three main grounds for the economic decline in Scotland during the interwar period: failure of initiative from Scottish entrepreneurs to adapt to changes in technology and the global economy; failure of Scotland to attract investment due to its remoteness from major centres; and failure of the militant unionised workforce to understand that the cost of its labour had increased beyond the profit incentive.<sup>21</sup> There are historical ironies inherent in all three factors. It had been the initiative and innovation of Glasgow’s entrepreneurs, and the industry and skill of its workforce, that had played a large part in the development, not only of Glasgow, but also of the entire United Kingdom during the Industrial Revolution; and this despite the region’s remote geographic placement. In fact Glasgow’s position was extremely favourable to its participation in the Atlantic trade with British colonies, and the Clyde was

<sup>18</sup> The rise of the Labour Party in Glasgow is documented in J. J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow, 1896-1936: Socialism, Suffrage, Sectarianism* (Tuckwell Press, East Linton, 2000); and Alan McKinlay and R. J. Morris (eds), *The ILP on Clydeside, 1893-1932: from Foundation to Disintegration* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Hutchison, *The Working Class in Glasgow, 1750-1914*, p.115

<sup>20</sup> Maver, *Glasgow*, pp.258-260

<sup>21</sup> See discussion of ‘Condition of Scotland’ discourse below.

Scotland's global gateway and a vital link in its prosperity. These economic problems are discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two of the dissertation.

The economic problems of the interwar years were exacerbated by numerous complex dynamics: The reputation of Clydeside for difficult industrial relations; the concomitant high price of labour in the labour-intensive heavy industries upon which the Glasgow economy was based; and an economic policy determined by Westminster far from the economic realities of Scotland. During the Great Depression, in a futile attempt at economic rationalisation, government policy for regeneration was geared towards reduction in prices, resulting in wage cuts and worker redundancy.<sup>22</sup> The consequent massive unemployment, increasing immiseration, and growing militancy of the working class, contributed to the development of the reputation of Glasgow as a revolutionary city, discussed in Chapter Four of the dissertation.

The interwar years were a liminal moment of economic becoming for Scotland when the old was not yet terminated and the new was struggling to emerge. Liminality is a period of transition, during which normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to nascent possibilities of being. However this state can become permanent when the transition is not fully completed. During the interwar years Glasgow was caught in a liminal historical moment, one of shifting world trade patterns when the global economic order was being redefined. It was a time of twentieth-century technological modernisation, to which the nineteenth-century based Glasgow industries did not adjust well. It can be argued, no doubt controversially, that failure of economic vision and adaptation on the part of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, led to the city being caught in a state of permanent liminality from which it has never successfully moved forward, discussed in Chapter Six of the dissertation.

It was during the interwar period that Glasgow, the once powerful industrial, self-proclaimed Second City of Empire, began to evolve its post-modern, post-industrial identity. The 'Second City' label continued to underpin Glasgow's rather shaky self-image as an imperial city during the interwar years. However 'Second City' status was always contested territory, with similar claims made by

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<sup>22</sup> Summary of discussion in Maver, *Glasgow* pp.203-225.

other great British industrial cities such as Liverpool and Manchester. From the nineteenth century Edinburgh and Dublin rivalled each other for the title. In the wider context the British Empire contained cities much greater in size than Glasgow.<sup>23</sup> By 1938 Glasgow was no longer the Second City in population terms; although the population was almost double then than what it is in 2009.<sup>24</sup>

After the First World War the heavy-industry based economy of the city became increasingly marginalised by changing global economics. It briefly revived during the rearmament of the Second World War, hung on for a while in the following decades, and then eventually entered its death throes in the 1960s. Glasgow never recovered its former glory and wealth, although it has succeeded in reinventing certain aspects of itself. The five realistic proletarian novels of the interwar era examined here are a social and historical documentation of Glasgow at the beginning of this transformation.

### Scottish Renaissance or Revolution?

By the interwar years the Clyde industrial region had the image of being the 'Workshop of the World', the 'Engine Room of Britain', and particularly after the First World War, the 'Arsenal of the Empire'. Nevertheless, the shipbuilders, the miners, the engineers, and the factory workers, who created the wealth and success that made this public relations hyperbole possible, were paid poverty wages and forced to live in overcrowded squalor. Vast profits were generated in all areas of industry, but those who actually produced it shared little of this wealth. It was from this context that increasingly militant worker organisation emerged on Clydeside during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The extraordinarily difficult conditions endured by the proletariat during the development of the city produced a distinctively Glaswegian culture. It was an organic intellectual culture, but one which also became appropriated and represented by middle-class cultural practitioners. The phenomenon known as the Scottish Renaissance emerged in the early 1920s and evolved until the

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<sup>23</sup> W. Hamish Fraser, 'Competing with the Capital: The Case of Glasgow Versus Edinburgh', in Lars Nilsson (ed) *Capital Cities: Images and realities in the Historical Development of European Capital Cities*, (Institute of Urban History: Stockholm University, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Maver, *Glasgow*, p.208.

Second World War in 1939. Alan Riach observes that it was Hugh MacDiarmid who heralded this Scottish Renaissance: ‘an activation of national cultural awareness...an attempt to demolish the weight of convention suffocating creativity’.<sup>25</sup> The objective of those involved in the Scottish Renaissance was a re-evaluation of Scottish culture, a realistic reappraisal of the socio-economic condition of Scotland, and a challenge to previously distorted representations of the nation.<sup>26</sup> The project was to create a coherent, dynamic, artistic revival, integrated with a regeneration of the social, economic, and political life of Scotland. It developed across the spectrum of cultural producers: writers in Scottish fiction and non-fiction, journalists, intellectuals, artists, and politicians.

An intrinsic element of the Scottish Renaissance was the ‘Condition of Scotland’ discourse published during the interwar era, offering a realistic analysis of the prevailing problems in the nation. Examples of this discourse are: James A. Bowie, *The Future of Scotland* (1939);<sup>27</sup> John Boyd Orr, ‘Scotland as it is’ (1937) and ‘Scotland as it might be’ (1937);<sup>28</sup> Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse* (1930);<sup>29</sup> Alexander Macle hose, *The Scotland of Our Sons* (1937);<sup>30</sup> William Power, *Scotland and the Scots* (1934);<sup>31</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* (1927)<sup>32</sup> and *Scotland: That Distressed Area* (1935).<sup>33</sup> Additionally writers, whose main focus was more usually the production of fiction, added their voices to the ‘Condition of Scotland’ debates: for instance, George Blake, *The Heart of Scotland* (1934);<sup>34</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene* (1934);<sup>35</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (1935);<sup>36</sup> and Edward Scouller, ‘So this is Glasgow!’ (1936).<sup>37</sup>

These ‘Condition of Scotland’ writers engaged on different levels of literary dialogue and communication: autobiographical, travel-writing, life-writing, and

<sup>25</sup> Alan Riach, *Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of the Modern Nation* (Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2005), p.xxi.

<sup>26</sup> William Power, *My Scotland* (Porpoise Press: Edinburgh, 1934), p.300.

<sup>27</sup> James A. Bowie, *The Future of Scotland: A Survey of the Present Position with Some Prospects of Future Policy* (W&R Chambers: Edinburgh, 1939).

<sup>28</sup> John Boyd Orr, ‘Scotland as it is’ and ‘Scotland as it might be’, in *The Scotland of our Sons*, (ed) A Macle hose (London: 1937), p.64 -83 and p.84 -109.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse* (London: Humphrey Toulmin, 1930).

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Macle hose, *The Scotland of Our Sons* (London, 1937).

<sup>31</sup> William Power, *Scotland and the Scots* (Moray Press: Edinburgh, 1934).

<sup>32</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* (Kegan Paul: London, 1927).

<sup>33</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Scotland: That Distressed Area* (Edinburgh: 1935).

<sup>34</sup> George Blake, *The Heart of Scotland* (London: 1934).

<sup>35</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, ‘Glasgow’, *Scottish Scene* (London, 1934).

<sup>36</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh: 1935:1979).

<sup>37</sup> Edward Scouller, ‘So this is Glasgow!’ *Outlook*, vol.1, no 8, November (1936), pp.79-81.

journalism. This continues to be an under-researched area, one in which Margery McCulloch is one of the few documenters. In *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918 -1939* (2004) she has collated primary source documents from the interwar era, with the stated aim of bringing to the reading public the debates and arguments of the interwar era, ‘concerning the wider cultural, social and political forces at work at home and abroad during this challenging transitional period.’ Pertinent to the project of this dissertation is McCulloch’s suggestion that, ‘It may also be the case that a more acute understanding of the creative writing and writers of the period will be arrived at as a result of their work being seen in the context of such contemporaneous material’.<sup>38</sup>

A popular theme of the ‘Condition of Scotland’ debates concerned ‘What’s wrong with Scotland’. The pervasive image of Scotland was that of a ‘distressed area’, to be unfavourably compared with the more prosperous England. In an article entitled ‘Scotland as it is’, John Boyd Orr highlighted the historical irony of the Scots’ major contribution to the building of the British Empire, in relation to their poor share in its prosperity, compared unfavourably with the better-off English. Boyd Orr argued, ‘the whole of Scotland might well be scheduled as a distressed area’.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in the aptly titled: *Scotland, That Distressed Area*, the Scottish Nationalist journalist George Malcolm Thomson argued that, far from experiencing economic progress after the 1707 Union with England, for Scotland, ‘the hands of the clock had begun to move backwards’.<sup>40</sup> McCulloch avers that Thomson’s texts provided ‘wide-ranging and influential analyses of decline in Scotland’,<sup>41</sup> although unfortunately both his and Andrew Dewar Gibb’s credibility were undermined by their sectarian attacks on Irish immigration and the Catholic Church.<sup>42</sup>

Richard Finlay reveals how the ‘what’s wrong with Scotland?’ debate came to be deeply ingrained in the contemporary discourse around Scotland’s economic

<sup>38</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, ed. *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918 – 1939 Source documents for the Scottish Renaissance* (The Association for Scottish Literary Studies University of Glasgow: Glasgow, 2004), p.xiii.

<sup>39</sup> Orr, ‘Scotland as it is’, p.64.

<sup>40</sup> Thomson, *Scotland: That Distressed Area*, p.5.

<sup>41</sup> McCulloch, (ed.) *Modernism and Nationalism*, p.385.

<sup>42</sup> Maver. Pers. comm. University of Glasgow. July 2009.

difficulties after the First World War.<sup>43</sup> Edmund Stegmaier's discussion of these texts (he does not refer to them as 'Condition of Scotland') posits that they were grounded in a 'particularly Scottish analysis' of the nation's problems, with an emphasis on factual accounts, based on statistical data, and offering an alternative vision of the future.<sup>44</sup> The debate was also influenced by an underlying fear of social disintegration in the interwar zeitgeist, which was exploited by Glasgow's large and influential popular press. Maver argues that, 'The deteriorating urban fabric was used as a metaphor for Scotland's declining industrial prosperity. Assorted writers exploited the image of negativity to strengthen their case for remedial action'.<sup>45</sup> Nostalgia for pre-war success contributed to the media constructions of the post First World War city as sinister, creating the insidious image of Glasgow as the 'Cancer of Empire'.<sup>46</sup>

This negative tendency in the discourse is in contradistinction to a more positive development described by William Power in *Scotland and the Scots* (1934) as 'the new travel writing' of the interwar period, an attempt by Scottish writers to escape the confines of the industrialised cities and the urban misery of the Depression.<sup>47</sup> Power wrote 'The whole of Scottish literature of today, indeed, including the majority of books by Scots about Scotland, represents mainly the discovery of Scotland by the Scots'.<sup>48</sup> This sentiment is evident in *Gael over Glasgow*, *Major Operation*, and *The Shipbuilders*, and became an expression of Scottish Nationalist politics in the 1930s. The later 'Scotland on the Move' discourse, for example as portrayed in the realistic films of John Grierson, builds upon this more positive trend.<sup>49</sup> The role of the press and journalists in particular in shaping the imagery of Glasgow was consistent and important and will be discussed more thoroughly throughout the dissertation, particularly in relation to the concepts of Red Clydeside and Gangland Glasgow. Chapter Five of the dissertation discusses the possibilities of individual agency versus economic determinism experienced by the characters in the interwar

<sup>43</sup> Richard, J. Finlay, 'National Identity in Crisis: Politicians, Intellectuals and the "End of Scotland" 1920-1939. *History*, 79 (1994), pp. 242-259

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Stegmaier, 'Facts and Vision in Scottish Writing of the 1920s and 1930s'. *Scottish Literary Journal*, 9, Nov 1982, pp.67-78.

<sup>45</sup> Maver, *Glasgow*, p.253.

<sup>46</sup> Maver, *Ibid.*, p.234.

<sup>47</sup> The discovery of Scotland by the Scots as opposed to the discovery of Scotland by the English – first with Dr Johnson then the landscape painters such as Knox whose works hang in the Kelvingrove Museum.

<sup>48</sup> Power, *Scotland and the Scots*, p.30.

<sup>49</sup> John Grierson, (1979), 'The Salt of the Earth' in Forsyth Hardy (ed), *John Grierson's Scotland*, (Ramsay Head Press: Edinburgh, 1979)

novels; and examines the power of ideology, and whether false consciousness was a major reason for the failure of the ongoing class struggle to evolve nascent revolutionary potential in Glasgow during the interwar era. The analysis here is grounded in the Marxist concept that from the economic base or infrastructure of society emerges a superstructure consisting of definite forms of social consciousness. Politics, religion, aesthetics, and ethics are all instruments of ideology which Marxist theory attempts to deconstruct. Terry Eagleton insists on the importance of grasping the precise meaning for Marxism of ideology, the function of which is to legitimate and perpetuate the power of the ruling class, or the owners of the means of production, in any society.<sup>50</sup> For Raymond Williams, it is not the base and superstructure that need to be studied, but ‘specific and indissoluble real processes, within which the decisive relationship, from a Marxist point of view, is that expressed by the complex idea of determination’.<sup>51</sup> Eagleton lauds Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) for reintroducing the importance of social consciousness to a Marxism previously dominated by the notion of economic determinism. He avers that for Lukács, social consciousness, in particular the class consciousness of the proletariat, is not just a reflection of social conditions, but a transformative force within them: ‘Capitalist society in general is ridden with reification ... but it is in the interests of a subject class ... to grasp that social order in its dynamic totality, and in doing so it becomes conscious of its own commodified status.’<sup>52</sup> Eagleton argues that social relations are not a matter of freedom of choice but a constraint of material necessity. This seemingly deterministic position is mitigated by his understanding of dialectical complexity: ‘Ideology is never a simple reflection of a ruling class’s ideas; on the contrary, it is always a complex phenomenon, which may incorporate conflicting, even contradictory views of the world.’<sup>53</sup> These are contradictions that materialize within the interwar novels, the characters, and the writers themselves, and are referred to throughout the dissertation.

Marx and Engels did not produce a comprehensive theory of ideology or culture. Both Williams and Eagleton discuss this issue at some length in their writings, arguing that a Marxist theory of culture will emphasise complexity, diversity and

<sup>50</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, (London: Methuen, 1976) p.6

<sup>51</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p.82

<sup>52</sup> Terry Eagleton, (ed.) *Ideology* London: Longman, 1994) p.12

<sup>53</sup> Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p.7

contradictions. Eagleton reminds us that, 'ideological is not synonymous with cultural: it denotes, more precisely, the points at which our cultural practices are interwoven with political power.'<sup>54</sup> Williams elaborates on the idea of the superstructure as a matter of human consciousness that includes continuities from the past as well as reactions to the present, 'Marx indeed at times regards ideology as a false consciousness.'<sup>55</sup> a system of continuities which change has in fact undermined'.<sup>56</sup> Detailed information about how people felt and thought at a particular time, is often only available to us in literature,<sup>57</sup> therefore 'To understand literature, then, means understanding the total social process of which it is a part.'<sup>58</sup> However Williams avers that much 'English' Marxist criticism 'seems to subscribe simultaneously to a mechanistic view of art as the passive 'reflex' of the economic base, and to a Romantic belief in art as projecting an ideal world and stirring men to new values'.<sup>59</sup> These ideas are also applicable to an analysis of the interwar Glasgow novels and are discussed in Chapter Six of the dissertation.

### The Realistic Novels of Clydeside

A new genre of urban novels developed in Scottish literature during the interwar years. Authored in Glasgow and therefore 'Clydebuilt', these became known as the proletarian or realistic novels of Clydeside. This dissertation examines the five novels with interwar Glasgow as both their subject and date of publication, that realistically represent the economic, social and political consequences of the Great Depression on the city and its people. The defining feature of these realistic novels is that all contain some reference to the alienation and anomie produced by the reification inherent in capitalist social relations. From the perspective of 2009, seven decades after their creation, it is possible to assess their veracity as historical documents by comparison with the evidence of contemporaneous non-fictional representations of Glasgow, particularly the 'Condition of Scotland' debates.

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<sup>54</sup> Eagleton, (ed.) *Ideology*, p.11

<sup>55</sup> Although Engels used the term 'false consciousness', Marx himself never did.

<sup>56</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*. (London: Hogarth, 1958 repr.1982) p.266

<sup>57</sup> Engels and later Lenin argued that realistic novelists can teach more about the nature of a society than can sociological, political and historical analysts.

<sup>58</sup> Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p.5

<sup>59</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*. p.273

In the 1980s Moira Burgess offered a critical re-evaluation of the Glasgow novel, on which she is now the accepted authority. She posits that the Glasgow novels of the interwar era portray the city in fiction for the first time in all its gritty reality. An enigma for critics of Scottish literature is that until the interwar years, there was a dearth of realistic representation of the city in the form of an industrial Scottish novel genre. Burgess describes it as ‘a strange blind spot in Scottish fiction, the ignoring by most novelists of the urban and industrial scene in favour of the rural and parochial’. She suggests possible reasons for this:

the exceptionally swift and brutal impact of the Industrial Revolution, with, as it were, a stupefying effect on contemporary writers; the influence of Scott’s novels with their historical-romantic view of Scotland; and a desire to record, with perhaps more enthusiasm than accuracy, the picturesque elements of an obsolescent way of life.<sup>60</sup>

Around the time of its emergence, Power commented on the new realistic genre in the novel as being in favourable contradistinction to the previously dominant style in Scotland of the so-called ‘Kailyard’: ‘The average Scottish writer no longer views his own country through the narrow and distorting media of feudal romanticism, Kailyard sentimentalism, or Imperialist insularity’.<sup>61</sup> Burgess defines kailyard as, ‘a body of work characterised by sentimentality, narrowness of vision, and the acceptance of a code of unshakeable assumptions regarding conventional conduct and belief’.<sup>62</sup> It was a term usually applied to fiction with a rural setting, and in order to describe Glasgow city fiction with these qualities, Burgess claims to have invented the term ‘urban kailyard’.<sup>63</sup> Some decades earlier, George Blake, the Glasgow journalist and novelist, had been similarly critical of the sentimentalising escapist kailyard genre because, as he argues in *The Annals of Scotland*, it was incapable of portraying the true miserable reality of industrialised Scotland:

So we ask what the contemporary Scottish writers had to say about this almost melodramatic state of affairs ... Was there nobody in Scotland to tell the truth about what was happening? ... The representative Scottish writers of the period went on - and on - representing their coevals as either bucolic philosophers or eagle-plumed gallants in the heather ...<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Moira Burgess *The Glasgow Novel* 3rd Edition (The Scottish Library Association: Glasgow 1999) pp.31-32.

<sup>61</sup> Power, *Scotland and the Scots*, p.30.

<sup>62</sup> Moira Burgess, *Imagine a City: Glasgow in Fiction* (Argyll Publishing: Glendaruel, 1998), p.68.

<sup>63</sup> Burgess, *Ibid.* p.69.

<sup>64</sup> George Blake, *The Annals of Scotland 1895-1955* (BBC:London,1956) p.10-11.

In tracing the development of the realistic Glasgow urban novel Burgess divides the interwar period into the 1920s and 1930s. She argues that initial attempts at urban realism in the 1920s 'have not survived to the present day in either popular favour or critical esteem', but laid the groundwork and provided 'a first draft of the realistic Glasgow novel'.<sup>65</sup> The novels of the 1930s were a nascent phenomenon in that they evinced 'a new political and social commitment'.<sup>66</sup> However these very 1930s Glasgow novels that Burgess regards as a development in the realistic genre have also not survived in popular favour with the reading public, with the possible exception of *No Mean City*,<sup>67</sup> and there is little evidence of their receiving much critical esteem. All succeed perhaps more on a level of social commentary than on their literary merit, and ironically it was the two which were most flawed and unrealistic, *No Mean City* and *The Shipbuilders*, that became iconic representations of Glasgow in popular consciousness. Burgess herself has reservations about the merit of many of the novels of the 1930s, and she regards *No Mean City* as a particularly negative influence on the genre.<sup>68</sup> However in the second edition of her text *The Glasgow Novel* (1986), she selects three of these novels as being of major significance for the decade: *The Shipbuilders* (1935), *Major Operation* (1936), and *Gael Over Glasgow* (1937). In the third edition of her text she adds a fourth novel, *Hunger March* (1934). For the purposes of this dissertation *No Mean City* is also included, for the reason that it shares the thematic emphasis of the other four interwar proletarian novels: the effects of the Depression and unemployment on the working class of Glasgow.

For the most part, the five novels discussed in this dissertation present a picture of Glasgow which can be regarded as 'realistic'. Realism in literature is an approach that attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity and concerns itself with social setting and the nature of society. Insofar as the primary focus of the interwar novels discussed in the dissertation is upon the working classes and upon social structures, and the (albeit varying) levels of social and political commitment in the novels, they belong in the genre of 'social realism'. This is grounded in Marxist theory which presupposes that

<sup>65</sup> Moira Burgess, *The Glasgow Novel*, p.45.

<sup>66</sup> Burgess, *Ibid.* p.45.

<sup>67</sup> Although *No Mean City* is a well known representation of Glasgow, it is rare to find anyone who has actually read this novel.

<sup>68</sup> Burgess, *The Glasgow Novel*, p.40.

perceptions of reality derive from class-consciousness, and was developed in the aesthetic of Georges Lukács. The distinction is made between the 'apparent form' of the art work and its 'inner core' or essence, through which the conscious reader can gain access to the truth of a historical situation, based on the premise that all literature is a reflection of reality, and that it will be the truest mirror if it fully reflects the contradictions of social development. There is also an ethical implication in that social realism should demonstrate insight into the class structure of society and the future direction of its evolution.<sup>69</sup>

According to Lukács, realism is a genuinely dialectical art form which mediates and reconciles the capitalist contradictions between abstract and concrete, essence and appearance, individual and social whole. Realism mirrors the complex totality of society itself, and in so doing it combats the alienation and fragmentation of capitalist society, projecting a complex possibility of human wholeness and harmony.<sup>70</sup> Eagleton discusses how Bertoldt Brecht diverges from Lukács on the question of realism with a critique of the 'recreation of human harmony' view of art as reactionary nostalgia. Brecht believed that art should expose and stimulate action to abolish contradictions, and that the possibilities for humanity revealed by art should be concrete and historical, not abstract notions of wholeness.<sup>71</sup> For Lukács however all great art is inevitably also socially progressive in the sense that, whatever the author's political allegiance, it will realise the vital historical forces of an epoch which make for change and growth: 'the great realist writers arise from a history which is visibly in the making'.<sup>72</sup> It is argued in the dissertation that the interwar era in Glasgow was just such a turbulent revolutionary epoch of change, the significance of which the writers of the realist novels were aware, albeit in varying degrees, and attempting to represent. However, as Eagleton stresses when he augments Lukács's theory of realism with that of Marx and Engels' 'principle of contradiction': 'the political views of an author may run counter to what his work objectively reveals'.<sup>73</sup> In a later text Eagleton argues that the realist novel is actually 'reformist in spirit' and suggests that realism in the sense of 'verisimilitude' (the semblance of truth) is not necessarily revolutionary.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Georges Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. (Merlin Press:London,1920)

<sup>70</sup> Georges Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, (Merlin Press:London, 1937,1962)

<sup>71</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, (Methuen: London, 1976) pp.70-74

<sup>72</sup> Eagleton, *Ibid*, p.29

<sup>73</sup> Eagleton, *Ibid*, p.57

<sup>74</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2005) p.7

Don Adams questions the validity of ‘mimesis’ (an imitation of life or nature) as the dominant theory of literary realism, ‘which assumes the reality of only that which is materially actual’. He offers up alternative realisms which ‘assume the reality of both actual and virtual, or potential, modes of being’. Reality as ‘not a finished product as it is conceived by mimesis, but as an evolving and purposeful creation, in which the reader crucially participates.’<sup>75</sup> Adams argues for the need to move past the Modernist impasse between objective reality and subjective desire by which: ‘human activity is, a priori, rendered impotent and robbed of meaning’; or alternatively ‘the writer identifies what is necessarily a subjective experience with reality as such, thus giving a distorted picture of reality as a whole’.<sup>76</sup> The implications of these ideas are discussed in Chapter Six of the dissertation in relation to the interpretation of the interwar novels, their inherent contradictions, and their nostalgia and related inability to articulate an alternative progressive vision of the future.

Of all the novels examined in this dissertation, the one most befitting the label ‘social realism’ is *Major Operation*. The novel narrates descriptions of the economic decline of Glasgow in the interwar years, and the response of the workers to the interwar crisis of capitalism, in a manner corresponding more successfully with reality than the other novels. *Major Operation* recounts the historic events of the United Kingdom hunger marches of the 1930s with more detailed realism than that of the novel entitled *Hunger March*, which takes as its subject a twenty four hour period in Glasgow covering one such march. *Major Operation* also dissects the devastating effects of unemployment on the working class more realistically than *The Shipbuilders*, which takes as its subject the demise of the shipbuilding industry. *Major Operation* also contains a more radical historical materialist analysis of the social unrest that affected Clydeside than *Gael Over Glasgow*, although *Major Operation* cannot surpass this last novel for realistic descriptions of the working life of the area. And finally, *Major Operation’s* exposure of the degradation of the slums is as realistic as, but less melodramatic than, that of *No Mean City*.

It has been argued that *No Mean City* veers too far into naturalism to be classified as ‘social realism’. According to Lukács, naturalism in writing is

<sup>75</sup> Don Adams, *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2009) p.2

<sup>76</sup> Adams, discussion of Lukács from *Realism in our Time* Ibid. p.115

concerned only with the surface appearances of everyday life, deprived of the historical conditions of its existence, drained of direction and meaning.<sup>77</sup> Jack Mitchell posits that with *No Mean City*, proletarian social realism in Scotland, ‘allowed naturalism to get in first and queer the pitch ... showing the proletarian community teeming with dynamic life, with its own morality and specific human relations - all twisted into their opposites’.<sup>78</sup> He is almost as condemnatory of *The Shipbuilders*, positing the possibility that *Major Operation* was consciously intended to work against these two novels, intimating that a literary antidote to their negative influence was needed. However it can be argued that *No Mean City* reflects the effects of the Depression on the lives of the working class with adequate realism, and is therefore a useful portrait of the city during the interwar era. It contains descriptions of the economic workaday life of the industrial city other than shipbuilding and heavy industry, and is notable for detailing the minutiae of domestic life, housing, and courting rituals; as well as unemployment, gang violence, and criminality on the margins of the economy.

The central narrative structure of the four novels other than *No Mean City*, presents the device of parallel plots pertaining to the lives of representative members of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and the ways in which the economic crisis of the 1930s affects these characters. The plots compare the diverse, and sometimes similar, life and work experiences of these two classes in Glasgow during the economic crisis of the interwar years. In *The Shipbuilders* the two class representatives are shipyard owner Leslie Pagan and his ex-army batman and current employee Danny Shields the shipyard riveter. *Major Operation* concerns the bringing together in the same hospital ward of Jock MacKelvie a shipyard worker, and George Anderson a bourgeois business man, both in hospital to have an emergency ‘major operation’. In *Gael Over Glasgow* the parallel plot device is similar though not as clear-cut as the other novels: Brian O’Neill a working-class trainee shipyard engineer meets his middle-class counterpart Alec Cameron, when they are both roaming the hills above Clydebank. In *Hunger March* the bourgeois life of Arthur Joyce the business owner of ‘Joyce’s India Merchants’, is set up in opposition to that of his cleaner, working-class Mrs Humphry and her unemployed son Joe. The fifth novel *No Mean City* differs somewhat from the other four in theme and structure.

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<sup>77</sup> Georges Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*.

<sup>78</sup> Jack Mitchell ‘The struggle for the working class novel in Scotland’. *Scottish Marxist*. Part III no 8 January (1975), P.39.

Although also concerned with class difference, the main class opposition is between the working-class anti-hero gangster Johnnie Stark, and Glasgow itself. He is the faecal figure, a by-product of the industrial digestion of the Second City, and an integral aspect of its capitalist identity.

The five realist novels all take as their subject matter the economic crisis of capitalism in Glasgow during the interwar years and its socio-political consequences. All illustrate the long term effect of economic deprivation on the Glasgow working class. All share the themes of: unemployment, the dole, class struggle, class consciousness, the possibility of impending revolution and the deterrents to revolution - notably false consciousness and alcohol. All contain an overt critique of the capitalist system, together with the writers' commitment to presenting it realistically. All contain a condemnation of the ills of urbanisation and express a loss of innocence caused by the corrupting city. But the realistic novels also express a celebration of Glasgow's cultural and political energy, and serve as a testament to the life of Clydeside and the city of Glasgow at a particular moment of its development. A range of themes are apparent within the designation of liminal city; the impact of the First World War being one of the most crucial as the Red Clydeside image arose directly from that conflict.

Together with these shared themes, each novel contains its own specific thematic emphasis. Some of the novels document for posterity the working life of the Clyde shipbuilding industry and the social life of its skilled communities, and some of them emphasise politics and the labour movement, demonstrations and hunger marches. *Hunger March* recounts the decline of business in Glasgow, and the political demonstrations during the economic crisis. *Gael Over Glasgow* details the practical working life, the factories and shipbuilding yards, and the trade union politics of Clydeside. *The Shipbuilders* records with pathos the demise of the epoch of the shipyards and the effects on the workers. *Major Operation* relates a comparative study in class difference and reconciliation, and the effects of unemployment on the shipyard workers and bankrupt businessmen alike. *No Mean City* reveals, and seemingly revels in, the social degradation and criminal underclass created by the development of capitalism in Glasgow. This last novel alone of the genre attempts no historical materialist analysis of contemporary political conditions in the city, and it occasionally disparages, but

mostly ignores, as does *The Shipbuilders*, the left-wing and unemployed movements that so dominated the politics of Glasgow at the time, an omission which suggests conservative political leanings in the authors.

There has been some contention regarding the class credentials of the writers of the so-called proletariat Glasgow novels and their ability to speak legitimately for the working class. In a series of articles discussing the working class novel in Scotland, Mitchell, focusing on the period 1900-1939, critiques the prevalence of what he refers to as the 'pseudo-working class novel ... one of the achievements of decadent bourgeois literature in the twentieth century'.<sup>79</sup> Of the five writers under consideration in this dissertation, it is only James Barke's working-class background and Marxist communism that provide sufficient authority and authenticity to qualify as genuinely 'working class' in Mitchell's opinion. He commends *Major Operation* as 'a heroic attempt to lay, almost single-handed, the foundations for the proletarian socialist-realist novel in Scotland'.<sup>80</sup> The novel contains powerfully realistic descriptions of the unemployed workers' movement and industrial unrest in the interwar city, informed by Barke's knowledge of contemporary Glasgow and sympathy with the labour movement. Barke was a Glasgow shipyard worker from a farm worker's family, who wrote a number of novels about Scotland and Robert Burns. However the writers of the other four novels do not possess Mitchell's requisite qualifications for producing a genuine proletariat novel. Dot Allan was a nurse and freelance writer from a Glasgow merchant family. Alexander McArthur was a working-class baker from the Gorbals who had written other novels but only published the one before ending his own life.<sup>81</sup> His co-writer H. Kingsley Long, whose opinions dominate *No Mean City*, was a middle-class London journalist. Edward Shiels, described by the *Glasgow Herald* as 'a Clydebank man and an engineer who has been incapacitated by an accident', also died young after writing only the one novel, for which the *Herald* commended him in the same article for his first hand knowledge of the shipyards.<sup>82</sup> George Blake was a middle class journalist and literary critic from Greenock, who wrote a substantial number of non-fiction texts and novels concerning Glasgow.

<sup>79</sup> Mitchell 'The struggle for the working class novel in Scotland'. p.40.

<sup>80</sup> Mitchell, *Ibid.* p.42.

<sup>81</sup> For a fuller account of Alexander McArthur and *No Mean City* see Seán Damer. 'No Mean Writer? The Curious Case of Alexander McArthur', in Kevin McCarra and Hamish Whyte (eds), *A Glasgow Collection: Essays in Honour of Joe Fisher*. (Glasgow City Libraries: Glasgow, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 5 March, 1937.

The Glasgow realist novels occasionally attempt a Modernist strategy with varying success. There are long stream of consciousness passages in *Major Operation* and *No Mean City* in which the realistic narrative is punctuated with political and economic analysis intended to reflect the collective voice of the Glasgow Everyman. However the novels are at their best when describing events in a realistic journalistic fashion, a style prevalent at a time when English journalists were being shown around Glasgow's poor areas as a sort of sideshow.<sup>83</sup> George Blake was a journalist, and perhaps consequently *The Shipbuilders* expresses overt awareness of the power of journalism, with references to the characters reliance on the press to mediate their world: 'Danny did not really understand it until he read his evening paper on the way home'. (SH, p.70) This is particularly interesting with reference to how the press were considered responsible for the creation of popular perceptions of the dominance of gangs and Red Clydeside in the city during the interwar era.

The city of Glasgow itself functions as a protagonist in all the novels, as discussed in Chapter Three of the dissertation. *Hunger March* does not refer to Glasgow by name but the characteristics of the city are obvious. Similarly *Major Operation* refers obliquely to the 'The Second City' or 'the City', although streets and places in Glasgow are referred to by their given names. The sobriquet invoking the Second City runs like a refrain throughout the text from the lyrical opening: 'The sun set over the Second City. The Second City of the Empire on which the sun never sets'; (MO, p.13) and similarly in *No Mean City*, there is repeated ironic reference to Glasgow's former glory as the 'Empire's Second City'. The novels all, to varying degrees, examine the irony of the continuing myth of Glasgow as Second City of Empire after its economic decline. In his analysis of the development of the Scottish novel, the literary critic Francis Russell Hart asks with reference to the decline of Glasgow's status as Second City of Empire, 'How did the mighty fall? It is a sop for Calvinist morality....The economic shift seemed so sudden and drastic as to invite superstitious awe and tragic saga'.<sup>84</sup> And it is the lapse and liminality of this once great city that is caught for posterity in the interwar realist novels.

<sup>83</sup> Slum tourism as part of the vogue for travel writing in the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>84</sup> Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel from Smollett to Spark* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1978), p.205.

## Conclusion

The interwar period was an important era for Glasgow fiction at a time when capitalism was clearly in crisis, and writers were anxious to explore creatively the social and political significance of apparent industrial failure. There was also a crisis of confidence in the British State in the 1930s. It was the catalyst for shaking up the old certainties about Glasgow and contributing to the climate of negativity. The First World War provided a nexus of liminality for the interwar period. Previously existing problems assumed a new resonance. There was the prediction of the end of capitalism. The social realist writers tried to explain in fiction what was happening and what to do about it.

The realist novels discussed in this dissertation are historically and geographically specific. The industrial powerhouse that was Glasgow underwent massive changes in response to the depression of the interwar years with the popular view of Glasgow as Second City vying with the mystique of Red Clydeside. In addition to the economic and political context, the novels occurred at the same time as the cultural movement towards a Scottish Renaissance, itself an endeavour to critique the nation and its ills. The novels attempt to delineate the conditions existing within the city, primarily focusing upon the working classes, and can be regarded within a framework of urban social realism arising from a desire to move from the romanticised kailyard tropes preceding them. In doing so they present an invaluable historical record of Glasgow within a defining liminal moment.

Yet four of the novels examined here have not survived to become part of a literary canon. Like the shipyards themselves, the Clydebuilt novels have sunk without leaving much trace. The novels were presumably written for a highly literate readership in Glasgow, and when first published they were iconic examples of the realistic genre, summing up the city in the popular consciousness. Seven decades later most of the novels are difficult to obtain. *The Shipbuilders* was reprinted in paperback and is occasionally available in Glasgow's second hand bookstores, *Major Operation* underwent one reprinting in 1955 during the height of the popularity of Barke's novels on Robert Burns, but now, along with *Hunger March* and *Gael Over Glasgow*, it seems only to survive

in a few privately owned copies or for reading in situ in Glasgow's Mitchell Library.

The anomaly and irony in this scenario of abandonment is *No Mean City*, probably *the* Glasgow novel best known to the general public. It became an instant best seller when published, has never been out of print, and is the only realist novel from the interwar period still available and in demand seventy years later. However the novel has caused much controversy and objections to its depiction of Glasgow. It stands accused of stigmatising the city and creating the stereotype of 'Violent' and 'Depressed' Glasgow. Until the 1980s this was the enduring image of Glasgow, emulated in other fictional depictions of the city.<sup>85</sup> This representation is however no longer pertinent in literary terms or in the social reality of the city. Gradually consciousness of the city has become disentangled from that of degradation and aggression.

In Chapter Six the dissertation discusses possible reasons for why novels that represent Glasgow so realistically during the interwar era have mostly been ignored by critics and publishers, reducing them to a state of permanent liminality. Were the novels designed to entertain an audience whose tastes have since changed? Eagleton argues that realism went out of fashion because:

the ordinary reader delights in the exotic and extravagant. The irony is that the novel as a form is wedded to the common life, whereas the common people themselves prefer the monstrous and miraculous ... do not wish to see their own faces in the mirror of art. They have quite enough ordinary life in their working hours without wanting to contemplate it in their leisure time as well. Labourers are more likely to resort to fantasy than lawyers.'<sup>86</sup>

Were the novels written to provide a synopsis of a city at a time which we, in retrospect, can perceive as an historical watershed in the evolution of the city? Is it that they lack sufficient social comment to be regarded as historical documents, or enough literary merit to survive as scholarly works? Academic analysis tends to change with time - each new era producing differing readings. Is it merely that the theoretical approaches of previous scholars have not been suitable to glean any relevant rewards from a critique of the novels? Is it that

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<sup>85</sup> Seán Damer, (1990), *Glasgow Going for a Song*, Lawrence & Wishart Ltd: London

<sup>86</sup> Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction*. p.5

these novels did not comply with literary critiques which were fashioned to fit the agenda of their authors? The attempts at social realism mixed with romanticism evinced in the novels do not fall into the category of Kailyard, and nor do they fit easily within a paradigm of pure social realism. The novels perhaps could be viewed as a 'missing link' - an evolutionary literary step which has yet to be identified?

Although the novels are now mostly out-of-print, the dissertation argues that they have continuing relevance by providing a realistic socio-historical record of interwar Glasgow. The question that may need to be asked by anyone interested in the promotion of Scottish literature is: why have these novels been marginalised? Possible answers may lie in the changing marketing strategies of publishers, a history of reader reception, fashions in literary styles, gate-keeping by literary critics and publicists, or a sense of discomfort with their message. Perhaps many of the novels succeed more as social representation and commentary than they do as literary texts. Their appeal may have been limited precisely because of their specific sense of time and place. However it is because of their very value as realistic historical documents that a case can be made for their publication revival. So the dissertation also attempts to discover why so few of these novels have been re-published, uncover a silence in Scottish history, and recover a lost voice in Scottish literature.

## Chapter 2 City in Crisis

### Interwar Economy and the Great Depression

#### Introduction

The realignment of the forces of economic globalisation and new trade protectionism after the First World War damaged the interests of the export-reliant Glasgow economy. Subsequently the post-war recession of the 1920s developed into the major economic crisis of the Great Depression in the 1930s. Until this time, 'Glasgow's market was the world and reliant on an expanding global economy'.<sup>1</sup> During the 1930s this world economy contracted, resulting in the closure of industries in Glasgow, increasing immiseration of the city's working-class, and a devastating downward economic spiral. Clydeside was badly damaged, arguably more so than any other area in Britain because of the specialised nature of its industry and workforce and its inability to adapt to the changing global demands. These factors contributed to the increasing irrelevance of Glasgow within the world production markets and the start of a downward spiral from which the city's export economy never recovered.

The claim to realism of the novels determines that they should accurately reflect the seismic shifts in the economic landscape and the effects upon the protagonists and the social life of Glasgow during the interwar era. What do the novels reveal about the crisis of capitalism during the interwar era, the reasons for the economic decline of Glasgow as Second City of Empire, and how realistically do they document the subsequent social changes and political consequences when compared with contemporary journalism?

#### Local Responses to Global Trends

Contemporary analysis of the interwar crisis of capitalism and how it affected Scotland failed to appreciate the deep-rooted structural weaknesses in the Scottish economic system. The new economic order was one in which proximity

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Massie, *Portraits of a City* Ed. By Barrie and Jenkins (London, 1989), p.99.

to new technology, electric power, financial centres and markets, and later access to cheap labour, became more important than Glasgow's traditional assets of proximity to raw materials and a skilled labour force. Glasgow's economy had become dependent on heavy industry and shipbuilding, which were to relocate elsewhere as the twentieth century progressed. This nascent revolution in the global economic system accelerated from 1945 in an era characterised by British imperial decline; in consequence heavy industry moved to areas in the Third World where labour was cheaper and less troublesome. These changes were artificially delayed by the approach and onset of the Second World War, but the relentless dynamic of rapidly restructuring capital was inevitably to result in the redundancy and unemployment of large numbers of workers in the labour-intensive heavy manufacturing, engineering and shipbuilding economy of Glasgow, and in the ultimate demise of those industries.

The fluctuation in the city's economic fortunes and the varying and inadequate responses from the government and business community and the 'mounting sense of insecurity in the city' during the interwar years are examined by Irene Maver in *Glasgow* (2000).<sup>2</sup> She posits that technical advances made during the First World War should have presented opportunities for economic diversification in Glasgow's industries, particularly in the area of aircraft production. Unfortunately 'the biggest Glasgow companies, such as Beardmore's, were not prepared to adapt their output to changing times'<sup>3</sup>. The reliance of Glasgow on heavy industry, and the decline of its fortunes, is noted by Edwin Muir:

Scottish iron is almost at a standstill; coal is declining; and shipping and shipbuilding in Britain generally have sunk so definitely that not even optimists expect them to be again what they once were, except in the event of another war. The probable consequence seems to be that Glasgow, after its rapid expansion, is fated to shrink again.<sup>4</sup>

In *Scottish Journey* (1935) Muir critiques the crisis of capitalism, economic, social and political, in an insightful account of the consequences of industrialisation. In relation to Glasgow, which Muir considers to be the most representative city of industrialised Scotland,<sup>5</sup> he argues that 'In one way it may

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<sup>2</sup> Irene Maver, *Glasgow*, (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000), p.203.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, (Mainstream Publishing Company, Edinburgh, 1935:1979) p.128.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.p.98.

be said that Glasgow *is* modern Scotland, since it is the most active and vital part of Scotland as well as the most populous'.<sup>6</sup> Andrew Dewar Gibb, critical of English influence (along with George Malcolm Thomson, a right-wing nationalist) compared the poor prosperity, high unemployment and remoteness of Scotland unfavourably with that of England: 'Scotland is to-day, ten years after the War which played havoc with the prosperity of both, very much less prosperous than England...Scotland suffers more than England. The proportion of persons unemployed in Scotland is consistently higher than it is in England'.<sup>7</sup> *Major Operation* articulates the response from the Glasgow business community to the fluctuating interwar economy: 'Throughout the City there was hardship. Bankruptcies, sequestrations and liquidations were the order of the day. Business men failed right and left. Here and there profits continued to mount and swell.' (MO, p.375) The uneven nature of the effects of the economic depression on business is also documented in the novel: 'And yet there were businesses that seemed to flourish, depression or no depression. Luxury trades: the radio trade, for example'. (MO, p.237) The Great Depression results in the bankruptcy of the protagonist George Anderson's business and his financial insolvency.

*Hunger March* describes a twenty-four hour period in Glasgow, the day of the All Scotland Hunger March which happens to be the same day that Glasgow entrepreneur Arthur Joyce has chosen to close down his business, 'Joyce and Son - India merchants', 'There was some talk ... that if trade didn't look up his would be the next big firm to find itself in Queer Street.' (HM, p.39) Overt in *Hunger March* is a critique of the owners of the means of production who have not weathered the Depression by continuing to trade, but who have chosen to close shop and make their workers redundant. A clerk working for Arthur Joyce thinks: 'damn all the craven firms that hadn't faced the Depression, fought it out!' (HM, p.66) In *Major Operation* the hopeful signs that the economy is picking up and the worst of the Depression may be over are depicted as an aspect of false consciousness: 'Superficial signs that the middle-class, in their complete ignorance of the economic structure of society, did not understand'. (MO, p.238) In contrast, *The Shipbuilders* portrays the belief of the workers that the situation must get better. After he becomes unemployed, Danny the riveter

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.102.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse*, (Humphrey Toulmin: London,1930), p.65-69.

believes that life and work will return to normal: ‘he clung to a strong and almost mystic faith that he was only marking time until, shortly, he would be back with the squad at the hammer, holder-on and mate and rivet-boy in a happy solidarity of work’. (SH, p.97) Brian the engineer in *Gael Over Glasgow* projects his own ideological mystification onto that of the trade union movement: ‘There was a great deal of confusion even amongst the workers’ leaders...They did not know what was the real cause of the distress and to what extent the crisis would develop. But the War and Capitalism was enough to go on with’. (GG, p.107)

In *Scottish Scene*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon begins the chapter entitled ‘Glasgow’ by quoting himself describing the city as ‘the vomit of a cataleptic commercialism’, a theme which he expands upon here: ‘Commercialism has returned to its own vomit too often and too long still to find sustenance therein. Determinedly in Glasgow (as elsewhere) they call this condition “The Crisis” .... the remedy lies neither in medicine nor massage, but in surgery’.<sup>8</sup> And the need for surgery as a response to Glasgow’s ills is expanded in *Major Operation* which elaborates and dissects the sustained trope of the sick city needing economic surgery:

The crisis continued to eat into the economic life, the basic structure of the Second City. The once red pulsating blood of the City was impoverished: it dripped grey like the rain. The social reflection of the crisis was equally grey. There were many surgeons round the bedside of the City: there were anaesthetists and there were nurses....But nothing could stem the grey blood from dripping. The patient was sinking. (MO, p.228)

The Glasgow economy was geared towards heavy industrial production, so anticipation of the Second World War and armaments production was considered the solution to the economic problems of the time. This is a situation commented upon ironically in *Major Operation*: ‘Everything had gone with a bang during the last war. Things might go with a bigger bang during the next war. Fortunes had been made in the last: greater fortunes might be made in the next.’ (MO, p.237) Preparations for the Second World War began in Glasgow in 1936 and unemployment figures fell as workers were drawn back into industry and the military. However, as indicated by Maver, while the Glasgow economy was rejuvenated, ‘the long-term problems were not resolved’.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Scottish Scene*. (Cedric Chivers: Bath. 1934:1974), p.143.

<sup>9</sup> Maver, *Glasgow*, p.203.

## The Clyde Shipyards

The Clyde was once the world's most important centres of shipbuilding and, 'as late as the 1950's the river was still producing approximately one seventh of the total tonnage of sea-going ships in the world'.<sup>10</sup> Given this fact, two things are surprising: the first is the dramatic documenting of the demise of the shipyards in some of the novels; and the second is that shipbuilding itself formed a relatively minor sector of Glasgow's economy, employing a small percentage of the industrial workforce in comparison with the heavy engineering and metal-working industries. The first issue can be addressed by the fluctuating nature of the Clydeside economy and the brief recovery of the shipyards in the rearmament for the Second World War which would have occurred after the novels were published. The second issue is addressed by the fact that a great range of Glasgow's subsidiary industries were tied into supplying the needs of the shipbuilders.<sup>11</sup> Therefore the closure of the shipyards during the interwar era was to affect the entire economy of Glasgow, and the demise of the Clyde was significant to the mythology and morale of a city intrinsically intermeshed with the identity of its river. The symbolism and mythology of the Clyde runs omnipresently through two of the novels, glorifying and documenting for posterity the history of epic shipbuilding. *The Shipbuilders* functions as an elegy to the lost shipyards along the length of the Clyde, and *Gael Over Glasgow* historically links the working life and proletarian politics of the Clydebank shipyards with those of Glasgow.

Three of the novels provide an idea of the work of the shipyards, and the hierarchical nature of their organisation, with job status and specification firmly established. *Major Operation* details the work of 'the red leaders' scraping the ship's plates with wire brushes and repainting it, hanging all the while from the sides in the 'flat punts'. The work is difficult, dirty and dangerous and the paint extremely toxic: 'To swing a paint brush in ordinary paint is a tiresome job; to swing heavy red-lead over a rough surface is worse. But to swing a heavy brush on the end of pole requires great effort and long practice'. (MO, p.45) *Gael Over Glasgow* contains the most detailed realistic descriptions of shipyard work at an historic moment, serving as a worthy documentary. The narrative

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Osborne and others, *Glasgow's River* (Lindsay Publications: Glasgow, 1996), p.58.

<sup>11</sup> Irene Maver, *Glasgow*, p.120.

describes ‘the black squad’, who tacked the plates of the ship together with bolts and brute force before the advent of welding: ‘unmistakable with their dirty faces and stained clothes, the riveters, caulkers, holeborers and platers, the men who cut, bend and build the frame and hull of the ship.’ (GG, p.335)

The work of a now largely lost skill is explained in loving detail:

a riveter grasped a red hot rivet in expert tongs and inserted it into a hole in the bulkhead plates. A bump from his heavy pneumatic hammer splashed sparks again as the rivet was bashed close up to the plate. Then the riveter braced himself for the kick of his hammer, the hanging plank on which he stood swinging out dangerously. Suddenly, from the other side of the bulkhead, came the roar of a pneumatic hammer battering at the front of the rivet, while the man above Brian gritted his teeth and hung on to his dancing hammer. (GG, p.20)

The changing economic dynamics of the shipyards, and the effects of modernization and progress are articulated in *The Shipbuilders*. The riveters are replaced with the advent of the new technology of welding:

Now in the place of the riveter was the welder, joining the plates of ships with a melting jet of white flame; and no riveter of the old school could hope to graduate in the fierce new art. Now one man and a boy, working a machine, could do in the way of making hatches what it used to take fourteen craftsmen to do ... One man, commanding a single drill-punch, displaced six of his kind ...the number of men in the yards fell by one half in the ten years from 1920 - and would go on falling. (SH, p.264)

The hellish world of heavy industry is romanticised in *Gael Over Glasgow*. There is a sense of godlike collective control of the elements versus the frailty of individual humanity. The noise must have been deafening, ‘the sustained snarl of pneumatic caulking machines from the close staccato or the riveting hammers in the shipyards of Brown’s and Beardmore’s’. (GG, p.1) The imagery is all gargantuan, the birth of a giant described, with men tiny in comparison, evocative of a Muirhead Bone etching. Other than in the opening chapters, most of *Major Operation* and *The Shipbuilders* describe a Clydeside in which the work has already departed, although the latter repeatedly evokes the nostalgic imagery of the previously industrious Clydeside:

In the great days, there was not one of these yards but had two or three big ships a-building, so that up and down the River the bows of vessels unlaunched towered over the tenement buildings of the workers and people passing could hardly hear themselves speak for the clangor of metal upon metal that filled the valley from Old Kilpatrick up to Govan. (SH, p.47)

After the First World War conditions of disarmament suspended all new and existing military shipbuilding contracts for ten years. Then Glasgow's dominance of shipbuilding was challenged by Japan and the United States. Faced with a declining world market for their products, Glasgow industrialists did not move quickly enough to adapt to the changing economic order. Maver argues that the problem was compounded by the continued reliance of Clyde Shipbuilders on an outmoded form of technology, the marine steam engine, as opposed to the state-of-the-art diesel engine, at a time when radically new methods of organization were necessary to compete internationally. The fluctuations of Clyde shipbuilding output went from 'over 672,000 tons in 1920 ....to the unprecedented nadir of 56,000 in 1933'.<sup>12</sup> The ebb and flow of supply and demand in the Clyde shipbuilding industry, along with its ultimate decline and the concomitant ramifications on working-class culture, is illustrated in *The Shipbuilders* through the narrative device illustrating the parallel declining fortunes of the two protagonists Leslie Pagan shipyard owner and his employee and old war comrade Danny Shields the shipyard riveter. The novel expresses how 'Clyde-built' has long been a stamp of pride for the Glasgow shipyards, but how an era is ending due to 'the fantastic shrinkage of world trade; the development of building abroad; state subsidies to foreign builders and owners; the ghastly mess of currencies'. (SH, p.3)

Attempts to salvage the shipyards during the interwar era were largely futile. Sir James Lithgow, one of the great shipbuilding patriarchs, formed the National Shipbuilders Security Limited (NSS) in the 1930s as an attempt to rationalise and streamline declining industries. The NSS acquired and closed Beardmore's, and within three years a further half-dozen Clyde yards had ceased operations, two had suspended work, and three were operating on restricted quotas.<sup>13</sup> In *The Shipbuilders* the refrain, 'Not a single order on the books', is repeated throughout the first chapter as Leslie struggles to understand, 'the economy of a world gone mad'. (SH, p.11) His attempts to procure new orders from London prove futile. Not even his connections within the old boys' network will save his shipyard. He receives an irate and prophetic response from another ship owner: 'Ships! There are too many damned ships in the world just now, and too damned

<sup>12</sup> J.Cunnison and J.B.S. Gilfillian (eds), *Glasgow: the third statistical account of Scotland*, Collins: Glasgow 1958), p. 841.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Slaven, *The Development of the West of Scotland 1750-1960* (Routledge & Paul Kegan, 1975), p.189.

little to put into them. ....it's going to get worse. ... Not a hope for us for years, if then, with all this tommyrot of tariffs and subsidies.' (SH, p.108) Leslie comes to understand that: 'A strange, mocking fatalism had settled on the world of shipping. No trade, and the Government talking either economy or disarmament, and hence no ships of war'. (SH, p.108)

In *Gael Over Glasgow*, after the completion and launch of the last ship to be built in Beardmore's the shipyard is empty. The bleak hopelessness of the situation is described in numerous passages: 'things were at a standstill in the shipbuilding industry and likely to remain so. The foreigners were building their own ships and disarmament had robbed the Clyde of its largest orders'; (GG, p.286) and 'It seemed that Big Business awaited the result of this latest war between Capital and Labour before embarking on any new ventures'. (GG, p.221) When the time comes for the pay-off the shipyard workers realise they may not get work again in the present economic situation:

A pay-off was nothing unusual in this life, but now with this crisis facing Society, and unprecedented industrial stagnation, who could hope for work again? ...Was the Clyde's greatness ended? ... on all sides one heard the continually reiterated statement that Capitalism was finished and had to go. (GG, pp.230-231)

The narrative of *The Shipbuilders* opens with the launch of the last ship to be built by the fictional firm of Pagan's, its maiden voyage down the Clyde providing a vehicle for a passage of pathos eulogising the Clyde shipbuilding industry: 'the high, tragic pageant of the Clyde'. (SH, p.118) A pseudo-Homeric style listing the litany of loss of shipyards follows the ship as it moves down towards the Clyde Firth, documenting the 'grim majesty of the parade' (SH, p.119) of now defunct shipyards, presented in names which correspond to historical reality. Leslie laments the demise of the Clyde as 'a catastrophe unthinkable'. Nostalgically he imagines the history of the great river: 'Out of this narrow river they had poured, an endless pageant, to fill the ports of the world'. (SH, p.121) Leslie's liberal conscience is appalled at the thought of how many of the shipyard workers will never work again, at the loss of skills never to be regained, but more so by the sense of waste inherent in the decline of the industry itself:

It was a tragedy beyond economics ... a tradition, a skill, a glory, a passion, was visibly in decay and all the acquired and inherited loveliness of artistry rotting along the banks of the stream... as if

shipbuilding man had tried to do too much and had been defeated by his own conception. (SH, pp.118-119)

The narrative voice sums up the high heroic hubris of the scene rising into mythical hyperbole somewhat excessive for what it is describing:

It was as if a race had worshipped grim gods of the sea. And now the tide had turned back...Never again would the Clyde be what it had been...The fall of Rome was a trifle in comparison...the collapse of a dynasty or the defeat of a great nation in battle was a transient disturbance. (SH, p.121)

Linklater comments that when Blake, 'writes of the Clyde itself, with its empty yards and its world-pacing history he is magnificent'.<sup>14</sup> But the converse could be argued, that this sentimental ethos of existential tragedy in the novel undermines the realistic narrative in *The Shipbuilders* and flaws what might otherwise have been a useful realistic historical documentation of the end of an era. Francis Russell Hart wryly remarks how in *The Shipbuilders* the narrator is, 'divided in the presence of the tragic pageant of the once-glorious Clyde'; but he enquires, 'Was the glory ever real ... was the truth a tale of brief, brutal capitalist warfare leading to exploitation and collapse'?<sup>15</sup>

### The Second Clearances

In a process begun with the transference of political power to London in 1707, the control of Scotland's economy shifted inexorably southwards over the years. The 'Condition of Scotland' writers were particularly critical of this trend known in the 1930s as 'the southward drift of industry' (one that has continued into the twenty-first-century). George Malcolm Thomson in *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* laments it as: 'a general process of removing the control of Scottish administration, commerce, and industry four hundred miles further South...'<sup>16</sup> He bemoans the southward migration of business and skill from Glasgow:

The head offices of shipping companies which once were crowded together in Glasgow no longer fly their house-flags in St Vincent Street. They are mostly transferred South of the Border to London or Liverpool. ....One immediate result of this tendency is to give

<sup>14</sup> Eric Linklater, 'The Novel in Scotland', *Fortnightly Review* (Nov 1935), pp.621-624.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel from Smollett to Spark*, p.217.

<sup>16</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* (Paul Kegan: London, 1927), p.47.

increased impetus to a form of emigration from the country ...the drain of the educated, intelligent, and energetic middle-class youth who would normally become the leaders of the commercial, political and intellectual life of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Concomitantly, skilled labour in Scotland was drawn south towards London in a trend referred to in the 1930s as 'the Second Clearances'. Brian's friends in *Gael Over Glasgow* move to London to find employment telling him, 'There's thousands of young men leaving the country for England every week'. (GG, p.331) Brian himself refers to this mass migration as 'The Second Clearances', (GG, p.332) 'From Glasgow and the distressed areas young men, cut off without any means of support by the Means Test, were leaving their homes for London where the light industries were booming'. (GG, p.332) In a critical polemic directed against the inability of Scotland to retain its talented skilled population, Muir describes the decanting of the nation:

Scotland is gradually being emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth, industry, art, intellect and innate character. This is a sad conclusion; but it has some support on historical grounds. If a country exports its most enterprising spirits and best minds year after year, for fifty or a hundred or two hundred years, some result will inevitably follow.<sup>18</sup>

Thomson argues that the control of business and industry far from Scotland makes decision-making difficult and inefficient. Some of the problems he lists regarding the state of the economy in Scotland of the 1920s are similar to issues in Scotland of the early twenty-first-century, although there have been changes since devolution: 'Not only is Scottish industry decaying, it is steadily ceasing to be Scottish. Four out of eight banks having been affiliated to English banks ... Scottish railways are now directed from London'.<sup>19</sup> The subservient economic position of Scotland to England, the seeming irrationality of the movement towards the metropolis, and the social consequences for Scotland are protested by Andrew Dewar Gibb in *Scotland in Eclipse*:

Great commercial concerns have flitted their offices, lock, stock and barrel to London or elsewhere in England. The reason apparently alleged is that they must be near the centre of things if they are to compete with their rivals... it is amazing that it should be necessary at a time of day when people can communicate with one another over long distances more easily than ever before...Instances of total closure are to be found in the shipyards, in the chemical and sugar-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.47-51.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots*, pp.47-51.

refining industries, in agriculture, in the railway workshops, in the textile trade...More and more of the great shops and stores pass under English control....Every step in these disastrous processes means more unemployment, more misery, and more emigration for Scotsmen.<sup>20</sup>

The emphasis in the economic analyses of the interwar era is on statistics and 'fact', a trend highlighted by Edmund Stegmaier.<sup>21</sup> In 1935 Thomson published another tract on the condition of Scotland entitled *That Distressed Area*<sup>22</sup> wherein he uses statistics to compare the economic development of Scotland with that of England and nine other European countries with roughly the same population as Scotland at the time; between 1913 and 1930. The figures for Scotland indicate greater decline in population, higher unemployment, lower national income, decrease in volume of industrial production, decline in basic industries and failure to initiate new secondary industries. In his review Muir considers this the first text to successfully define 'the Scottish Question' and the economic state of Scotland. He applauds Thomson's conclusion: 'The character of the Scottish problem is that of stealth, of gradual attrition of physical and economic resources, of a decline in strength which is only perceptible over comparatively long periods'.<sup>23</sup>

### Unemployment and the Reserve Army of Labour

The novels all illustrate the effects on interwar Glasgow of the increase in unemployment, and the decrease in real wages for those who managed to keep their jobs; along with the concomitant increase in poverty, alienation and anomie in the social conditions of the working-class. Ingrained in Glaswegian collective memory are the well-documented scenes of depressed, demoralised, disempowered men hanging around on street corners, waiting in dole queues, forming a reserve army of labour to be called upon at the whim of the capitalist bosses. The anxiety as well as the actuality of unemployment, and its effects on the morale and mental health of the work force during the Depression, dominated the zeitgeist of the city at the time, and informs all five of the

<sup>20</sup> Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse*, p.65-69.

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Stegmaier, 'Facts and Vision in Scottish Writing of the 1920s and 1930s'. *Scottish Literary Journal*, 9, Nov 1982, pp.67-78.

<sup>22</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Scotland: That Distressed Area* (Porpoise Press: Edinburgh, 1935).

<sup>23</sup> Edwin Muir :1979 Review of George Malcolm Thomson, *Criterion* (Jan, 1936), pp.330-32.

realistic Glasgow novels. This is evoked by Ralph Glasser in his memories of the daily scene outside Dixon's Blazes blast furnace just south of the Gorbals:

Outside the twenty-foot high gates were clustered a couple of dozen men in cloth caps, fustian jackets and mufflers, heavy black trousers tied with string below the knees. Lantern-jawed, saturnine, faces glazed with cold, collars turned up under their ears and heads bowed, they stood huddled in upon themselves, sheltering within their own bodies, as sheep do on a storm-swept hillside.<sup>24</sup>

Capitalism requires a reserve army of unemployed labour to draw upon when business is booming and extra production is needed to meet demand. When not required this pool of labour was left to fend for itself as best it could until the introduction of social security or 'the dole' in the United Kingdom. The insecurity of this situation is documented in *Major Operation*: 'There was the haunting fear of unemployment...they lived in the midst of it. Few in South Partick could boast of regular employment. There were men who had never done a stroke of work in years'. (MO, p.79) Competition between workers for scarce jobs and the resulting demoralising fear of unemployment sustains low wages, ensuring surplus value and thus higher profits for the owners of the means of production. A description of an unemployed march in the novel depicts the workers in their poverty and ragged clothes as 'The Second City's waste human labour'. (MO, p.128)

The economic insecurity induced by too few jobs for too many workers is an understanding inherent in *Major Operation*. While still a business owner George Anderson holds a bourgeois perspective on unemployment and, believing in the myth of the meritocracy, cannot comprehend that work is unavailable to those who try hard. Jock MacKelvie, the socialist worker leader he meets in hospital, 'puts him right'. Jock himself has been unemployed for seven years. He has experienced: 'four years' intermittent unemployment: three years' steady unemployment ... Seven years of hardship and bitterness', moreover Jock has not wasted his enforced idleness, participating in 'seven years of intensive self-education and discipline'. (MO, p.130) This is a reference to the night schools in Glasgow at the time, organised by the Socialists, and Jock's analysis of the situation is informed by an understanding of Marxist economics. He enlightens George as to the reality of the economic situation during a crisis of capitalism: 'There are over three million unemployed in this country. But there aren't three

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Glasser, *Growing up in the Gorbals*, (Edinburgh: Black & White Publishing, 2006), p.6.

million jobs waiting to be filled. ... Capitalism can't and never will be able to absorb the unemployed. And the capitalist state can't and never will be able to guarantee their dependants more than a bare existence.' (MO, p.337) Jock's lesson in realism includes a reminder to the now unemployed George, who has few skills other than managerial, that 'there are thousands of men and women in this City in a much better position to take work than you are: clerks, typists, book-keepers, accountants: they can't get work though they've been trying for years'. (MO, p.336) When Jock realizes he would probably never be fully employed again he joins the unemployed movement. He encourages George to do so too, and George's re-education is the vehicle for the political rhetoric throughout the novel.

As the economic situation worsens in *Gael Over Glasgow*, the Clydebank shipyard workers try to invent jobs for themselves to avoid being paid off until 'The foreman came down the stairs at last with a list in his hand ... Men bent over their jobs and made a passable pretence of feverish industry'. Then Brian is told to 'finish up' and 'get ashore and get your insurance books and lying time at the dock office'. (GG, pp.228-230) After being laid off at Beardmore's and much fruitless searching Brian finds re-employment at John Brown's shipyard in Clydebank, 'now known all over the world as the builders of the famous Queen Mary' (GG, p.334), or the Cunarder Number 534 as it was iconically known on Clydeside during the 1930s. However this shipyard too experienced an enforced work hiatus due to economic exigencies, depicted in the memoirs of David Kirkwood, Red Clydesider and Labour MP. Kirkwood emphasises the outrageous wastage of the highly-skilled Clyde workforce and undermining of a proud Protestant work ethic:

For more than two years the Clyde had been like a tomb. Not a tomb newly made, but a tomb with a vast and inescapable skeleton brooding over its silence. For two years that gaunt frame had stood lifeless. It had sapped the vitality from a great town - aye, from a nation. Beneath its shadow men have crept about battered and broken by enforced idleness. These men - the finest, the most expert craftsmen in the world - had lived their lives in their work.<sup>25</sup>

Pay-off day at Pagan's shipyard is described in a paternalistic passage of pathos in *The Shipbuilders*, where who is Leslie watching, 'streaming noiselessly

<sup>25</sup> David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt* (George.G. Harrap: London, 1935), p.251.

towards the gate, the crowds of men who were to lift their last pay as they went out', (SH, p.55) wonders whether this was worse than the suffering he had experienced with his men in the trenches during the First World War. He likens his workers to a phantom army as he observes them leaving the yard for the last time, 'He was gripped then by the sentiment of the old days of war and remembered the endless files of Scottish men he had seen come and go, rough, cheerful, fatalistic, endlessly and blindly suffering'. (SH, p.55) Leslie is powerless to do anything constructive about the situation, and his inactive agonising is no good to his workers and a flaw in Blake's text in that it is not represented convincingly.

The demoralisation of unemployment is represented in *No Mean City*. Even though crime *does* pay for the protagonist Johnnie Stark who, 'knew that one well-organised raid might bring him in more money than two months of solid work', (NMC, p.182) he too eventually becomes infected by the ennui of unemployment, 'fed up with life...that frustration of the spirit which comes at times to every healthy unemployed man'. (NMC, p.296) Years of unemployment gradually wear down Johnnie's hope and aspirations: 'Unemployment, which he had made no serious effort to escape, had, nevertheless, lowered his morale. It always does and always must do. Glasgow, the second city in the Empire, with a third of its adult population idle, bears tragic witness to this indisputable fact.' (NMC, p.255) The effects of extended unemployment on the huddled groups of men who hung about the street corners of 1930s Glasgow are documented by Muir in *Scottish Journey* in an impressionistic description of the previously industrious and busy shipbuilding quarter of Clydeside, where now the workers have been deprived not only of their means of existence, but also of their very voice and vitality:

The very air seems empty around them, as if it had been drained of some essential property; they scarcely talk, what they say seems hardly to break the silence.... there is hardly anything but this silence, which one would take to be the silence of a dead town if it were not for the numberless empty-looking groups of unemployed men standing about the pavements.<sup>26</sup>

From the outset *Gael Over Glasgow* documents the difficulty of finding work when so many were unemployed: 'Too many good men haven't got their jobs

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<sup>26</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p.138.

back after the war' (GG, p.17). The demoralisation of unemployment is illustrated: 'years of this demeaning process destroy pride and nobility...driving the shame and bitterness deep into a man's soul' (GG, p.224). After weeks of tramping up and down the industrial Clyde searching for work Brian feels hopeless: 'The Labour Exchanges were crowded with men signing the unemployed register and long queues of men stretched down the streets; .... clerks had smiled cynically and added his name to the hundreds of engineers who had visited the office before him' (GG, p.233). The novel expresses the frustration of dealing with officialdom and bureaucracy in the nascent British welfare system:

they were called before committees of apparently intelligent officials, who gravely examined and cross-questioned them to see if they were looking for work or not. If you were a fool and took this insulting farce seriously and told them the truth they stopped your dole for not looking for a thing that did not exist - a job. (GG, p.234)

Muir describes with great pathos what he labels 'the everlasting Sunday Land of the unemployed',<sup>27</sup> the waste of human talent, and resulting existential sense of emptiness: 'At forty, at thirty, at twenty, sometimes at birth, they are pensioned off from civilisation, and their lives consigned to inactivity and ennui'.<sup>28</sup> He continues: 'The enforced inactivity, the loss of manual skill, the perpetual scrimping to keep alive, the slow eating away of dignity and independence, the compulsory spectacle of semi-starvation around one, in the faces of the children one has brought into the world'.<sup>29</sup>

### The Buroo and The Dole

During the interwar era Scotland had an unemployment rate 50% higher than England, and average wages for those who were in work was consistently lower.<sup>30</sup> Unemployment in Glasgow rose to unprecedented levels at the height of the Great Depression.<sup>31</sup> By 1933 over 30% of the Glasgow work-force was dependent on social security or 'poor relief', as opposed to 25% for the rest of

<sup>27</sup> Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p.142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p.143.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p.144.

<sup>30</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots*, pp.26-46.

<sup>31</sup> Other 'special areas' of the UK concentrated on mining, steel and shipbuilding were also badly affected – see Wal Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (Victor Gollanz: London, 1937).

Scotland.<sup>32</sup> The high levels of unemployment in the interwar period had a devastating effect on the poorest families' standard of living. Many Glasgow families came to rely on the state social security system known as 'the dole' to provide their means of subsistence. This is well documented in all of the Glasgow realist novels.

Unemployment benefit in the 1930s is delineated in *Major Operation*: 'Two parents and two children. Twenty-nine shillings for the lot...Ten shillings for rent. That leaves nineteen for food....and nothing for fire or light or clothes or a newspaper or a night at the pictures. Nothing for illness, trouble and unforeseen circumstances'. (MO, p.380) Muir made a real attempt to understand the ramifications of unemployment, given that it made up such a significant part of the socio-economic milieu of his time. In an ironic indictment of the social security system, he argues that while Industrialism has changed the attitude to the poor insofar as to create a social conscience on the part of the wealthy, he calculates that the dole does not provide more than a basic subsistence to prevent the unemployed from dying of starvation.<sup>33</sup>

In *The Shipbuilders* Danny finally comes to the realisation that, 'There was no real work going on Clydeside. Up and down the River the yards lay empty... It was bad, hundreds, thousands of his mates on the Dole or the Parish'. (SH, p.86) The dole office is still known colloquially in Glasgow 2009 as 'the Buroo' - from Bureau pre-dating the British Welfare State which came into being after the Second World War, although the official name has changed over the years during the process of transforming poor relief into social security.<sup>34</sup> The history of social welfare in Britain evolved from 1911 with the introduction of limited unemployment insurance administered by the Labour Exchange, available for a specified time after the loss of a job. Once unemployment benefit was exhausted the next stage was to apply for Parish Relief, known simply in the novels as 'The Parish'. The Means Test introduced in Britain in 1931 assessed the income and assets of all the members of a family together, so reduced benefit and was much hated, as protests indicate in the novels. This is documented in *Gael Over Glasgow*: 'the Means Test decreed that Brian was not

<sup>32</sup> Maver, *Glasgow*, p.205

<sup>33</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p.134.

<sup>34</sup> A process described by C.de B.Murray, *How Scotland is Governed*. (Moray Press: Edinburgh, 1938).

entitled to any money as his father's wages spread over all three just touched the pauper's scale.' (GG, p, 309) The process was administered by the Glasgow Corporation under the supervision of the Director of Public Assistance, as described by David Stenhouse the Glasgow town clerk in 1933.<sup>35</sup>

The novels convey a sense that the shame of the dole queue was the worst disgrace for the Glasgow worker. Although this does not apply to the work-shy Johnnie Stark and his gang in *No Mean City*; unemployment eventually depresses even him. On his return to working as a coalman after a long period of idleness he is so happy that, 'He seldom bothered to think that there was barely twelve shillings difference between his wages for a hard week's work and the money he could draw from "the buroo" for nothing'. (NMC, p.122) In due course however it does occur to him 'that he was slaving like a navy for next to nothing a week. He knew that if he were sacked he would go "on the dole" to draw, as of right - for he was an insured worker - almost two thirds of his actual salary'. (NMC, p.183) So Johnnie gives up his job.

The fear and demoralisation of unemployment pervades *The Shipbuilders*: 'No worker on Clydeside could do anything but fear that this infection of unemployment would touch him yet.' Danny the riveter understands 'even Pagan's may one day be as a score of yards up and down the river - empty, silent, while the men slouched about street corners outside and queued up automatically at the Buroo. That last offence to decency and pride'. (SH, p.17) And again later in the novel, 'to be a dole-drawer, to queue up with the workshies and the halflins at the Buroo, that last humiliation of his artisan pride'. (SH, p.129) When eventually Danny in *The Shipbuilders* is forced to go on the dole: 'He registered at the Buroo. He stood in queues with others like him. He hung about street corners, hands in pockets, staring emptily at passing trams ...There were hundreds of thousands in the sinking ship with him'. (SH, p.137) The shared sense of humiliation and deprivation is documented in *The Shipbuilders*, but nowhere in the narrative does this translate into political action. Unlike the protagonists in the other novels, Danny does not join a union or go on hunger marches.

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<sup>35</sup> David Stenhouse, *Glasgow: Its Municipal Undertakings and Enterprise*. (Glasgow Corporation: Glasgow, 1933) p. 116.

Struggling to define his own identity as an unemployed worker, Joe in *Hunger March* asks himself if he is indeed what others have labelled him, 'A moocher? A supporter of the buroo?' (HM, p.76) And it is an uneasy and angry irony that comes through the voice of Jimmy the journalist in *Hunger March* when deconstructing the dole and the attitude of the bourgeoisie towards the unemployed: 'In this Christian country of ours, none need starve ... Not so long as he had strength to drag himself out to draw his dole. On it he could live like a lord on a diet for obesity'. (HM, pp.160-161).

The ironic satirising in *Major Operation* of the bourgeois attitude towards working-class unemployment and the social security system, is articulated as the collective voice of the generic middle-class which Barke is holding up for critical consideration: 'It's this damned dole that's at the bottom of the trouble....Unemployment they call it: but it's just laziness. Work-shys. Never have worked and never will work. But do they go without? When the dole's exhausted they go to Public Assistance: they're made for life then'. (MO, p.376) Before George's bankruptcy in *Major Operation* his viewpoint towards an unemployed demonstration is one of intolerant irritation at being held up in traffic: 'Unemployed becoming a menace, silly of them demonstrating during business hours.... Hadn't they got the dole? Want jam on it. Sapping morale. Terrific burden on country.' (MO, p.128)

Both Muir and Gibbon see the capitalist and commercial essence of Glasgow as unredeemably negative. Gibbon asks in *Scottish Scene*, with reference to capitalism and its consequences, 'Why did men ever allow themselves to become enslaved to a thing so obscene and so foul...?' <sup>36</sup> He denounces the quality of life for the Glasgow unemployed: 'doomed to long days of staring vacuity, of shoelessness, of shivering hidings in this and that mean runway when the landlords' agents come, of mean and desperate begging at Labour Exchanges and Public Assistance Committees'. <sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene*, p.137.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.138.

## Conclusion

The response of Capitalism to the interwar depression was to rationalise and relocate its resources. Like all organisms its primary goal is to survive and if that means jettisoning the livelihoods of those deemed to be inefficient then so be it. The region's very success in the field of heavy industry meant it was vulnerable to this reallocation of resources and the events within the novels reflect this. Shipbuilding may not have been the major industry, but so many other industries were interdependent with it, that when the shipyards had a cold, the rest of Clydeside sneezed. The depression caused unemployment and an exodus in search of work. Perhaps the very pride with which the Second City regarded its achievements worked as hubris. Possibly this is best reflected in the transformation of George's opinion of the casualties of commerce in *Major Operation*. All the novels are informed by, and arise from the economic turmoil of the times. They are not only written with ink but with the haemorrhaging life-blood of Glasgow's seminal industries. The sheer magnitude of the vulnerable heavy-industries meant the entire local economy was in crisis with the concomitant collateral damage on all who dwelt there.

## Chapter 3 City as Protagonist

### Realistic Representations of Interwar Glasgow

#### Introduction

The greatest interest in the realistic novels of Glasgow may lie in their representations of the city, its topography and social realities during the interwar era. The novels all feature Glasgow as protagonist - the city as central character, describing it at a particular moment, fixing it for posterity in the literary imagination. How realistically do the tropes used to signify the city in the novels, and the representations thereof, correspond to contemporaneous non-fictional depictions of social conditions in Glasgow during the interwar era?

The realistic novels can be regarded as an expression of a nascent urban literary genre that emerged during the interwar era to represent the gritty truth of the city and counteract the dominant bucolic, rural trend in Scottish literature known as kailyard. They are also a rejection of the so-called urban kailyard that had previously glossed over the negative aspects of the city. The prevailing imagery of the interwar novels is that of the corrupting city, highlighting social conditions of poverty, degradation, alcohol, crime and gang violence. There is the repeated metaphor of the corrosive influence of the slums, and the people who become like the slums. What all the novels examined here have in common is that interwar Glasgow functions not only as setting, but also as protagonist. The city is an entity which has a life and existence of its own, apart from the narrative and the life of the characters. The city as entity exists as a discrete unit. The character of the city is not always positive, but rather dark, degenerate, corrupt, monstrous. Its reeking slums represent a dark Dionysian embodiment of the shadow-side of capitalism, in ironic juxtaposition with the Apollonian eclecticism of its architecture and temples to commercialism. The characters in the novels struggle for meaning in the streets, houses and work places (if they are lucky enough to have a job) of an economically and culturally impoverished Glasgow, often succumbing to a culture of alcohol and violence, but the city continues.

Nonetheless, Glaswegians knew how to enjoy themselves, despite their hard environment; drink was always a central theme, while the city was known as dancing mad. The people were also internationally famous for a particular form of language and humour, all adding to the vitality of the city. The ‘Glasgow patter’ is legendary, a guttural, nasal speech uttered at a speed that has visitors to the city imagining it is a language other than English. What Lewis Grassic Gibbon describes in his article on ‘Glasgow’ in *Scottish Scene* as, ‘a herd-beast delighting in vocal discordance and orgiastic aural abandon’.<sup>1</sup> Glaswegians excel at insulting each other. ‘Sherricking’, or bringing down someone who is ‘getting above themselves’, is a peculiarly Glaswegian tradition, described in its full glorious manifestation in *No Mean City*. In a snobbery inverse to that of England, Glaswegians take perverse pride in their proletarian roots and in debunking any suspected pretension. ‘Humane irreverence’ is Glasgow’s greatest export according to William McIlvanney, who explains that the essence of Glasgow speech is deflation of pomposity:

Those who are for me the truest Glaswegians, the inheritors of the tradition, the keepers of the faith, are terrible insisters that you don’t lose touch for a second with your common humanity, that you don’t get above yourself. They refuse to be intimidated by professional stature or reputation or attitude or name. But they can put you down with a style that almost constitutes a kindness.<sup>2</sup>

Gibbon understood the notion of city as character, and of the character of Glasgow as being distinct from that of Edinburgh or Aberdeen. His surreal metaphoric snapshots of cities in Scotland in *Scottish Scene* read like newsreels, but for him Glasgow defies definition: ‘no Scottish image of personification may display, even distortedly, the essential Glasgow’.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to define the essence of anything. However it is possible to argue that the five novels examined here do succeed in realistically representing the character of the city and the city as character in some of its varying complexity, in a way that they do not always succeed in portraying the complexity of individual characters.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Glasgow, A Scots Hairst.* (Hutchinson: London, 1967:1978) [First published in 1934 in *Scottish Scene*. (1934) p.82.

<sup>2</sup> William McIlvanney, *Surviving the Shipwreck*, (Mainstream Publishing: Edinburgh, 1991) p.183.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Glasgow, A Scots Hairst.* (Hutchinson: London, 1967:1978), p.82. First published in 1934 in *Scottish Scene*.

## Mapping the City

The mapping of a city's geography and history is possible by examining the realistic representation of its literary production. The five novels examined here are all specifically set in Glasgow and the constant topographical descriptions reinforce that this is Glasgow and not some other city. As culture derives from a combination of people and place, so the mapping of the city reinforces not only the location of the action, but also the concomitant social effect it has upon its inhabitants.

Residential, industrial and commercial areas were all intermingled in interwar Glasgow. Miles Horsey provides an instructive comparison, 'To a present-day observer, the abiding impression throughout the whole conurbation would have been one of close-packed population density and juxtaposition of housing and industry, as still found in Oriental cities such as Calcutta or Seoul'.<sup>4</sup> In the novels there is an acknowledgement of the conflicting and contradictory worlds of the city, in close cohabitation with each other. In *Gael over Glasgow* the contrasts are overtly invoked: 'disgusting slums and modern housing schemes; of hooligans living and mingling alongside intelligent workmen, of full blooded modernism brawling alongside Calvinism; of materialism and Catholicism all weaving and intertwining in that puzzling pattern of Society known as Clydeside'. (GG, p.193) Edwin Muir in *Scottish Journey* maps Glasgow's topography of the time - the working-class residential areas in close proximity to the industrial work places: 'The slums in a Scottish industrial town are generally to be found either near the factories or in the oldest and most dilapidated of the tenements ... the tenements near the shipyards have mostly a clean and orderly look.'<sup>5</sup>

The topographical location of the novels is in the predominantly working-class residential districts of the Gorbals and Govan on the South Side of the Clyde, Partick on the North Side, and the middle-class residential West End, an area west of the city centre surrounding the University of Glasgow. The Gorbals functions as a protagonist in its own right in *No Mean City*, a poor working-class

<sup>4</sup> Miles Horsey, *Tenements and Towers: Glasgow Working-Class housing, 1890-1990*. (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1990), p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Mainstream Publishing Company: Edinburgh, 1935:1979) p.125.

area identified in the novel as a 'slum'.<sup>6</sup> George Square in the City Centre and Glasgow Green in the East End were the central gathering places for many political demonstrations and marches. For example, the hunger marchers gathering in George Square as portrayed in *Major Operation*: 'The Square was filled to overflowing. Demonstrators filled every approach. The centre of the Square was solid with sympathisers.' (MO, p.485) Glasgow Green, a traditional working-class area of the city, was also a favourite setting for gang fights. After one such 'rammie' in *No Mean City*, Johnnie escapes by running towards Glasgow town centre, and the narrative, mapping his escape route, corresponds to areas and streets in the city that are recognisable in 2009.

The descriptions in the novels of the streets of Glasgow on a Saturday night in the 1930s indicate that the rhythms of the city have changed little since the interwar years. A chapter in *Major Operation* entitled 'The Pavement Patrol', describes the sociability of the city streets, and the desire of Glaswegians to publicly promenade, a habit which probably originated as an attempt to escape from overcrowded housing conditions. Sydney Checkland notes that, 'the very compression and density of the central part of Glasgow made for a city life that was colourful and lively. Instead of, as in many English cities, dying when the day's business was done, it was a place of human contact'.<sup>7</sup> *Major Operation* appears to be articulating two different ideas about class and the streets of Glasgow. On the one hand there is the egalitarian ethos of Glaswegians enjoying themselves, walking the streets is free and open to all, both rich or poor. The streets level class differences: 'Over the entire City the object of the (pavement) patrol was the same: there was an identity of interests between the middle class and the working class: the desire to be in the stream of life.' (MO, p.85) However a few lines later the narrative contradicts itself by arguing that the streets delineate class differences: 'The crowd in Sauchiehall Street was a middle-class crowd: the crowd in Argyle Street was a working-class crowd. In Dumbarton Road the crowd was more finely divided. On the north side paraded the better working-class. On the south side the slum dwellers.' (MO, p.85)

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<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion of the geographical history of The Gorbals see J.G. Robb. 'Suburb and Slum in Gorbals: Social and Residential Change 1800-1900.' in George Gordon and Brian Dicks (eds), *Scottish Urban History*. (Aberdeen University Press: Aberdeen, 1983), pp.132-135.

<sup>7</sup> Sydney Checkland, *The Upas Tree: Glasgow 1875-1975* (University of Glasgow Press: Glasgow, 1977), p.24.

The city is sometimes taken apart and pieced together in the novels in a cubist collage of impressionist imagery, as in a passage from *The Shipbuilders*: ‘The glazed wen of the People’s Palace, the turgid Clyde, great buses, blue and red, passing over the bridge into the Gorbals - queer Jewish signs over doorways there - meaningless interminable streets of tenement houses, a horde of idle men at Bridgeton Cross, the evening papers with the racing results close to their eyes.’ (SH, p.148) In both *The Shipbuilders* and *Gael over Glasgow*, the chiming of the Glasgow University bell is a reminder of the temporal nature of existence, a leitmotif throughout the narrative along with the symbolism of a faceless clock which chimes the hour but has never possessed an actual clock face.

### Housing and Slums

There was a preoccupation with the problem of the slums evident in the journalism of the 1920s and 1930s. George Malcolm Thomson asserted in 1927 that, ‘Half Scotland is slum-poisoned. The taint of the slum is in the nation’s blood’.<sup>8</sup> There is a horror of contamination evident in this statement. Glasgow in particular had become, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the economic powerhouse of Scotland. During this process the Glasgow urban proletariat were subject to the usual deprivations inherent in early capitalist development, although arguably in a more extreme form than anywhere else in Europe. By the interwar era the region was, ‘Narrow and ugly, slum-cluttered, Scotland’s industrial belt stretched tight across the 24 miles from the estuary of the Clyde to the Firth of Forth’.<sup>9</sup>

Inner-city overcrowding was a well known feature of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Glasgow. John Wheatley was one of the Red Clydesiders who publicised Glasgow’s grim housing situation. He argued that by 1912 Glasgow was the most congested city in the in the United Kingdom, with a population density of 53 people per acre (as compared with 45 people per acre for Liverpool, the nearest city in terms of overcrowding).<sup>10</sup> *No Mean City* describes the housing shortage in Glasgow in the 1920s, and how life for the tenants was a weekly

<sup>8</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia, Or, the Future of the Scots* (Kegan Paul: London, 1927), p.21.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Grieve in *Whither Scotland?*, ed. by D. Glen, (London: Gollancz, 1971), p.39.

<sup>10</sup> John Wheatley, *Eight-Pound Cottages for Glasgow Citizens* (Glasgow Labour Party: Glasgow, 1913), p.10.

struggle to find the rent for the Factor, the agent of an often absent or deceased landlord: 'In 1924 overcrowding was such that any empty apartment was immediately re-let. The Factor could pick and choose his tenants if he had a mind to'. (NMC, p.123) Not much had changed since Glasgow was famously cited as an example of the worst housing conditions in Europe by Jellinger.C. Symons, whose comments were influential on Fredrick Engels in his classic critique of capitalist society and the social effects of the Industrial Revolution, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. It contains the following description of the Glasgow slums as:

this tangle of crime, filth and pestilence in the centre of the second city of the kingdom. An extended examination of the lowest districts of other cities never revealed anything half so bad, either in intensity of moral and physical infection, or in comparative density of population.<sup>11</sup>

Residential areas in Glasgow were dominated by four-storey sandstone tenements during the interwar period. Built during the nineteenth century to accommodate a wide range of social classes these buildings can appear uniform and egalitarian on the outside, however, as described in *No Mean City*, middle-class tenements could contain many spacious rooms, while working-class tenements would house large families in a one-room ('single end') or two-room ('room and kitchen') apartment. Tenements provided, and still do, an unmistakable, iconic image of Glasgow, although Frank Worsdall discusses how tenements became negatively associated with slums during the interwar period leading to their large scale demolition later in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

In the preface of *No Mean City* a project of the writers is to expose the poverty and untenable living conditions prevalent in the city at the time, and it contains the most graphic depictions of tenement life in the five novels, enhancing its interest as a historical record. Sleeping in shared recessed 'hole-in-the-wall' cavity beds was a common feature of Glasgow housing at the time: 'windowless closets', 'little tombs about five feet by five by three and a half', (NMC, p.7) although the building of what became know as 'cubicles of consumption' had

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<sup>11</sup> Jellinger .C.Symons, (1839 ) 'Reports from the Assistant Handloom Weavers Commissioners', cited in Fredrick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* published 1845 (Penguin: London, 1987), p.79-80.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Worsdall, *The Tenement, A Way of Life: A Social, Historical and Architectural Study of Housing in Glasgow*. (Chambers: Edinburgh, 1979), p.ix.

already been outlawed in 1913.<sup>13</sup> Few had indoor plumbing, though by the end of the nineteenth century some of the tenements were built with toilets, known colloquially as ‘cludgies’, located on the half landing, and shared by families on two floors. The Royal Commission on Housing Report 1917 stated that 93% of one room houses in Glasgow had no WC.<sup>14</sup> In *No Mean City* the first marital home of Johnnie and Lizzie is described thus: ‘the one room of Razor King’s new home was tolerable “large”...Of course, it had no lavatory and there was no bathroom in the whole of the long, grey, four-storied tenement, nor, for that matter, in the whole of Crown Street.’ (NMC, p.123) An indoor bathroom is the highest housing aspiration in the novel. (NMC, p.160)

Working class living conditions in the novels can be verified by comparisons with *Up Oor Close* and *She Was Aye Workin’* - collections of working-class oral narratives from Glasgow and Edinburgh spanning the 1900s-1960s. A prevailing memory from people who lived in tenements was that their mothers never stopped working. Life for tenement women was an endless round of cooking, cleaning and washing. Most families lived in houses of one or two rooms and an enormous amount of time and effort was spent just packing away the beds in the morning to make room to move: ‘The labour expended in keeping a one-room house in order is out of all proportion to its size. It is a constant succession of lifting, folding and hanging up, and if this relaxed for even a short time the confusion is overwhelming’.<sup>15</sup> *Gael Over Glasgow* corroborates this: ‘it was impossible to keep these places tidy’, (GG, p.197) and describes the effect of the hard living conditions on the women of the Glasgow tenements: ‘One could hardly imagine those sad, dull eyed women one saw standing at the closes, telling their children fairy tales. Life was too cruel and hard here for them to indulge in imaginative flight. Reality, stark ugly realities were too close and insistent.’ (GG, p.198)

A Glasgow Councillor who grew up during the interwar period, eulogises his mother and women like her: ‘She died of overwork as many women did. The women of the working class in those days were first up in the morning and the

<sup>13</sup> Helen Clark and Elizabeth Carnegie, *She was Aye Workin’: Memories of Tenement Women in Edinburgh and Glasgow* (White Cockade: Oxford, 2003), p.17

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Laird, Women’s Labour League giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Housing 1913 in Helen Clark and Elizabeth Carnegie *She was Aye Workin’: Memories of Tenement Women in Edinburgh and Glasgow*, p.107.

last to go to bed. They kept the houses clean and they kept themselves clean, they kept the family's clothes clean in the worst possible conditions.'<sup>16</sup> Also paying tribute to 'those heroic women', David Kirkwood, the Red Clydeside leader and Labour politician, describes the effect of unemployment on the working-class women of Glasgow who had 'seen their men depressed and nervous. They had long eaten up their little savings. They had struggled with untold splendour of sacrifice to pay the rent, to keep the husband and the children fed and clad; aye, and still more to keep up the sprit of their men'.<sup>17</sup>

The material poverty of Glasgow tenement life forced women to work together. In *Hunger March* working-class Mrs Humphry's feels a duty of care towards her neighbours in a way that middle-class Mrs MacGregor for whom she works doesn't: 'It was queer but being under the same roof knit you all together whether you willed it or not. You were responsible for one another here.' (HM, p. 212) The social organisation of women in Glasgow working class tenements is examined by Seán Damer in *Glasgow-Going for a Song* (1990), illustrating how living in close proximity to neighbours and sharing the washhouse and the stair-head toilets enforced the need for women to co-operate and created a particular moral order.<sup>18</sup> It was other women who made survival possible in extreme deprivation through mutual support.

Edwin Muir argues, much as Symons had a century earlier, that the majority of the population of Glasgow during the interwar era lived in some form of poverty caused by the competitive, capitalist economic system; that the slums 'penetrate the lives of all classes in Glasgow'.<sup>19</sup> Muir's preferred themes in *Scottish Journey*, and in all his work, are the impoverishment of human economic, social, and imaginative life by industrialisation, the Glasgow urban wasteland, alienation from neighbours, and the anaesthetising of the senses in an untenable environment. On first arriving in Glasgow Muir was traumatised by having to walk to work on the South side of Glasgow every day through the slums of Gorbals: 'all the main thoroughfares leading from the town to the South Side were slums or semi-slums'.<sup>20</sup> This childhood horror of the slums is to Muir what

<sup>16</sup> Clark and Carnegie *She was Aye Workin'*: p.13.

<sup>17</sup> David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt*, (George.G. Harrap: London, 1935), p.252.

<sup>18</sup> Seán Damer, *Glasgow - Going for a Song* (Lawrence & Wishart Ltd: London,1990), pp.88-90.

<sup>19</sup> Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p.123.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.113.

the blacking factory was to Dickens, a muse and obsession that appears in a creative crossover between his fiction and non-fiction and vice versa.<sup>21</sup> It is particularly obvious in the chapter in his *Autobiography* entitled ‘Glasgow,’ which mirrors the chapter of the same name in *Scottish Journey*, and explains the fixation with Eglinton Street which emerges so strongly in his novel *Poor Tom*. The revulsion at the industrial degradation of the city permeates all these texts: ‘These journeys filled me with a sense of degradation: the crumbling houses, the twisted faces, the obscene words casually heard in passing, the ancient, haunting stench of pollution and decay, the arrogant women, the mean men, the terrible children, daunted me’.<sup>22</sup>

Muir protests that he has never been tempted to actually investigate the slums of Glasgow, professing he has no wish to ‘enter into competition with the narrators of horrors of this kind’. Nevertheless *Scottish Journey* evinces a scatological fascination with narrating the more nauseating aspects of slum housing, apparently in an attempt to shock his middle-class readership from their complacency. Muir’s visceral descriptions of living conditions assume the speech cadences of an evangelical preacher: ‘I have been told of slum courts so narrow that the refuse flung into them mounted and mounted in the course of years until it blocked all the house windows up to the second-top storey...and I have been given an idea of the stench rising from this rotting, half liquid mass’.<sup>23</sup>

Lewis Grassic Gibbon in *Scottish Scene* employs a similarly sordid imagery to describe Glasgow, his stated aim also being to shock his middle-class reader (addressed as being from ‘Kelvinside’ a bourgeois residential district) into an awareness of the dispossession of the Glasgow underclass:

In Glasgow there are over a hundred and fifty thousand human beings ... living five or six to the single room ... part of some great sloven of a tenement ... its windows grimed with the unceasing wash and drift of coal-dust, its stairs narrow and befouled and steep ... (who) eat and sleep and copulate and conceive and crawl into childhood in those waste jungles of stench and disease and hopelessness.<sup>24</sup>

An even more harrowing account of Glasgow slum conditions is given by David Kirkwood of his time at the bar pleading the cause of tenants at the Summary

<sup>21</sup> Although Muir also has his bone factory – which was a nadir of horror in his life.

<sup>22</sup> Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (Canongate Classics: Edinburgh, 1954:1993), p.83.

<sup>23</sup> Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p.116.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene* (Cedric Chivers: Bath, 1934:1974), p.137.

Ejectment Court of the Sheriffdom of Lanarkshire at Glasgow. This experience was for him a revelation of, ‘the appalling misery in which thousands have to live, and a standing challenge to the system of society which makes such human misery possible.’<sup>25</sup> Kirkwood protests that: ‘No picture of rural poverty can compare with the grimy, sordid, diseased hideousness of life in a Glasgow slum, as it was in 1920’.<sup>26</sup>

### City of Dreadful Night

The trope of the dark, corrupting, decadent influence of the city is sustained in all five novels. Glasgow is depicted as two worlds: industrial, impersonal and imposing, contrasted with human, emotional and sordid. It is not steel which is used and consumed in the making of the leviathans of industry but rather flesh and blood - the people. There are numerous examples, painting a canvas of the city in binary oppositions: The Apollonian versus the Dionysian. However this way of viewing the world can obscure the complexities inherent in everything. Glasgow like everything else is the sum of the integrated mixture of its parts. It is dark because it is also light, to see it as one or the other simplifies understanding. In *Gael Over Glasgow* the sunny hills overlook the dark city. In *No Mean City* the slums contrast with the better-off parts of the city. In *Major Operation* and *Hunger March*, the slum areas contrast with the wealthy commercial city centre. In *The Shipbuilders* the working-class residential areas contrast with the houses of the rich.

Catherine Carswell believes that John Stuart Mill was wrong to find ‘little else at Glasgow’ save for ‘the stench of trade’. She argues in her autobiography *Lying Awake*, that there was much more in Glasgow; ‘there was life, fierce and reckless and abundant, more especially when this life was low’.<sup>27</sup> Although Carswell is describing her years growing up in the city in the 1890s, social conditions had not changed much by the interwar era judging from the images in *No Mean City*. Carswell’s portrayal of the ‘keelies’,<sup>28</sup> or street children, ‘those

<sup>25</sup> David Kirkwood *My Life of Revolt*, p175.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p.177.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Carswell *Lying Awake*. (Canongate: Edinburgh, 1950:1997), p.18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p.27.

ragged, bare legged, blue footed, verminous and valgus (sic) children of Glasgow',<sup>29</sup> and the street crowd on a Saturday night, has the riotous vitality of Hogarth illustrating a London street a century before:

where all the men and women, and even children at the breast, were openly drunk, drunkenness assumed an epic quality. It was an orgy, an abandon, a bacchanal, a celebration, a wild defiance. Shawled women fought, screaming and tearing out each other's hair, while the men stood round roaring them on with laughter. Other men and women reeled along in song or reclined oblivious in gutters.<sup>30</sup>

Muir's first impression of Glaswegians, articulated in *Scottish Journey*, was that, 'they were sad and incomprehensible distortions of nature' and life in Glasgow was 'barbarous and degrading',<sup>31</sup> 'these people seemed to have all passed through the slums, and to bear the knowledge of the slums within them. On their faces ... quite clearly displayed, a depraved and shameful knowledge, a knowledge which they could not have avoided acquiring'.<sup>32</sup> A chapter in *Major Operation* entitled 'Pain in the Second City' similarly delineates the effects of poverty on the working class of Glasgow: 'Men, women and children withered and wasted with disease. On infants, poverty, stupidity and ignorance bred a mountain mass of wailing pain and suffering. Malnutrition, rickets, consumption: the ravages of venereal disease: cruelly ignorant feeding: callous clothing: dirt: bed-bugs: lice, vermin'. (MO, p.207)

Nature reflects culture in the novels, which frequently create a parallel between the grey gloomy weather in Glasgow and depressed social conditions.

Descriptions of the grey slate of the buildings, against the grey rain, reflecting the grey sky, create a peculiarly Glaswegian *mise-en-scène* in which everything works together to produce a homogenous grey, dark, wet, polluted whole, often indicative of and contributing to the misery of the protagonists in the literature.

The anthropomorphising trope of the city birthing the monstrous is memorably and semi-humourously employed by Gibbon in his essay entitled 'Glasgow': 'The monster of Loch Ness is probably the lost soul of Glasgow, in scales and horns, disporting itself in the Highlands after evacuating finally and completely its

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.20.

<sup>31</sup> Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp. 112-113.

mother-corpse'. Later in the text the metaphor of death, degeneration and corruption is extended: 'It may be a corpse, but the maggot-swarm upon it is fiercely alive'.<sup>33</sup> In *Major Operation*, the city is likened to a 'monstrous hermaphrodite' in labour, although it is not clear to what is being given birth. (MO, p.229) Is it something akin to Yeats' monstrous premonition, a rough beast of a new social order slouching towards Glasgow to be born at last? The metaphor for the power of the demonstrating crowd in *Hunger March* is 'this mammoth specimen of the Atlantasauros'. (HM, p.118) Whatever such a beast may be, there is a fear that something enormous and uncontrollable is about to be born or break loose, the forces of chaos unleashed. Possibly ruling class paranoia at the prospect of profound revolutionary change is revealed in a description of the hunger marchers:

squalor embodied in the form of a dinosaurian monster before whose snapping jaws culture must vanish, frivolity must doff its tinsel, and in whose maw whole tracts of civilized country might conceivably disappear. ... you felt if this shambling monster were held in bondage much longer it must stretch forth its great limbs, break loose and storm the buildings on either side. And for a space you saw Chaos rampant. You saw the outposts of civilized order tottering. (HM, pp.117-118)

A visual spectacle of Glasgow is provided by Muir in *Scottish Journey* when he illustrates how the rubbish in the streets of an industrial town can reveal and represent much; be a synopsis of its collective existence, creating a sort of primordial social soup:

Scraps of newspaper, cigarette ends, rims of bowler hats, car tickets, orange peel, boot soles, chocolate paper, fish-and-chip paper, sixpences, broken bottles, pawn tickets and various human excretions: these several things, clean and dirty, liquid and solid, make up a sort of pudding or soup which is an image of the life of an industrial town. To this soup must be added an ubiquitous dry synthetic dust, the siftings of the factories, which is capable under rain of turning into a greasy paste resembling mud.<sup>34</sup>

Muir's observations above, along with Gibbon's olfactory description of the Gorbals in his article entitled 'Glasgow': 'And out of the Gorbals arises again that foul breath as of a dying beast',<sup>35</sup> endorse a chapter in *Major Operation*

<sup>33</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Glasgow', in *A Scots Hairst*. (Hutchinson: London, 1967:1978), p.82. First published in 1934 in *Scottish Scene*.

<sup>34</sup> Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p.115.

<sup>35</sup> Gibbon, 'Glasgow', p.144.

entitled ‘the Smells of Slumdom’, which provides a similar sensationalist account of the disgusting details of slum life:

The subway entrance breathed out its stale decayed air. Immediately beyond, where they turned into Walker Street, a warm odiferous waft of slumdom met them. It was not a smell that could be escaped. There were identifiable odours of cats’ urine, decayed rubbish, infectious diseases, unwashed underclothing, intermingled with smells suggesting dry rot, unsanitary lavatories, overtaxed sewage pipes and the excrement of a billion bed-bugs. (MO, p.72)

Notwithstanding the negative portrayals of the city and its inhabitants, Glasgow does glint on occasion in the novels with the ability for enjoyment so characteristic of Glaswegians, seemingly irrepressible even in the depressed conditions of the interwar period. The dancing halls were famous and always packed: ‘Glasgow was dancing mad between the wars and had many dancing halls such as the Locarno and the Clarendon ...the largest was the Barrowland which could hold close to 2000 people’.<sup>36</sup> The Plaza opened at Eglinton Toll in 1922 (and existed until 1996) where folk from the Gorbals would have gathered for ‘the jiggings’, given its close proximity. The dancing tradition continued well into the twentieth century, as reported in *The Herald*: ‘Glasgow was the dance capital of the UK in the 1950s and 1960s with 30 dance halls, a total unrivalled even by London’.<sup>37</sup> Along with the Glaswegian propensity for street promenading, the dancing was no doubt motivated by a desire to escape from overcrowded and difficult living conditions. There are glimpses of this vibrant social life in *The Shipbuilders* and *Gael Over Glasgow*, but it is most evident in *No Mean City*, where much of the action, both good and bad, takes place in the dance-halls. In this novel ‘the dancing’ is the place for young couples to meet, the nexus of social advancement for some, but also the scene of numerous gang fights. A dance hall manager from the period describes the reality of the scene: ‘A lot of good people came into the Barrowland and a lot of bad people as well. I would say more good than bad because we had all the gangs from Bridgeton, the Gorbals and the Calton.’<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Helen Clark and Elizabeth Carnegie, *She was Aye Workin’: Memories of Tenement Women in Edinburgh and Glasgow* (Oxford: White Cockade, 2003) p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Stewart ‘Historians race to save pieces of the Plaza’, *The Herald*, 5 July 2006.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.54.

Crime was a convenient way of interpreting the corruption of the city, and gangs formed a vivid metaphor for journalists and novelists when describing the problems in Glasgow. Andrew Davies posits the influence of United States gangster movies on the interpretation of the gang phenomenon in the United Kingdom during the interwar era. He reveals that the fear of the gang menace in the 1930s was fuelled by the press in collusion with the police, responding to gang incidents with complex and often contradictory messages depending on their agenda. He argues that, 'Their rhetoric provided sensational copy. It was left to senior figures in the city's press such as George Blake to ponder the consequences of Glasgow's notoriety for the city's prospects of economic recovery by the mid-1930s'.<sup>39</sup> Blake attempted to provide reasons for the gang culture in Glasgow in *The Shipbuilders*: 'Gangs of idle, unemployable boys, fed on American films and bad Sunday newspapers, seizing on so-called religious or sporting prejudices, arming themselves as they could, going about in bands, looking and hoping for trouble' (SH, p. 132). In the same novel, when Danny's unemployed teenage son Peter is arrested for murder the father has, 'Some dim sense of the economic crime that had been committed against his son' and reflects that crime 'would never have been done or made by a boy who had worn himself out in a fitting shop or on the rusty deck of a ship in the making.' (SH, p.134)

The novels describe an ambivalent Glaswegian working-class attitude towards the police, described in *The Shipbuilders* as 'those aloof authoritarians his class at once feared and disliked and respected.' (SH, p.132) Cynicism toward the authorities permeates *No Mean City* where 'the polis' are presented as being, for the most part, ineffectual. Damer argues that gangs were the creation of unemployment and poverty, that *No Mean City* fails to get the gang phenomenon in perspective, and more contentiously that 'the biggest and most successful gang in Glasgow was always the city's police force'.<sup>40</sup> From 1931 Glasgow's Chief Constable was Percy Sillitoe, a controversial figure who wrote his own interpretation of interwar policing, *Cloak Without Dagger*.<sup>41</sup> Another economic rationale for gangs is offered in *Gael Over Glasgow*, 'Men instinctively shrank

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Davies, 'The Scottish Chicago? From hooligans to gangsters in inter-war Glasgow'. *Cultural and Social History*, Vol 4, issue 4, 2007. p. 524.

<sup>40</sup> Damer, *Glasgow - Going for a Song*. p.149.

<sup>41</sup> Percy Sillitoe, *Cloak Without Dagger*, (Cassell & Co: London,1955)

from these surroundings, and men drew closer to each other. Solitude meant madness in a place like this. Hence the groups huddled at the corners, hence the gangs.’ (GG, p.128) The empowerment of gang status functions as an antidote to the disempowerment of those who fail within the capitalist system.

Gang feuds function as a dark motif throughout *No Mean City* in which the desire to escape from the slums is one of the reasons advanced for the existence of the Glasgow gangs. The stated aim of the novel from the outset is to illustrate Glasgow’s claim to violence - a result of the poverty and degradation of its citizens. The gangs are territorially based with Johnnie’s Gorbals gang feuding against gangs from other working class districts in Glasgow - Plantation, Bridgeton and Townhead. At the height of his fame and power in the Gorbals, Johnnie Stark the Razor King can be assured that, ‘there were at least five hundred young men in the district now ready and eager to face the armed strength of any other division in the city.’ (NMC, p.147) Explicitly violent imagery periodically punctuates the text. There is much crashing-down of broken bottles on cheeks and kicking-in with iron-shod boots of heads: ‘Fighting is truly one of the amusements of the tenements. Nearly all the young people join in, if not as fighters themselves, at least as spectators and cheering supporters’, (NMC, p.44) and there is, ‘that queer admiration for a champion gangster which exists in the slums even among people who have nothing to do with the gangs.’ (NMC, p.123) The descriptions of Glasgow gang fights are fearfully graphic and realistic and this pornography of violence must have added to the titillating appeal of the novel. One of the most explicit of these passages in *No Mean City* is described as an epic gang battle in Albion Street involving a crowd of more than two thousand ‘slummies’:

the opposing mobs surged down it from opposite ends in a tumult of shouting and yelling and cursing and defiance. Stones and bottles were thrown from one crowd to the other before the front ranks met. ..Then, as the front rank hooligans joined battle, the high-pitched screams of the girls goaded them on until there were half a hundred furious fights in progress at once. The whole mob reeled and sprawled and swirled and eddied like a flooded river between narrow banks. (NMC, p. 180)

## Models of Masculinity

Glasgow evolved its own brand of machismo through a particularly harsh historical process. Working-class male identity was moulded by the difficult and dangerous work in the shipyards and heavy industries of the city. Social conditions were often brutal and dehumanising. The ‘Glasgow Hard Man’ became a vision of entrapped masculinity: self-destructive, drunken and violent. But what were Glaswegian notions of masculinity during the interwar era? What was accepted and expected of a man? Is this informed by, or in dialectical relationship with, portrayals of men in the realistic novels in that they could also have provided a model for male behaviour? Did novels like *No Mean City* encourage emulation in the way that Davies suggests Hollywood gangster movies of the era influenced British gang culture?<sup>42</sup> Was there a unitary masculinity? There are inherent contradictions in the term. Ruling-class power had an intrinsic interest in young Scottish men flaunting their masculinity to feed the imperial armies, and the warrior tradition is not noted for emotional depth and sensitivity. Clyde shipbuilding often acted as a cipher and allegory for the health of Glasgow: when shipbuilding thrived Glasgow prospered. Skilled work created a strong symbol of potency and masculinity while unemployment emasculated male identity and self esteem. So, did the development of the notion of the Glasgow hard man mask enormous complexity in the actual lives of Glaswegian working-class men?

Hegemonic masculinity in the West of Scotland came to be associated solely with negative characteristics depicting men as unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate – indeed the causes of criminal behaviour. There are links between excessive alcohol consumption and the male role. The use of alcohol and a licence to overindulge are deeply rooted in expectations of male behaviour in Glasgow. It is difficult for men to abstain: not drinking is considered weak and feminine. Holding your drink without becoming intoxicated becomes an expression of male identity and gender affirmation. Male social constructs in the West of Scotland tend to focus around the hub of the pub. This culture evolved as a release from the overcrowded living conditions in working-class homes as illustrated in the novels. The pub also

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<sup>42</sup> Davies, ‘The Scottish Chicago?’

functions as a replacement substitute for the institution of the Kirk: the place for social gathering, knots of people standing around on the street at closing time, much like the social groupings that form after a church service. But the so-called social cohesion of pubs becomes social division: hard men, plus pub, plus alcohol, plus too much free time when unemployed, tends to add up to violence, neglect and abandonment of family responsibility, which in turn equates to guilt, feeds into lack of self esteem, requiring more alcohol to ease the pain. Even gentle Danny in *The Shipbuilders* gets trapped into this cycle of self-destructive behaviour when he loses his job, takes to the drink, and has to restrain himself from hitting his annoying wife. Why do people hit people? Is it a frustration arising from impotence, a desire to take control of circumstances in a disempowering milieu?

It is documented that in Glasgow domestic violence towards women after the pubs had closed was far worse than any of the gang street battles.<sup>43</sup> In *No Mean City* most of the fathers and husbands depicted in the novel are unemployed, alcoholic, and habitually abusive towards their wives and children, contributing to an environment of domestic instability, terror and reproduction of dysfunctional relationships. Johnnie's father John Stark is the archetype of the bad father. He takes no responsibility for his progeny, and 'wondered grimly how it was that all the women in the slums seemed to want kids' whom he regards as 'breadsnappers'. (NMC, p.10) He 'bashes' the family who live in constant fear of him, but who won't put him in jail even when he fractures his wife's skull with a beer bottle, and she, 'refuses to give evidence against her husband'. (NMC, p.31) There is also a conspiracy of silence from the neighbours. His son Johnnie is less relentlessly violent towards his women, but does not hesitate to give them a 'careless blow' now and again. He is not regarded as a woman-beater because he only hits his pregnant ex-girlfriend Mary when she is 'sherricking'<sup>44</sup> him, and refrains from 'bashing' Lizzie his wife until several years into their marriage. (NMC, p.189) It is in this crucible of violence that Johnnie develops into the 'Razor King', afraid of nothing but ridicule, of 'being laughed at by the neighbours'. (NMC, p.27)

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<sup>43</sup> Irene Maver, *Glasgow* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000), p.254.

<sup>44</sup> A Glasgow ritual of public humiliation

The Glasgow hard man model of masculinity contains similar characteristics to those popular in American movies of the first half of the twentieth century: Western cowboys and urban gangsters, epitomised by strength, boldness, being in control, meeting challenges in dangerous situations, a cool toughness; and risk-taking behaviours such as smoking, drinking, and gambling. (See above for discussion of Davies work on the influence of American gangster movies.) Mark McManus, the first actor to play Taggart the popular Glasgow detective in the television series of the same name, defines the ontological roots of the Glasgow 'hard man', concluding with a pertinent observation regarding the ongoing reproduction of a culture of violence:

The hard man is ingrained in Glasgow history. He came to prominence in the "No Mean City Era" between the wars, a time of razor kings and mass gang fights, but his origins go back to the overcrowded slum housing of Glasgow's early Industrial period. Conditions have changed since then, although no-one in their right mind would claim that poverty and unemployment have been conquered. In today's city we still have unacceptable levels of domestic tension, depression and hopelessness. Some of its victims erupt into violence, others neglect family duties or just cannot cope with them, and this creates a new wave of urban casualties - their children. <sup>45</sup>

*No Mean City* was one of the first in a long genre of novels about Glasgow hard men and their exploits. It traces the evolution of its protagonist Johnnie Stark into the archetypal representation of the Glasgow hard man, gang leader, known as the 'Razor King' because of his weapons of choice, two cut-throat razors which he wields effectively in his many battles. The novel is a sociological study in the making of the type: 'Many a young gangster, not yet lost to all decent feeling, deliberately hardens his heart as he hardens his muscles. His vanity compels him to be brutal. There must be nothing soft about a "razor king"', (NMC, p.52) and 'The least faltering by the Razor King would have turned the spectators into a pack of wolves.' (NMC, p.65)

*Major Operation* describes a shipyard work crew in a passage shocking in its seeming affirmation of the violence of male identity and negation of women's: 'They were raw but they were genuine - when you got to know them. They weren't angels of course. Razor slashers, wife beaters, incestmongers, adulterers, drunkards, blackmailers, gangsters ...But a man, morally rotten,

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<sup>45</sup> Mark McManus & Glenn Chandler. *Taggart's Glasgow*. (Lennard Publishing: Oxford, 1989), p.148.

didn't work long with MacKelvie'. (MO, p.41) Perhaps this is a misguided attempt at irony, otherwise it is difficult to envisage by what standards moral behaviour is being measured here.

Unemployment in a capitalist system is akin to emasculation, resulting in low self esteem. Thus it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the crisis of capitalism resulted in a crisis of confidence in the collective male Glaswegian psyche during the interwar era. Compounding the economic disempowerment of unemployment, the loss of the traditional breadwinner role within the family unit would have been emotionally disempowering. Shipyards and engineering were the domain of men. (Women entered this world during the wars but men regained control after.) In *The Shipbuilders*, Leslie is happiest when 'reestablished as the man of action', whereas for Peter, Danny's older son, he 'becomes the big man in the house on the strength of a job'. (SH, p.95) The strength of this connection between work and self-esteem is evident in Danny's masculine pride preventing him from going on social security. Male identity in the novels stems from work, although this identity is a social construct and as such hides the underlying reality. It is also possible that the menfolk cannot deal with reality at anytime, but when otherwise occupied can disguise this from themselves, and when not working they anaesthetise themselves with alcohol.

The notion of 'manliness' runs as a repeated refrain throughout two of the novels. In *Gael Over Glasgow* there is an obsession with 'being manly' evident in Brian's mother's view of him, in his own dreams of manhood, and finally, in his uncle's declaration on 'the State of Scotland' and how it is 'a man's job to make it a nation'. (GG, p.353) Lily in *No Mean City* constantly exhorts Bobby, her boyfriend, to be "a wee bit manly!" said she, galling him with that reproach which became the intermittent refrain of their married life.' (NMC, p.163) The overarching tone of the novel derides notions of manliness - then undercuts this in turn by describing Bobby as being unmanly - and when he sensibly runs away from the final fight leaving Johnnie and Peter, the judgement of the narrative voice is that, 'Bobby was never very manly'. (NMC, p.312) The numerous repetitions of the word 'manly' in both novels naturalises the social construct and emphasises how its absence leaves the main characters adrift.

But is there a unitary notion of masculinity expressed in the Glasgow novels? What of the possibility of diverse masculinities? There is not only one norm of the Glaswegian male, and some of the realistic novels do depict men who are different from the stereotype, men who are capable of sensitivity, gentleness and nurturing. Aside from representing the Glasgow hard man, the novels of the 1930s also show a softer side to Glaswegian men. Domestic economic arrangements in the novels unexpectedly subvert conventional notions of masculinity. For example in *The Shipbuilders* Danny's gender role performance changes after he loses his job. When his wife leaves him he comes to dominate the domestic by default as the housekeeper and primary carer of his son. Leslie in *The Shipbuilders* displays more nurturing affection for his son than does his wife the cold-hearted Blanche. Jock in *Major Operation* nurtures his new friend George. Even uber-masculine Johnny can cook his own supper as *No Mean City* helpfully explains: 'Most working class men can cook for themselves and the unemployed habitually do when their wives are lucky enough to be at the toil. They often look after the house and children too.' (NMC, p.208) It also reveals the general acceptance that the woman is often the financial provider and manager in the household, 'a very normal state of affairs, as indeed it was, and still is in modern Glasgow.' (NMC, p.202) So there is a slippage towards anti-patrician values and characterisation. Men who are denied the opportunity to function within their designated social role can experience the upsurge of unaccustomed emotions. This could possibly contribute to a construction of the Glasgow 'soft man' - a problematic notion in the West of Scotland!

## Conclusion

The city has been considered here as character, topography, housing, social interaction, violence, masculinity and crime. The way in which a city is put together materially incarnates certain social segregations and produces particular contradictions. For example, the historic juxtaposition of housing with the shipyards in Glasgow created working-class solidarity, and simultaneously effected segregation from the middle classes. The city produced a certain mentality and persona which can be regarded as a 'spirit of Glasgow'. Deprivation can result in a shared camaraderie. Working-class solidarity was a practical survival mechanism for those who possessed little, relying upon each

other for support. The isolation from the middle classes would also serve to increase the cohesiveness of the working classes, strengthening the sense of belonging to a distinct tribe, creating pride in surviving through adversity, while developing a wry sense of humour as a coping mechanism. The drink too would function in this manner, while exaggerated toughness, particularly masculinity, would provide a social template for dealing with heavy blows such as the death of children and general ill-health. These characteristics can also be somewhat over-sentimentalised by the middle-class writers of the novels.

Realism in fiction can match and connect with historical data and help reconstruct reality: in the five novels studied here this is diagnostic rather than remedial. The Glasgow proletarian novels of the interwar period tend to be infused with a deep existential pessimism, narrating the decline of the city and the demoralisation of the population caused by unemployment, but without offering solutions to the problems or a vision of a way out. Although crude and melodramatic in parts, most of the texts have a certain archetypal power. They serve to record the credible voices and lives of the people Glasgow during the interwar era that may otherwise have been lost to history. The novels provide an interesting insight into the Second City of the British Empire at a particular moment in its historical development, documenting the social conditions in Glasgow during the Great Depression, providing the reader with a realistic representation of the interwar city.

## Chapter 4 Revolutionary City

### Interwar Politics and Red Clydeside

#### Introduction

The idea of Revolutionary Glasgow had its roots in various radical social reform movements in the city throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reaching realisation during the first three decades of the twentieth century, when Glasgow's popular image evolved into that of a militant proletarian city. The creation of this symbolism and the myths fostered thereby were both historical and literary. This is represented in the realistic novels of Clydeside, and by the supporting evidence in non-fictional accounts of the era they describe, including those of the influential autobiographies of the political leaders from the time. The interwar era was one of increasing empowerment and political action by the labour movement in Glasgow, and a period when the city came to be associated with various stereotypes including: Socialism, Communism, the Labour Movement, and Red Clydeside.

The global context witnessed the development of increased political consciousness in the first decades of the twentieth century, as the international working class organised to fight for a share of the profits they were making for their employers. Before the First World War there was already a committed, well-organised, political infrastructure in Glasgow consisting of different Marxist and socialist groups. This grew rapidly with political action during the First World War creating a radicalising effect on the labour movement. The anti-War Peace Movement and the Rent Strikes politicised the population of Clydeside, leading to a growth in the popularity of left-wing political parties such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the British Socialist Party (BSP) and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP).<sup>1</sup> After the 1917 success of the Russian Revolution there was considerably increased political activity on the streets of Glasgow. At the time Glasgow and central Scotland, 'was just about the most proletarianised area of the world ... It also contained within it a complicated and potentially explosive mixture of political tensions'.<sup>2</sup> There was developing militancy in the workplace, and a new form of workers organisation - the Shop Stewards movement,

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<sup>1</sup> For a full overview of the politics of Glasgow during the interwar era see Irene Maver, *Glasgow*, (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> John Foster, 'Scotland and the Russian Revolution', *Scottish Labour History Society*, Vol. 23 1988 p.23.

formalised by the establishment of the Clyde Workers Committee. There also emerged a new form of political activist and organisation, based on working class communities themselves. It was in this context that the image of 'Red Clydeside' developed.

Did the crisis of capitalism and the phenomenon of Red Clydeside create the necessary and sufficient conditions for a radical political revolution in Glasgow during the interwar era, and what evidence is there for this in the novels and in contemporary and subsequent political analyses?

### **Red Clydeside and the Revolution - the Forty Hour Week Strike 1919**

Defining 'Red Clydeside' is complicated as it was not really a coherent political movement and owed much of its swashbuckling status to the power of the British press. It could represent the small parliamentary group more usually known as 'the Clydesiders', or the whole continuum of left-wing politics in and around Glasgow, including communists, anarchists and the Marxist-inclined Independent Labour Party (ILP). Radicalism on Clydeside was a product of the spontaneous reaction of the unemployed and working classes to the material conditions of their oppression; combined with leadership by a local vanguard of the Communist Party with close connections to Soviet Russia.

The legend of Red Clydeside developed during and just after the First World War, as political protest to what was perceived to be a war for Imperialist ruling class interests in Europe. At the time, according to Marxist historian John Foster, there were those who believed that, 'the two million people of the Clyde Valley, concentrated around the biggest of Europe's heavy industry and munitions centres, represented the most serious potential threat to the existing order in Britain'.<sup>3</sup> The Forty-Hour-Week Strike of 1919 was a struggle for a shorter working week, in an attempt to circumvent unemployment with the return of the work force from the war. It was supported by most of the workers in the Clydeside area, along with recently demobilised soldiers. Marches and demonstrations culminated in a massive demonstration in George Square on Friday 30 January 1919. The authorities confined Scottish veteran troops to their barracks in Maryhill for fear they would support the strikers. In the

<sup>3</sup> John Foster, 'Red Clyde, Red Scotland', in *The Manufacture of Scottish History* ed. Ian Donnachie and Christopher Whatley (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1992) p.107.

aftermath, apprehensive of revolution, the Westminster Government sent English troops and tanks into the city. Winston Churchill in particular considered it a possibility that the Bolshevik Revolution was imminent in Glasgow.<sup>4</sup>

Reviewing the process by which the history of the Red Clyde has been constructed, Foster describes it as, 'predictably dislocated and incoherent'.<sup>5</sup> He investigates the possibility that it was merely a 'heroic episode' invented by left-wing propagandists years after the event. Comparing the diverse interpretations of the period, Foster acknowledges the genuine belief of the actual participants at the time, 'that something special had occurred on the Clyde during and immediately after the first world war ....a moment of near revolutionary potential had been reached, and missed...'<sup>6</sup> The debate around imminent revolution in interwar Glasgow continues into the twenty-first century, indicating the numinous quality the incident assumed in the consciousness of Glasgow. George Square 1919 became the benchmark of all future demonstrations of militancy in the city.

Foster argues that Red Clydeside passed into history during the interwar decades as propaganda for both those desiring revolutionary transformation, and also for those defending the existing social system.<sup>7</sup> He examines the various histories that went into the making of the myth of Red Clyde, starting with the autobiographical accounts of the revolutionary leftist participants themselves: Willie Gallacher and Tom Bell; and those of the reformed rebels who became parliamentarians, Emanuel Shinwell, Tom Johnston and David Kirkwood. He then looks at the official ruling class accounts from the Ministry of Munitions, Winston Churchill, Lloyd George, and William Beveridge. This leads him to the more recent interpretations of the phenomenon by historians Keith Middlemass, James Hinton, and Jeremy Cronin, which contest the credibility of some of the claims of revolutionary threat. Then there is the debunking of these claims in turn by Iain McLean and Alastair Reid, whose questioning of the revolutionary orientation of Clydeside's skilled workers is accepted by Seán Damer, and challenged by Joseph Melling who, 'demonstrates conclusively the degree to which rank and file militancy did emerge in the later stages of the war and the

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<sup>4</sup> Iain McLean (1999), *The Legend of Red Clydeside*, (John Donald: Edinburgh, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Foster, 'Red Clyde, Red Scotland'. p.118

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.107.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.115.

degree to which previous historians had been misled by the self-serving history by the Ministry of Munitions'.<sup>8</sup>

Foster concludes his review of the construction of Red Clydeside by returning full circle to the original opinion in the historical debate - that revolution was narrowly averted in 1919. But now this opinion is extrapolated not only from the perspective of the strike leaders and government, but also from fresh evidence of the views of the owners of the means of production. The source of this most recent understanding of the circumstances leading up to Bloody Friday was the discovery in 1992 of the minute book of the Clyde Shipbuilders Association, which reported on the actual discussions among the Glasgow captains of industry during the General Strike of 1919. It is clear from this account that the owners, arguably the most powerful force in the equation, were fearful of revolution. They considered the strike to be both political and dangerous because: 'It had created an active alliance between the tens of thousands of recently discharged soldiers (demobilised only weeks before in circumstances of real and threatened mutiny) and the most radical section of the industrial workforce'. The 'most radical section' refers to the shipyard workers and miners, and a strike leadership dominated by the socialist Clyde Workers Committee. In addition the employers feared the weakness of the Glasgow civic authorities, who appeared to be sliding into collaboration and compromise with the radicals.<sup>9</sup>

In contradistinction to the paranoia of the bosses, the memoirs of the trade union leaders themselves all reflect peaceable marchers and intentions of good faith on 30 January 1919. They also recount the reading of the Riot Act on George Square, the frenzied attack by the police, the mass panic of the crowd, several of the crowd batoned over the head including Kirkwood and Gallagher themselves, the arrests, charges of incitement to riot, and the subsequent trials. Kirkwood's interpretation of events on the day and their aftermath is disappointingly sparse, perhaps because he was knocked unconscious by a police baton! He presents no reasons for the riot or any revolutionary intent on the part of the marchers.<sup>10</sup> Shinwell is more forthcoming. Still positive that the mass of workers had no aims beyond remedying the labour situation, he had addressed the Trades Council saying, 'This movement for a 40-hour week is not

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.123.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.124.

<sup>10</sup> David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt* (George.G. Harrap: London, 1935) p.172.

revolutionary in character ...it is attributable solely and entirely to the fear of possible unemployment in the near future and the desire of the workers generally to make room for the demobilized servicemen'.<sup>11</sup> He argues in his memoir that these views were ignored by the Press, 'which continued to report the alarmist statements of politicians who seemed able to give a graphic account of the revolutionary situation in Glasgow without coming within three hundred miles of the city'.<sup>12</sup> Shinwell concludes, as does the evidence at the trial, that, 'the workers did not riot for the sake of making trouble: they only rioted when panic-stricken forces of law enforcement drove them to it', and it was 'Red Friday' only due to the blood spilt by the police not due to imminent revolution.<sup>13</sup> Gallacher's memoir describes mistrust between the strike leaders, and a Press organised against the increasingly isolated strikers. His interpretation of events is the most radical, and posits the possibility of a more militant insurrection if the marchers had progressed to Maryhill to enlist the support of the Scottish troops confined to barracks there. He also admits with hindsight what he considers was the main reason for the improbability of revolution:

We had forgotten we were revolutionary leaders of the working class. Revolt was seething everywhere, especially in the army. We had within our hands the possibility of giving actual expression and leadership to it, but it never entered our heads to do so. We were carrying on a strike when we ought to have been making a revolution.<sup>14</sup>

Iain McLean argues in *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (1983) that at the trial of the leaders after 'Bloody Friday' 1919, the judge and jury were not convinced that, 'any conspiracy, Bolshevist or otherwise, existed'.<sup>15</sup> McLean is also of the opinion that the violence in George Square was initiated by the police, who baton charged the crowd of strikers and their families, together with the usual innocent bystanders who gather around any fracas in Glasgow, and was therefore what McLean labels, 'a police riot ...caused by the inexperience and incompetence of the police in handling a large crowd with no revolutionary ambitions'.<sup>16</sup> However the press did not believe in the innocence of the strikers' intent, *The Glasgow Herald* reporting after the trial that the strike was, 'the

<sup>11</sup> Emanuel Shinwell *Conflict Without Malice*, Odhams Press: London, 1955), p.61.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* P.62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.65.

<sup>14</sup> William Gallacher *Revolt on the Clyde* (Lawrence & Wishart: London 1936:1990). p.221.

<sup>15</sup> McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside*, p.132.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.132.

first step towards the squalid terror which the world now describes as Bolshevism'.<sup>17</sup>

It appears that the press and the police played major roles in fomenting the fear of impending revolution on Clydeside in 1919. None of the strike leaders' memoirs suggest that revolution was the plan or purpose. It is possible to argue, along with Gallagher, that the worker leaders may have been efficient industrial organisers, but they did not have the resources available to enable them to match ruling class manipulation. As a result they were unable to understand the true nature of the struggle in which they were involved, and were thus incapable of providing the necessary political leadership and organisation to bring about a final victory for the working class.

### **Politics and Protest - the 1926 General Strike**

There is a long tradition of socialist organisations in Glasgow. The novels all refer to this history, and reflect how the 1930s brought increasing political and industrial unrest. This new militancy characterised not only the unemployed, but also an empowered, unionised workforce in constant conflict with the owners of the means of production to improve wages and working conditions. The industrialists in turn fought to keep down the costs of labour in a labour-intensive industry in order to maintain surplus value and prevent further decreases in profits at a time when most of Glasgow's enterprise was struggling to stay in business.

Glasgow was the centre of the 1926 General Strike in Scotland. Over the years a struggle had been developing between a growing militant working class versus the military industrial complex serving the interests of the owners of the land, the owners of the means of production, and the State. In *Gael Over Glasgow* the history of the dispute and the build-up to the 1926 Strike creates a mood of expectation of the final showdown between Capital and Labour: 'And this fight would be decisive. For of all the long struggles and bitter industrial disputes ....this threat of a General Strike was the most serious menace Capitalism had ever been called upon to face'. (GG, pp.221-222) The novel describes the May Day march and demonstration on Glasgow Green on the eve of the strike, with a

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<sup>17</sup> Shinwell *Conflict Without Malice*, p.65.

sense of excitement and euphoria that the workers will win and the existing order will be overturned: ‘They will see and feel the full brunt of an organised working class. ... From now on the workers will come first, as it should be. ... The old fashioned exploitation where profits come first, last and all the time is finished.’ (GG, p.265) Brian cautions prudence, recalling the brutality of government response to previous strikes. Evident in the text is that the police and army in a bourgeois society exist to uphold the interests of the property-owning classes, and the majority of the population is too complacent to dispute the use of excessive force by the authorities.

Irene Maver argues that the 1926 General Strike did not have the impact that might have been expected upon Glasgow, considering it was a city with a reputation for industrial militancy: ‘The famous “Red Clydeside” ...was only marginally involved. Engineering and shipyard workers were in the “second line” of action and were not called out until the last day of the strike... Moreover the sheer size of Glasgow made effective control difficult’.<sup>18</sup> The power of the media is documented for over twenty pages in *Gael Over Glasgow*. The press had joined the strike so it was difficult to transmit and receive news. The press in a bourgeois society usually upholds the imagined community of capitalist society, but it can also subvert it. However in this instance its very subversion worked against the success of the strike: ‘All that the Strike meant, its mammoth nature, the stranglehold it had on industry was not appreciated by the public who depended on the Press which normally linked them together.’ (GG, pp.275-277) So the role of the press in 1926 was very different to that in 1919.

On 12 May 1926 the surprise call-off of the strike by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was announced against the wishes of the miners, and without any guarantees or written terms of agreement. The majority reaction among the Glasgow strikers was a sense of betrayal of the workers by a leadership who had been co-opted by the ruling class<sup>19</sup> articulated in *Gael Over Glasgow* as, ‘after all that the Strike had been in vain with the Memorandum turned down by the miners and owners’. (GG, p.285) Contemporary writers responded quickly to the events of the time, some referring to the strike in an oblique literary form other than realism. For example Hugh MacDiarmid’s now famous poem ‘A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’ published in 1926: ‘I saw a rose come loupin’ oot’ (line

<sup>18</sup> Irene Maver, *Glasgow* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000), pp.206-207.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* pp.204-205.

1119) refers to the labour movement rising from the image of waste, and it blooms and grows until it 'shrivelled suddenly'.<sup>20</sup>

Each of the novels approaches the political unrest and the radical political movements of the era in a singular way. In contradistinction to the rather naïve enthusiasm of *Gael Over Glasgow*, and the dearth of political action in *The Shipbuilders; Major Operation* and *Hunger March* articulate a more balanced view and depict the grim reality of the unemployed workers' movement in unsentimental terms. The politics of *Major Operation* is informed by Barke's worker consciousness, articulating a Marxist internationalist attitude towards war, religion, and politics, and a more localised critique of Glasgow municipal politics and a Corporation dominated by Labour from 1933. The prevailing ethos in *No Mean City* is that of cynicism towards authority, and nihilism towards politics. The attitude of the authorial voice towards leftwing politics is negative. The population of Glasgow are portrayed in the as novel voting 'Red' because they were bribed, 'they sneered as they made their crosses on the ballot papers. They cared for nothing - literally nothing'. (NMC, p.70)

*Gael Over Glasgow* contains contradictory messages. On some occasions the text appears to be supporting revolution, and on others it is fearful of it. There is a resignation in the narrative stance and a conservative acceptance of the status quo which consistently confuses and cramps the narrative attempts at a more revolutionary stance. Brian's world view is conflicted as he exhibits both admiration and disaffection towards the radical leftist politics of his fellow workers in the shipyards: 'that hot-bed of fighting socialists and agitators ....They were a daft crowd over there. It seemed they went on strike every second day'. (GG, p.106) When the ILP looms large in his life Brian dithers about whether it is the best movement to work for, although he does not have any other political affiliation. He emerges as essentially apolitical preferring to head for the hills with his sandwiches than become an activist. This is consistent with the overall vision of *Gael Over Glasgow* which is essentially conservative and atavistic, and harkens back to the old traditions of the Gael and a long-gone time in Scotland, a view which sits uneasily with a more radical left-wing analysis sometimes evident in the text. Recalling the history of revolutionary struggles, Brian both anticipates and fears the social revolution that seems

<sup>20</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). line 1171.

imminent: ‘And was it Britain’s turn next? If they could just control it, it could be a great and worthwhile struggle...But who knows what undreamt of forces might be released in a social upheaval now?’ (GG, p.148) There is an ongoing refrain throughout the novel that there are uncontrollable forces at work, a fear of organised revolution, and paranoia about communism:

Political agitators were in their glory. ... They had their plans laid, plans of which the average working man knew little or nothing. Communists had carried out the instructions they had received years ago and had wormed their way into every working class organisation in an attempt to capture as many vital positions as possible. They awaited the revolutionary conscience awakening. (GG, p.277)

Marches in Glasgow often had a set route aimed at the seat of civic power: the City Chambers in George Square, as delineated in *Hunger March*. However this novel also has the bleakest most sceptical vision as to the lack of effectiveness of such civic protest:

So the same procedure was to be adhered to, the procedure honoured by custom and observed on every occasion by the marchers of circling the City Chambers while the councillors held their meeting. ... But it could never reach those urbane wearers of robes and chains, those arbiters of a people’s destiny. It could never reach them, because they were all-powerful. (HM, p.124)

### **Hunger Marches of the 1920s and 1930s**

One of the methods of protest documented in the novels are the hunger marches, a phenomenon of the Great Depression and a reaction to the unemployment of 1920s and 1930s Britain. It was one of the few ways in which the unemployed, organised into the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM), could articulate their impoverishment and frustration, and attempt to regain a modicum of power through collective action.

An account of the Scottish hunger marches is contained in two volumes of collated oral histories compiled by labour historian Ian MacDougall, *Voices from the Hunger Marches: Personal Recollections of the Scottish Hunger Marchers of the 1920s and 1930s*<sup>21</sup>. What is most interesting about these testimonies is the matter-of-fact approach of the participants to their individual experiences which correspond with the fictionalised depictions in the novels. The volumes include a

<sup>21</sup>Ian MacDougall, ed. *Voices from the Hunger Marches: Personal Recollections of the Scottish Hunger Marchers of the 1920s and 1930s*, Vol. 2 (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1990:1991), p.299.

timeline of the events, showing that the first Scottish Hunger March occurred in 1928, even before the 1929 economic crisis which precipitated the Great Depression. The favoured destination for these marches was actually Edinburgh rather than Glasgow, although there was a significant Glasgow march in 1935, recalled by Michael Beattie, a miner from Fife: 'On the Glasgow Mairch they had cudgels ye ken, the Gorbals and the Springburn boys they had muckle cudgels. The police were afraid they wid be attacked.'<sup>22</sup> Tom Clarke an ex-professional soldier recounts: 'All Glasgow turned out. This was the great thing at that time. You could depend on at least a great demonstration.'<sup>23</sup> MacDougall provides the *Glasgow Herald* (25 March 1935) estimate of numbers: 40,000 demonstrators of whom 3000 were Hunger Marchers. These are figures which correspond with those given in *Hunger March* and *Major Operation*, the two novels which best document the hunger marches.

There are two major political marches described in *Major Operation*. The first near the beginning of the novel, is a demonstration by the NUWM against the introduction of the Means Test for unemployment insurance in 1931 (explained in Chapter 2). This was a hated, degrading procedure and caused a great deal of public protest and 'an incentive for many to support the National Unemployed Workers' Movement as a tangible expression of concern about rapidly deteriorating living standards'.<sup>24</sup> This march is where George has a first antagonistic encounter with Jock, leading his Partick contingent on the march. (MO, p.129) Not realising that Jock will soon become his friend, and that he himself will soon be one of the ranks of the unemployed, George observes the workers from the patronising perspective of his then seemingly secure bourgeois position:

There could be no doubt about the poverty of the marchers. There didn't seem to be a really satisfactorily fed person in the ranks. They were ill-clad: quite a number in dirty rags: themselves not overclean. But they had spirit. They carried themselves proudly. Prouder still the red flags, the banners and the slogan-board. The army of the unemployed, the unemployable. (MO, p.128)

The second march occurs at the climax of *Major Operation*. (MO, pp.475-490) It is the historically realistic 'All Scotland Hunger March on the Second City'. The novel documents how from all over Scotland, two hundred and fifty thousand

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.116.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.299.

<sup>24</sup> Irene Maver, *Glasgow*, (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000), p. 207.

workers and unemployed converge on Glasgow, forming a 'United Front Movement'. (MO, p.476) For twenty-four hours the workers put aside their divisions and take the Freedom of the City marching behind their trade union banners. There is a real sense of the power and massive scale of the hunger march, as the workers gather at George Square, and then march on to Glasgow Green bringing traffic in the city to a standstill: 'There were many miles of banners, flags and slogan-boards. It was like ten May Day processions. .... Never in its history had the Second City witnessed such a marshalling and consolidation of its organised strength.' (MO, p.482)

*Major Operation* contains historically realistic depictions of the NUWM of which Jock is a member, and to which he introduces George after he has joined the ranks of the unemployed due to the bankruptcy of his business. The history of the NUWM on Clydeside is outlined by George Rawlinson<sup>25</sup> who reports how its campaign for the rights of the unemployed was met with threats, intimidation and repression from the police and authorities.<sup>26</sup> There was lack of support and even open opposition from most trade unions, trades councils and the Labour Party in Scotland. Eventually the high profile of the movement on Clydeside, and the groundswell of support for the organisation in 1930-32, 'stirred the labour establishment into action. No doubt, fearful that the NUWM were being seen as more representative of the interests of the unemployed than the trade union movement'.<sup>27</sup> Rawlinson argues that the fact that the NUWM remained strong and achieved so much despite the level of opposition was attributable to:

tireless street activists like Harry McShane, and an indication that whilst unemployment was debilitating, it was possible to rally the people against such obscenities as the means test and cuts in benefits. Between the wars there were no saviours on high to deliver the unemployed from their misery. Those out of work had to rely on their own devices. This is a lesson which many are still learning.<sup>28</sup>

The power of the workers and the massive scale of the All Scotland Hunger March is also invoked in the novel *Hunger March*, the setting for which is 24 hours on the day of the demonstration. The march converging on George Square in the centre of Glasgow is likened to an overwhelming flood: 'a vast stream of

<sup>25</sup> George Rawlinson, 'Mobilising the Unemployed: The National Unemployed Workers' Movement in the West of Scotland', in *Militant Workers: Labour and Class Conflict on the Clyde, 1900-1950. Essays in Honour of Harry McShane 1891-1988*, ed. Robert Duncan and Arthur McIvor. (John Donald Publishers Ltd: Edinburgh. 1992).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p.182.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.179.

<sup>28</sup> Quote contains an allusion to the words of 'The Internationale'. From George Rawlinson, 'Mobilising the Unemployed', p.193.

humanity was converging on the Square....a teeming deluge had engulfed the cobblestones, the pavements. It was as though the collapse of some great dam had released a torrent'. (HM, p.116) The march itself is depicted as an independent entity in allegorical terms: 'Driven from the rear, without pause, without fluctuation, it surged on - Black Care, Hunger, Revolt'. (HM, p.116) However the power of the workers is in contradistinction to their disempowerment; their poverty displayed in juxtaposition with the great wealth of Glasgow's industrial and entrepreneurial legacy. The starving workers pass by the goods on show in the windows of the city's inaccessible temples of consumption: 'shambling between stately frontages, between rows of lighted shops agleam with the tempting fruits of luxury trade... A place worthy of plunder, you might think, worthy of being the objective of this ragged throng; but Dull Care, Hunger and Revolt appeared as though they saw it not'. (HM, p.116)

The uncharacteristic silence of The All Scotland Hunger March in relation to other marches he has witnessed unnerves Jimmy the journalist: 'On those other occasions when he had seen them, they had created an atmosphere of spurious excitement by shouting, by waving sticks, by shrilling of fife bands.' (HM, p.122) The silence of the marchers on this occasion is more powerful: 'You realized the grimness of it, the futility, as that pitiless line wound on and on, ... the spectacle of men caught up in an inexorable machine'. (HM, p.122) The poverty and starvation of the marchers is emphasised as they 'mooch along, so mealy-mouthed, so mum. He forgot, for the moment, there were flashes in his blood that were not in theirs. He forgot that in an ill-nourished body passion does not readily catch fire.' (HM, p.123) Jimmy opines that what is needed is a war in which the unemployed could serve as cannon fodder, an ironic reference to the fact that many of them are demobilised soldiers who have received little support from the State, and the legacy of their First World War wounds is why so many of them are now: 'a pitiful multitude over which Christ Himself might have sorrowed, a multitude made up of the lame, the halt and the blind'. (HM, p.125)

The disempowered state of the hunger marchers is evident in all the novels and could be posited as a reason for the failure of revolution. In *Gael Over Glasgow* the difference is delineated between the demonstrations of the 1926 General Strike and the Hunger Marches of the 1930s:

it was not the quiet peaceful workers of the General Strike they had to deal with. But a desperate army of derelict men who had nothing to lose and a lot to gain. But oh, the shame of it, their indignation and sense of bitter injustice had been cruelly exploited and side-tracked by political parties, till at last apathy and despair settled down like a huge cloud. (GG, p.311)

A corresponding irony of the media-constructed mythology of the worker movement as 'The Terror of Red Clydeside', is exposed in the following passage from journalist John R. Allan in *Scotland* (1938) a description of Buchanan Street on a busy shopping day in the 1930s:

A procession came up the street, with blood-red banners ...These should have driven the women screaming into the basements of the shops for they bore legends in praise of Moscow, warnings about the wrath to come. 'Communists' the word flew along the pavements. But no one screamed. The men that carried the flags were broken beyond violence by the prolonged misery of unemployment and could not sustain the legends.<sup>29</sup>

In his novel *Magnus Merriman* (1934) Eric Linklater very similarly describes a march of ex-servicemen:

Half these ragged fellows, these slouching dole-men, these pot-bellied deformities, had once stood rigid and magnificent on parade, and marched behind the pipes with kilts swinging, ...here, with foul shirts and fouler breath, were Mars's heroes. Kings had fallen and nations perished, armies had withered and cities been ruined for this and this alone: that poor men in stinking pubs might have a great wealth of memory.<sup>30</sup>

The idea of pending revolution is a palpable possibility in both *Major Operation* and *Hunger March*. In the former there are frequent narrative interjections articulating the hope of the proletariat anticipating, 'the day that socialism would be triumphant and lay the foundations of a new society'. (MO, p.73) This is in contradistinction to the attitude of the bourgeoisie in the novel, who voice hatred and fear of anything that will threaten their class domination. They do not believe revolution to be a possibility in Britain anyway, it is something that happens elsewhere: 'A hunger-march was something essentially un-British: something imported from abroad - Russia.' (MO, p.237) A similar disbelief in the probability of revolution is evident in *Hunger March*: a sense that insurrection is something imported from afar: 'Had they been foreigners, you would have expected to behold, at a given signal, the flash of hidden weapons dramatically disclosed. But things like that didn't happen here.' (HM, p.121) However the

<sup>29</sup> John R. Allan, *Scotland* (Edinburgh 1938) p.28.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Linklater, *Magnus Merriman* (London, 1934:1990) p.145.

middle-class observers in *Hunger March* are also fearful of Soviet-funded and inspired revolution: ‘They said there was a steady stream of Soviet money coming into the country these days, that Russia was behind all the disturbances.’ (HM, p.119) In both these novels, the sense of imminent social revolution from the workers is punctuated by the comments of the bourgeoisie, one moment fearful of the overturning of the status quo and the next scornful of the possibility of revolution in Britain, indicative perhaps of prevailing ambivalence and ambiguity in the contemporary zeitgeist.

The denouement of *Major Operation* has George, symbolically clutching the red flag, standing over Jock, saving his hero from the hooves of a police horse. And it is this sacrificial leap that infuses George’s previously reified bourgeois existence with meaning and significance. The final chapter consists of Jock’s elegiac funeral oration for his fallen comrade in praise of his struggle and courage in allying himself with the working class. There are similarities here to the ending of Gibbon’s *Grey Granite* where Chris’s Communist son Ewan departs to lead the hunger march into the unanswered question of the future.<sup>31</sup> If the lesson of the First World War was the bitter irony of the statement, ‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’ (It is right and fitting to die for your country), it seems that not only had it been learnt, but it re-surfaced again and again in the contemporary mindset and literature of the post war period.

### **Ruling-Class Repression**

The ruling class in any capitalist society maintains its domination through ideological hegemony, by the consent of the mass of the people, and only uses its coercive apparatuses; the forces of law and order, as a last resort (see discussion in Chapter 5). The British State was in a unique position to control insurrection by force when ideology failed, with the most powerful Imperial army since the Romans, with centuries of practice in policing the colonies and quelling revolts in Ireland, Africa, America, Asia, Ireland, and in Scotland itself. Together with the arrest of the leadership, this acted as a coercive deterrent to worker revolution in Glasgow. The main symbolic figure of Red Clydeside was John Maclean, the Glasgow teacher and Marxist leader of the British Socialist

<sup>31</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Hutchinson & Co: London, 1946:1971).

Party; twice imprisoned for his opposition to the First World War.<sup>32</sup> In *Major Operation*, Maclean is described as, ‘the indomitable, incorruptible first Scottish representative of the Soviet Union.’ (MO, p.481) In 1918 Maclean was arrested and found guilty of sedition in one of the greatest political trials in Scottish history. And in 1925 the entire Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain was arrested and received prison sentences just prior to the impending General Strike. However the failure of the 1926 General Strike by the Trades Union Congress was perceived to be a betrayal of the workers by a leadership who lost their nerve and were co-opted by the ruling class.<sup>33</sup> Brian’s disillusionment and cynicism is palpable in *Gael Over Glasgow*: ‘all the past had been squalor, misery and exploitation, and brave gallants only dupes of imperialistic aggression; and the working people little less than blind dull slaves.’ (GG, p.132)

Throughout *Major Operation*, Jock, the worker leader, attempts to politically educate bourgeois George, initially blinded by the ingrained ideology of his inherent class position to the truth of state sanctioned violence: ‘He was completely ignorant of the brutal and ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital’. (MO, p.366) The realities of British Imperialism, what Barke refers to in the second sentence of the novel as, ‘The Empire on which the sun never sets’, (MO, p.341) is also the empire on which the blood never sets. George has no understanding of how blood is bartered in the name of power and Jock has to explain during a consciousness-raising session: ‘When the capitalist state finds out that it can’t govern unless our blood’s shed - then they’ll have no hesitation in shedding it. There won’t be any nonsense about democracy the moment the will of the British People cuts across the interests of the governing class.’ (MO, p. 341) As a small time capitalist entrepreneur George cannot understand the dark power brought to bear by the controllers of the military industrial complex upon those who oppose it. It is only in the closing scenes of the novel, when he saves Jock’s life, that the reality of the situation become apparent to George, and he has his moment of epiphany and glory with red flag and self-sacrifice for his comrade Jock.

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<sup>32</sup> John Broom, *John Maclean*, (MacDonald Publishers: Loanhead, 1973)

<sup>33</sup> John Foster, ‘Scotland and the Russian Revolution’ in *Scottish Labour History Society*, 23, (1988).

The rhetoric of blood was much associated with the interwar period because of the legacy of the First World War, during which the British military-industrial complex did not hesitate to sacrifice the working class to fight their battles, or to ruthlessly repress those same workers if their authority was challenged. Johnnie in *No Mean City* talks of how the working classes breed ‘fodder for the capitalist cannons’. (NMC, p.112) All the novels, written with the event and its consequences still fresh in living memory, contain a subtext of the sense of the devastating impact of the so-called ‘Great War’, and no class had been immune from the death-dealing. Even Arthur Joyce the capitalist owner in *Hunger March*, who had been seemingly protected from the ‘harsh blows’ of fate until the death of his son in the war. (HM, p.28)

The Westminster Government had a long history to draw on of violently suppressing the rebellious Scots when it came to dealing with Red Clydeside. The aftermath of Bloody Friday at George Square 1919 is described in *Gael Over Glasgow* and contains an understanding of the relationships between political coercion and economic ownership, and the complacency of the masses:

They had machine gun nests rigged up along the docks. What for? The Germans? They had troops parading in full war kit through the city. Our city! Could anything be more outrageous than that. There should have been a wave of indignation throughout the country at that and whoever had ordered those troops out should have been kicked into the Clyde for the coward he was. But no; the people stood for it. Of course it was to protect property. (GG, p.266)

During the General Strike of 1926, the immense solidarity and widespread class-consciousness was so threatening to the British government that it sent seven naval vessels to the Clyde in an attempt to overawe the strikers. Hundreds were arrested during the nine days of the strike and there was widespread anger at the conduct of the police, upon whom the Westminster Government had conferred power to prevent public meetings. There were instances of police brutality and police forcibly breaking up strikers’ meetings. The legal system became seen as an instrument of class oppression.<sup>34</sup> In *Major Operation Jock* argues how power is in the hands of the workers if only they knew it, and that the forces of armed imperialism, the armies and police, required by the ruling class to maintain power, are created out of the ranks of the working class if only they could understand this:

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<sup>34</sup> Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside*, (John Donald: Edinburgh, 1999)

We are the armed forces ... we are the Nation. If we take our power openly and firmly, realising clearly what we are doing and what we want, who the hell's going to gainsay us? ... if we sit back and trust to the honour and decency of our class enemies, then we will be drowned in a sea of our own blood. (MO, p.343)

### Deterrents to Revolution

Although there were very real fears from both the Westminster Government and Glasgow Industrialists that, left unchecked, the workers' uprising would turn into a revolution, it seems doubtful that an actual revolution was likely to have occurred on the part of the working class movement. William Bolitho a journalist, published a somewhat sensationalist exercise in slum tourism entitled *Cancer of Empire* in 1924, including information from 'the Clyde Reds themselves', which cites the abysmal social conditions in Glasgow as being sufficient grounds for revolution.<sup>35</sup> However John Buchan's novel *Mr Standfast* (1919) reflects a desultory opinion towards the possibility of the revolutionary potential of the Glasgow proletariat: 'They may crack about their Industrial workers and the braw things they're going to do, but there's a wholesome dampness about the tinder on Clydeside. They should try Ireland.'<sup>36</sup>

In *An Industrial Survey of the South West Scotland*,<sup>37</sup> a report produced for the Board of Trade in 1932, it was noted with concern that altogether no new internal investments had come to the Clyde during the previous decade. The authors of the report directly relate this to an impression that 'the district is one seething with unrest which is of a subversive character'. However the report contradicts this perception as being false arguing that, 'while there is a small amount of Communism', this had little influence over the 'mass of working people', of whom 'no more steady and dependable body is to be found in any similar area'.<sup>38</sup> The shipyards have long been regarded as the cradle of the radical labour movement in Scotland. However it is a moot point whether shipbuilding was the main nurturing ground, given the defensive nature of shipyard trade unionism with its job demarcation and protectionist strategies.

<sup>35</sup> William Bolitho, *The Cancer Of Empire* (London: G. Putnam, 1924) concerning events in Glasgow prior to the First World War, so not included in this dissertation.

<sup>36</sup> John Buchan, *Mr Standfast*, (Oxford University Press, 1919, repr.1993),p.60.

<sup>37</sup> Board of Trade. *An Industrial Survey of the South West of Scotland*, ( Political Economy Department of the University of Glasgow. HMSO: London. 1932).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.140.

Indeed there was a range of influences, and mining has far more of a claim to the title of revolutionary cradle, with James Keir Hardie famously a product of the Lanarkshire and Ayrshire coalfields.<sup>39</sup>

*Hunger March* posits the idea of how the social deprivation of the slums is a breeding ground for revolutionaries: ‘those elements composed a fine marching tune for revolutionaries. With that in his ears, a man might fling a bomb into the innermost ring of the capitalists and harken unafraid to the roar of its bursting.’ (HM, pp.209-210) In contrast to this belief, historian Sydney Checkland suggests that the slums were places so destructive of humanity that they were unlikely to produce organised and sustained protest.<sup>40</sup> Alastair Reid suggests, ‘there were small groups of genuine revolutionaries in the area’ and ‘some more influenced by industrial syndicalism’, but that, ‘the main political catalyst and then beneficiary of these agitations was the generally more moderate and constitutionalist ILP’. He concludes that, ‘Perhaps one of the longest legacies of red (sic) Clydeside was the way in which John Maclean and Jimmy Maxton were more widely and fondly remembered than their more moderate and representative colleagues: as part of a long tradition of romanticizing Scottish history, the rebels and the martyrs were generally preferred to the practical politicians.’<sup>41</sup>

Possible reasons for the failure of worker revolution are contained in the social realist novels. Brian in *Gael Over Glasgow* predicts that the reason why there will be no revolution is because the workers prefer, ‘Charlie Chaplin and a pint of beer...and the other little things that made life worth while to the man at the bench’. (GG, p.285) These aspects of false consciousness are discussed in Chapter Five of this dissertation. *Major Operation* contains a contemptuous diatribe on the betrayal of the working class by the leadership of the labour movement who are viewed as having sold out, co-opted and corrupted: ‘There was the record of heroic struggle on the part of the workers and the grossest, most shameless betrayal by their so-called leaders’. (MO, p.386) When George’s romantic notions of the revolutionary working-class heroes are debunked by mundane reality it causes him disillusionment and despair: ‘From considering them

<sup>39</sup> Irene Maver. Pers. comm. University of Glasgow. May 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Sydney Checkland, *The Upas Tree: Glasgow 1875-1975* (University of Glasgow Press: Glasgow 1977) p.32.

<sup>41</sup> Alastair J. Reid, ‘Red Clydesiders’ (1915-1924), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford University Press, 2004-6). pp.2-3.

abstractly, as a theoretical proletariat - the advance guard of history - to seeing them as men and women standing around corners, living in squalid tenements, drinking in mean and horrible public houses, going to football matches and dog racing'. (MO, pp.387-388) The sub-text of *No Mean City* articulates a similar understanding.

## Conclusion

It is possible that revolutionary impetus from the working class was pre-empted by the ruling class, using the threat of coercion from a powerful British Imperial army and police force. So revolutionary change in Glasgow became a casualty of ongoing British Imperialism, a complex project in which many Scots across the classes were willing participants. However the greatest single deterrent seems likely to have been the sheer weight of false consciousness as delineated in the next chapter. And this despite the extensive worker-led Marxist-socialist re-education programmes occurring on Clydeside during the interwar era. No revolution could gain ground when the population was unaware of the true exploitative nature of their own predicament.

## Chapter 5 Consciousness and the City

### Ideological Hegemony and False Consciousness

#### Introduction

The realistic novels present a convincing voice reflecting many of the day-to-day concerns and material realities of life in interwar Glasgow. They also permit a glimpse into the dominant ideology of the era, and how it affected consciousness in a manner that continues into the twenty-first century. The political leanings towards the left come from the sense of alienation and disempowerment felt by the characters, and it is evident why it was that Clydeside remained, for more than seventy years after the events depicted in the novels, the heartland of the Scottish Labour Party. The novels, to a greater or lesser degree, chart their protagonists' journey towards a point of social and, more often than not, political, realisation, even if that realisation is one of impotence. Despite their circumstances many of the characters are aspirational, not just in terms of political will, but perversely enough in their desire to better their standing within the class structure: to move from the working class to the middle class. As well as political consciousness, the novels touch on the socio-economic foundation which informs the political motivations and choices of the characters.

Was false consciousness a major reason for the failure of the ongoing class struggle to evolve nascent revolutionary potential in Glasgow during the interwar era, and how is this supposition substantiated in the novels?

#### Class Consciousness and Conflict

The First World War had functioned as a conscientising exercise regarding the true nature of class-exploitation, and for many of the participants it was a horrific exercise in futility. The troops' experience of the trenches would have been enough to sow the seeds of doubt regarding the status quo and obedience to the ruling elite. The shipbuilding industry however was traditionally paternalistic, hierarchical and authoritarian, controlled by a coterie of Edwardian patriarchs into, and even beyond, the interwar era. Leslie's

relationship with his own father reflects this in *The Shipbuilders*, and although not an authoritarian, he himself is tormented by his overdeveloped sense of responsibility towards his workers. This echoes an officer's war time concern for his men, 'those rough innocents whose destinies were so strangely in his hands'. (SH, p.8) *The Shipbuilders* reflects no radical class-consciousness on the part of the authorial voice. The two class representatives are employer and employee, and the resulting uneven class relationship could be viewed as patronising on the part of Leslie the boss, and sycophantic on the part of Danny the worker. The fact that these characters knew each other in the army is significant - both seek to retain the status quo in their relationship but find it impossible because of the changing economic landscape. As with many of the de-mobbed population, they simply do not fit into the shifting world order in which they find themselves. Theirs is an unusual and anachronistic relationship. Leslie's sense of responsibility towards Danny and 'the best part of a thousand men' makes him desperate to save the shipyard so that these men will not be, 'put out on the dole, to hang about street corners, to be denied their right to work, to know emptiness indescribable!' (SH, p.10) Liberal guilt seems strangely out of place during the trauma of the Depression and is possibly more appropriate to the philosophy of social harmony that had characterised pre-war Liberalism, but had fractured by the interwar period.

The methods by which the protagonists in *The Shipbuilders* are able to deal with the effects of the Depression are determined by their class position. At the close of the narrative, bourgeois Leslie can use his surplus capital to abdicate his responsibility to the workers, sell the shipyard, escape the depressed north and relocate south to England. Danny is trapped in Glasgow by his poverty, but reinvents himself as a vendor of wood: ironically becoming a business man in his own right. Both of these strategies reflect the actual economic trends of the time, with the movement of capital to the south-east of the UK, and the necessity for working men to reinvent themselves in new and different employment in Glasgow.

In *Major Operation* the protagonists have been reduced to an equal social status by their ill-health, unemployment, and poverty. In the opening chapters George Anderson is described as a bankrupt coal agent. (MO, p.141) His opposite number in the narrative, both in the hospital ward and in terms of class position, is Jock

MacKelvie, 'leading hand of the squad of red leaders'. (MO, p.31) In an ironic and fitting contradistinction, Jock is also a 'Red Leader' of the workers' movement, well liked and respected by his workplace and political comrades. The humorous observation of the surgeon in the hospital is that Jock goes, 'from red leader to Red Leader'. (MO, p.183) Being unskilled and casual workers, the red leaders were at the bottom of the class-hierarchy of the shipyards, with no job security and for Jock, 'not every day did he enjoy three full and satisfying meals'. (MO, p.77) Jock and George meet in Glasgow's 'Eastern Hospital a public, charitable institution', (MO, p.145) possibly modelled on the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. The British National Health Service was only created in 1948, so in the 1930s a member of George's class would normally have used private healthcare, but now he 'had to confess he couldn't afford a nursing home'. (MO, p.145) Jock becomes a persuasive influence on George's class consciousness and, by the final chapters of the novel, in a passionate declaration of faith, he has converted to being a member of the working-class movement and 'a Red' himself.

The authorial voice of *Major Operation* is permeated with class-consciousness on the part of both proletariat and bourgeoisie. The middle class are contemptuous of anyone they consider to be of lower social status, and the working class scorn the effete nature of the middle class. The attitude of the working class towards the bourgeoisie is that they are: 'fearful of risk'. (MO, p.116) This is an ironic reversal of the usual view of entrepreneurs as being risk takers. After the failure of George's business his economic hardship situates him, 'between the world of the Haves and the world of the Have-nots'. (MO, p.329) As Jock, his new worker comrade, observes, George was 'pressed down into the ranks of the working class'. (MO, p.339) When George finally understands the reality of his position he is, 'as fit to face life as a pampered poodle'. (MO, p.356) There is an ongoing Marxist critique in the novel of the parasitic nature of the middle classes, and how their lifestyle is sustained by exploiting the surplus value of the workers. Particular condemnation is reserved for middle-class women such as George's wife Mabel: 'As a lady, her position was maintained by the wage-slavery of some forty human beings. Thus she was never devoid of clothes, food, shelter or entertainment'. (MO, p.216) Mabel in turn looks down on anyone she considers of inferior social status, and even George her husband, 'who prided

himself on his general democratic broad-mindedness', complies passively with her social snobbery, 'the innate superiority of class over class'. (MO, p.53)

Class divisions are constantly emphasised and commented on in *Hunger March* with an ironic judgment of the middle class and sympathy towards the workers. The bourgeois observers of the hunger march, sitting passively inside the aptly named restaurant overlooking George Square are referred to as: 'The window-gazers inside the Palatial'. (HM, p.119) The narrative voice is supportive of the working-class marchers, and so accordingly is ironic in its expression of the middle-class opinions of the voyeuristic diners critiquing the marchers. Class conflict is understood in a different way by the somewhat naïve narrative perspective of Brian in *Gael Over Glasgow*. With reference to the government's refusal to accept the Sankey Report on the miners' plight, 'It was a disgrace and could only create class hatred. A handful of mine owners preferred and protected against the Nation ... this stupid class hatred was only going to make things worse in the long run' (GG, p.107) (discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation). Brian wonders why the classes cannot cooperate between themselves to solve the economic problems of the nation as they had done during the First World War. The narrative describes 'class war'. (GG, p.268) The fear of class-slippage, of falling further down the ladder of working-class life is omnipresent in *No Mean City*, and both Johnnie and his brother Peter marry girls who are of higher social status than themselves, described as being 'better class'. (NMC, p.105)

The class system in Glasgow is as rigid as anywhere else in the United Kingdom. However Scotland has always had greater problems of poverty and social deprivation than its southern neighbour. Access to housing, education, nutrition, health, and life-expectancy were, and still are, determined by class in Scotland. However Sydney Checkland argues the converse, that there appears to have been a minimum of class-consciousness in Glasgow, much less class-conflict, despite the enormous class differentials in the city. He offers as a suggestion for why this was so lying in the spatial segregation of the classes due to the physical structure of the city<sup>1</sup> (discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation.)

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney Checkland, *The Upas Tree: Glasgow 1875-1975* (University of Glasgow Press: Glasgow 1977) p.32.

## Individual Agency versus Economic Determinism

What agency is allowed to the individual in the novels? How much freedom in relation to larger historical forces? Mostly the characters in the novels are depicted as having little individual agency and are determined and coerced by socio-economic forces that are beyond their control. This individual passivity in itself would have been a deterrent to cohesive working-class revolutionary action. Is there any way forward for the individual within that? The novels illustrate that then, as now, there are great differences between the classes regarding the control they have over their lives, and this is usually dependent on degrees of economic security.

*The Shipbuilders* could be judged as an attempt to reinforce the status quo in its unquestioning acceptance of unequal class and power relationships, and its sense of the powerlessness of the individual to act as a subjective agent against the economic forces of capitalism. There is a feeling of the irrelevance of individual struggles against larger class interests. Although Leslie would like to help Danny, he seems unable to help even himself, and Danny simply accepts, 'With the simple realism of his kind he knew that he was helpless under the great machine'. (SH, p.17) There is a sense of economic determinism, of the inability of bosses and workers alike to prevent the economic crisis: 'Danny could yet not escape that obsessing sense of calamity impending. Something big and black had happened, never mind why...there brooded over him the realisation that the old, safe life was falling to pieces about him'. (SH, p.85) The fatalism and futility of individual agency in the face of powerful extrinsic forces is experienced more intensely by Leslie in *The Shipbuilders* when his aged father becomes ill: 'There was upon him a queer, dumb feeling that fate was setting the scene for his trial and decision with an almost artistic care.' (SH, p.115) His father has been unable to face the truth of the near bankruptcy of his business and will talk, 'of anything save the likelihood of the Pagan partnership being broken up'. (SH, p.116)

The parallel plot structure in *The Shipbuilders* illustrates the effects of economic uncertainty on the emotions of the male characters, comparing the passive guilt and defeatism of employer Leslie the shipyard owner, with the helpless dissolution of employee Danny the riveter into unemployment,

drunkenness, violence and imprisonment. Both characters are anachronisms, portrayed as morally strong but economically weak, caught up by forces they do not understand and over which they have no power. Both are trapped by economic necessity in an unjust system. Both are living with delusions and denial about their lives. However the consciousness of the characters cannot comprehend the complexity of their condition, and the narrative voice is seemingly complicit in the confusion, never managing to analyse the implications of their position in the broader economic context. In *labour lies self-determination* and empowerment is the message in the novels.

The Edwardian capitalist Arthur Joyce in *Hunger March* considers himself to be above economic vagaries as a member of the ruling class. Business has been a fixed point for his life compass, as he reflects on his life described in a mixture of existential metaphors: 'Had he ever been a slave to business? ... Like the moon at nightfall, it had been a definite object in a vague windy space. You steered the ship of your existence according to it.' (HM, p.101) The authorial voice in *Hunger March* criticises the passive consumer consciousness of capitalism and modernity. Arthur's secretary, Celia is 'an unwitting victim of mass-production'. (HM, p.54) Mrs Humphry, the cleaner in *Hunger March*, is conscious of the difference between the social relationships of the proletariat and those of the bourgeoisie, and the amount of self-determination each class has. Economic security provides freedom from responsibility, from the need to rely on neighbours, and from the consequences of actions.

The class above her, living in security, can afford to hold the outer world at arm's length. Those who belong to it are rarely dependent for their interests, their entertainment, or their livelihood upon chance encounters. They are making their way through a realm that is policed and protected at every turn; and the fear of chaos, of disaster, is remote from their minds. The poor, on the other hand, cannot afford to hold potential friends at a distance. (HM, p.86)

There is an awareness of how class difference affects access to power in *No Mean City*. The characters articulate the belief that power and control are the domain of the ruling class. Corrupt police are the tool of the ruling class and exist to protect their property, and not to help the slum dwellers who do not press enquiries with 'the polis'. The only possibility of individual agency within this powerless environment is to join a gang. So the novel provides an insight

into gang psychology, bred from poverty and deprivation, providing a sense of belonging in the midst of alienation, peer-group approval, and local fame for the fiercest.

The aspirational desire of the characters to escape from the material conditions of their existence in *No Mean City* is different from what the novel refers to as 'The Escape Complex' which concerns avoidance behaviour (discussed later in this chapter). Lily and Bobby succeed in achieving some of their social ambitions, they do escape the Gorbals for a while through their rising careers as dancing instructors. But by the end of the novel they too are crushed by poverty and circumstance. Because of their social conditioning they cannot get out of the trap since they believe they are a part of the trap. Their desire to escape needs to be more than just aspirational for it to be effective. Peter Stark is ambitious, believes in the myth of meritocracy, of the possibility of his personal power to overcome the restrictions of his environment. As a 'messenger boy' he imagines that with brains and hard work he can climb his way up to being a 'traveller' (travelling salesman) and eventually a 'sales manager'. (NMC, p.72) However even his ambitions are restricted by his life in the Gorbals and he, 'never fooled himself that he would be able to set up in business on his own account ...That he should become an employer and a capitalist was a dream simply beyond the range of his imagination.' (NMC, p.72) Eventually even his limited hopes are thwarted by the Depression and unemployment. The subtext of the novel is that it is not possible to transcend class difference; degradation and poverty are not a matter of choice but of social conditioning and economic limitation. Peter thinks that his family would not be bothered if he, 'never escaped at all from the dreary contentment of mass failure'. (NMC, p.72) But his brother Johnnie has a more realistic and accurate assessment of how difficult it is to escape the poverty trap, and the false consciousness of those who think they can better themselves. He warns his brother of the injustice and the impossibility of change in an insightful passage detailing the futility of working class ambitions in the face of a fickle and indifferent capitalist system:

I've seen your kind before - plenty of them, likely fellas, goin' to toil every day, kissin' the boss's backside when he throws them a good word; readin' books and newspapers; ...dead sure, every one of them, that they're going to get on in the world....What happens to them aw? They get married and they have kids. An' the wages doesny grow with the family. An they take to drink a little later instead of sooner. An' the shop shuts or the yard shuts down or there's a bliddy strike. An'

there they go, back to the dung heap, haudin' up the street corners, drawin' their money from the parish, an' keepin' awa oot of the hoose all day, awa frae the auld wife's tongue and the kids that go crawlin' and messin' aroon the floor.'" (NMC, p.113)

'The escape complex' articulated in *Hunger March* is more spatial than hierarchical in its aspiration. Joe dreams of escaping the city of Glasgow altogether, of emigrating from Scotland to a new country: 'America, India, Canada ...Oh to leave behind all the hopelessness, the mess; to start afresh in a new country!' (HM, p.72) However he too eventually succumbs to the realisation that there is no escape from the oppressive, poverty stricken conditions of life in Glasgow, not even by emigrating, as many of those who did escape this way are being forced to return home to Glasgow due to the global economic crisis.

The ability to escape class fate appears to be one of the differences between *Major Operation* and *No Mean City* on the one hand; and *The Shipbuilders*, and *Gael Over Glasgow* on the other. The denouement of *Gael Over Glasgow* has the setting up of an imaginary utopia to which Brian can escape, but one which in its nature and scope is entrepreneurial, while Danny in *The Shipbuilders* also becomes an entrepreneur with his small business. However in *No Mean City* the only opportunities presented for escape from the class trap are prison, 'the madhouse' or death. (NMC, p.32) Even *Major Operation*, with all its Marxist revolutionary rhetoric, has a tone imbued with existential futility and fatalism and the inevitability of death, viewed as 'the eternal contradiction of life: in the Second City as elsewhere', (MO, p.117) and the only character who does escape his pre-determined class fate is literally trampled to death. There are no grounds for optimism here.

### **False Consciousness**

The possibility of overturning the existing order by revolutionary means in the 1930s was curtailed by the threat of coercion from a powerful Imperial army. But there were also the economic and social restrictions reinforcing the status quo, and the ideological conditioning, the powerful hegemony of the capitalist state and the concomitant false consciousness, to use the Marxian phrase. Part of this is the inculcated desire to 'better oneself', to 'escape' the material conditions of poverty, to join the system rather than fight it. If social status is

perceived as bestowing the ability to control one's destiny then it becomes desirable to increase one's status in the social hierarchy.

The concept of ideological hegemony theorizes the way in which relationships of domination and exploitation are embedded, internalized and consensual in society, inducing 'false consciousness'. Georges Lukács was one of the first to develop these constructs derived from a Marxist theory of social class, locating them within the framework of reification and alienation of social relations in a capitalist system.<sup>2</sup> Material and institutional processes in capitalist society are misleading to both bourgeoisie and proletariat albeit in different ways. The concept of false consciousness refers to the inability of the ruling class to understand the true nature of the capitalist system or its crises. Members of an oppressed class suffer from false consciousness when their mental representations of the reified social relations around them systematically conceal or obscure the realities of subordination, exploitation, and domination those relations embody. For example when members of the working class unwittingly adopt the views and values of the oppressor class, or fail to comprehend the arbitrariness, irrationality and inhumanity of the reified system of relations.<sup>3</sup>

There is a subtext in many of the novels of the advanced wisdom of a Marxist understanding of economics and social relations. During the first decades of the twentieth century the labour movement in Scotland offered an educational counterbalance to the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system. The Socialist Sunday School movement and the Clarion Scouts were organisations formed to educate young people in socialist principles.<sup>4</sup> Class awareness amongst the workers was raised through left wing political newspapers such as *Forward*, *Justice*, *Clarion*, *Vanguard* and *The Socialist*; and through the Outdoors Movement. Socialist study groups and night schools offered classes in Marxist economics and history, tutors and students of which would go on to play important roles in Red Clydeside (one of these tutors was John Maclean). There are references to these counter-hegemonic measures for workers and the

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness; Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1920, 1971), p.83-222.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> W. Hamish Fraser. 'The Working Class', in Fraser and Irene Maver (eds), *Glasgow, Volume II: 1830-1912* (Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.338-339.

unemployed mentioned throughout *Major Operation* and *Gael Over Glasgow*. In *Hunger March* working-class Joe Humphry becomes conscientised to the oppression of his class when he reads Marx: 'His outlook might be said to have been circumscribed by the slant of the tenements opposite. It was not until he was adolescent that ...Marxian writers ...Communist agitators, gathering together in his mind, illumined it with a sudden burst of light.' (HM, p.69) In *Mr Standfast* (1919) by John Buchan there is a depiction of Red Clydeside and socialist education as a foreign import inappropriate to Glasgow: 'Thae young lads are all drucken-daft with their wee books about Cawpital and Collectivism ... Them and their socialism! ...all that foreign trash....the world is getting socialism now like the measles.'<sup>5</sup>

Edwin Muir argues that Socialism did the most in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to humanise the social conditions of the very poor although, 'The very poor are almost more hard to convert to Socialism than the very rich ...partly because they are too sunk in hopelessness to open their minds to an idea, and partly because they cherish their exclusiveness as something which has become necessary to them.'<sup>6</sup> There is no class solidarity in *No Mean City*, with characters like Peter Stark who 'was not truly interested in any possible reorganisation of society itself, but only in his own escape from the unsuccessful poverty-stricken masses of poor fools who constituted the proletariat.' (NMC, p.106)

Marx and Engels had not previously been on bourgeois George's reading list in *Major Operation*, so he does not understand dialectical forces at work and is ignorant of the true nature of social relationships, 'All his life he had lived in a fool's paradise, sheltered and screened from reality, taking refuge behind the shams and the illusions of his class'. (MO, p.357) In Jock's opinion, this makes George an 'utterly bewildered bourgeois'. (MO, p.319) Jock's greatest difficulty in his re-education of George is to 'convince him of the class nature of society'. (MO, p.292) However, through re-education false consciousness can sometimes be overcome, as George discovers when Jock introduces him to a Marxist reading programme: 'As he began to grasp clearly the class nature of society.' he realises that 'There were terrific class battles raging at the moment.' (MO,

<sup>5</sup> John Buchan, *Mr Standfast* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1919:1993), p.54.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Mainstream Publishing Company: Edinburgh, 1935:1979), p.97

p.385) When George understands the true nature of class relationships he also becomes conscious of the betrayal of the labour movement by the Labour Party and the schisms within the Left, which contains its own form of false consciousness and inner contradictions. Scouring the scales of bourgeois idealism from George's eyes is tough work for Jock, who lectures his new pupil in class solidarity: 'Once you're unemployed ... you'll find yourself an outcast and a pariah unless you get into the ranks of the organized unemployed and fight there, shoulder to shoulder, with your unemployed comrades.' (MO, p.338)

The false consciousness of loyalty to capitalist employers, whose main concern is their profit margins, is debunked in *Hunger March*. Boss Arthur Joyce has not told his employees of the imminent closure of his business, but some of them guess it. Celia Ker his secretary is incredulous when first hearing the rumours that 'Joyce's would be the next big firm, if things didn't look up, to find themselves in Queer Street'. (HM, p.112) Now she views her employer with a new awareness: 'had he considered what it would mean to all those people who had trusted him, all those who had worked under him, who had flung their hearts, their souls, their interests into Joyce's.' (HM, p.113)

There is a lack of awareness of the true exploitative nature of class relationships in *The Shipbuilders*. Danny's devotion to his boss Leslie is expressed in his repeated refrain with regard to Leslie throughout the novel as; 'A toff and a gentleman'. Danny's 'admiration of Leslie Pagan was flawless... his decent working man's sense of respect for a good and efficient master' who he adores and trusts 'with a faith almost religious'. (SH, p.17) However it is hard to avoid a sense that there is some form of false consciousness at work in Danny's attitude. At a liminal moment in British society when the structure of class devotion was becoming obsolete, Danny's faith in his master is undiminished: 'Whatever happened, the boss would see him right and give him work to do and decent pay for that work'. (SH, p.17) But his master ultimately betrays Danny's misplaced trust in order to pursue his own class interests. There is no sense of a political consciousness of the workers in *The Shipbuilders*, and little sense of the tremendous political forces and class struggles that were taking place in Clydeside during the interwar era. There is only a brief mention when Danny is walking the streets: 'In a side street near Byres Road a noisy speaker on behalf of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement was hoarsely proclaiming

communism to a quiet, if occasionally facetious, knot of people'. (SH, p.26) In its unquestioning acceptance of unequal class and power relationships, and its sense of the powerlessness of the individual to act as a subjective agent against the economic forces of capitalism, *The Shipbuilders* could be judged as an embodiment of false consciousness and a reinforcement of the status quo, a sense of the irrelevance of individual struggles against larger class interests.

In the West of Scotland a particular form of false consciousness exists in the sectarian divisions inherent in the society. These were more pronounced in the interwar years than they are at the start of the twenty first century. In times of economic hardship there is an increasing awareness of such divisions within a society and it is surprising that the novels (with the exception of *Major Operation*) do not make more references to this. Possibly the best textual example of the schism is in *The Shipbuilders*, at a match between Rangers and Celtic Glasgow's two leading football teams known locally as 'The Old Firm', representing 'the dark significance of sectarian and rival passions. Blue for the Protestants of Scotland and Ulster, green for the Roman Catholics of the Free State...All the social problems of a hybrid city were to be sublimated in the imminent clash of mercenaries'. (SH, pp.66-67) Notwithstanding the prevailing romanticism and mythology that surrounds the beautiful game, the novel articulates an understanding that the warrior tradition in Scotland obfuscates the fact that football, like war, is a capitalist commercial enterprise based on the profit incentive.

Capitalism could not continue without the consent of the workers. Working-class solidarity would be a threat to the owners of the means of production, and the British ruling class perfected the old Roman strategy of divide and rule both in its colonial empire and in its home industries. In *No Mean City* the Gorbals' characters judge their neighbours in terms of how they dress and speak and the street in which they live. These divisions within the working class are a form of false consciousness and undermine any hope at working-class solidarity. The complex encoded nuances of working class social hierarchies are delineated in the novel: 'society in the tenements is graded far more narrowly than in the outside world. One street may be definitely "better class" than another and not such good class as a third. Families that have two rooms look down upon those that live in a "single end"'. (NMC, p.104)

Divisions within the working class are manifest in *Gael Over Glasgow*. When Brian finds work as a fitter in the Singer sewing machine factory in Clydebanks, it is dominated by a work ethic in which the machine operators are set against the fitters or engineers. He understands ‘It was only natural grousing against their unnatural existence.’ (GG, p.245) Racism is another form of false consciousness. Brian’s workmate labels the machinists as ‘white coolies’ in a reference to British Colonialism. (GG, p.246) He exhorts Brian to “Remember the old colour bar. No proud fitter should associate with these low coolies. Remember the white man’s burden. Don’t forget you’re a pukka sahib”. (GG, p.257) As in the other interwar realist texts, class solidarity does not imply inter-race solidarity.

In the labour hierarchy of interwar Glasgow, first generation Irish and Highlanders were relegated the lower status jobs and ‘anti-Gael phobia’ is referred to throughout *Major Operation*. A form of false consciousness is when the marginalised internalise their oppression, evident in how the shipyard foreman with his own Highland roots two generations back: ‘would rather have a gang of Chinese or coolies than Highlandmen’. (MO, p.39) Additionally, as previously alluded to, there is also much religious prejudice against ‘the papas’ from Irish or Highland roots. This reflects a reality in the West of Scotland where the Protestant population held a form of historical elitism in the job hierarchy and privileged access to employment and promotion. The depiction of a worker movement divided along sectarian lines in Glasgow is not Marx’s vision of international working-class solidarity as embodied in the philosophy of internationalism and ‘workers of the world unite’. Barke is offering the reader a reminder of ‘How the workers were beaten in one country and successful in another was of the greatest importance.’ (MO, p,385)

The dominant view of Highlanders in interwar Glasgow seems to have been one of ‘Gaelic decadence’. *Gael Over Glasgow* is an attempt to reclaim the importance of the Highland roots of Clydeside, an aspect of the interwar revival of nationalist sentiment.<sup>7</sup> However the novel is in turn in danger of becoming part of what Barke labels in *Major Operation* as ‘The Tartan Ragstore of Romance’. (MO, p.81) The narrative voice of Barke’s own realism contains

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Riach, Pers.comm. University of Glasgow, February 2009.

contradictory messages towards the Gaelic past. On the one hand nostalgia and regret at the passing of a culture, and on the other contempt for contemporary attempts at cultural revival: ‘The Gael could not survive into a world of expanding capitalist production...To what purpose had the Gael lived and fought and died?...To hand down to posterity a corpus of classical instrumental music to be prostituted at Highland Gatherings?’ (MO, p.96)

Alcohol as an escape from daily life along with its attendant social problems is an underlying theme throughout the realistic novels. Together with gambling and other forms of escapism from reality, alcohol is in itself a form of false consciousness, a substitutive satisfaction for authentic existence. It is omnipresent in the novels and consumed in a quasi-medicinal manner as an antidote to the more unpleasant realities of life in Glasgow. In *Major Operation* the anonymous voice of a Glasgow ‘jakey’ (homeless alcoholic person) articulates the problem: ‘Been a Jake drinker in my day. Meth, lavender water, green paint. Pain in the guts now. Think of the money spent on drink that might bring back a fortune’. (MO, pp.121-122) And later in the novel, ‘Get drunk for one night and drown the misery.... Six sleepless nights of misery and one night blotto! Takes effect quicker on an empty stomach’. (MO, p.380) The ‘Escape Complex’ in *No Mean City* echoes like a refrain throughout the novel. It refers to the desire of the slum dwellers to avoid and block out the grim reality of their existence and is achieved mostly through alcohol. (This avoidance ‘Escape Complex’ is different from the aspirational desire of characters in the novel to escape their class position, discussed earlier in this chapter.) A descriptive passage in the novel reflects a sense of sociological prescription on the part of the authorial voice:

Battles and sex are the only free diversions in slum life. Couple them with drink, which costs money, and you have the three principal outlets for that escape complex which is for ever working in the tenement dweller’s subconscious mind. Johnnie Stark would not have realised that the ‘hoose’ he lived in drove him to the streets or that poverty and sheer monotony drove him in their turn into the pubs and the dance halls or into affairs. (NMC, p.44)

In *Major Operation* the device of the hospital permits Barke, not only to present the reader with a cross-section of Glasgow society, but also to demonstrate the effects of endemic alcohol abuse amongst the Glaswegian working class. Many

of the characters in the ward with George and Jock are suffering the after effects of a lifetime of sustained drinking: stomach ulcers and liver damage. Characters are obsessed by the thought of being released from the hospital in order to visit the pub as soon as possible, even though they know drink will result in their demise. An illustration of this is a conversation George has with one of his fellow ward mates, who explains: 'You've got to understand how these fellows were brought up and how they live. If there were no pubs there would be a revolution in a month. That's why the government won't allow prohibition...Booze is the safety valve of the British nation'. (MO, p.225) The novel contains a deep understanding of the dominant role of alcohol in proletarian Glaswegian life and its role as a deterrent to revolution. The narrative lapses into what appears to be an Irish accent to articulate this: 'There'll never be any Red Clyde so long as there's Red Biddy. Ah, the bhoys would rather have a night with Red Biddy than a night with Burns.' (MO, p.121) Red Biddy was a popular cheap alcoholic drink in Glasgow concocted from mixing red wine and methanol. Alcohol is a great opiate of the masses, and the social problems related to alcohol are as prevalent in Glasgow of the twenty-first century as they were during the interwar period.

## Conclusion

The alienation and anomie of the working class in interwar Glasgow is well documented in the novels. This state is common when a society has undergone economic changes, when there is discrepancy between the ideology and commonly professed values of a society and what is actually achievable in everyday life. The vices are mixed but drink is always a factor. The unemployed spend the rent money in the pub and in gambling on dogs and horses. The volatile mix of alcohol, sectarian and workplace divisions, class divides, and the illusionary allure of upward mobility, create a mass of false consciousness. Given this it is surprising that the sobriquet 'Red Clydeside' became popular rather than that of 'failed revolution'. False consciousness is a deterrent to revolution. The oppressed underclass fails to act because their rebel energy is consumed by consumerism, and subverted by a desire for upward social mobility which can rarely succeed. It also could be argued that the novels subvert change by presenting most of their protagonists as doomed to failure. The one exception in *Gael Over Glasgow*, has an ending so fantastic as to not disgrace a fairy tale.

## Chapter 6 Liminal City

### Literary and Historical Evaluation

#### Introduction

The five realist novels map out the crisis of capitalism in interwar Glasgow, bearing testament to a liminal moment in history. Their vigour and value is in their validity both as historical and literary documents. Certain patterns permeate the texts, serving to support such an assertion and contributing towards the myth of revolutionary Glasgow. All the writers filter the politics of the time through varying degrees of class-consciousness, in a style that is generally journalistic. All the novels categorise modes of speaking and writing about the industrial reality of Glasgow during the interwar years. Although not all the novels can be judged as successful products of social realism, the defining features of which are political and social commitment combined with an alternative vision of the future, all do realistically record an historical era in ways which correspond to the non-fictional representations of the time. Therefore they can be judged as satisfactory realism, and useful historical documents in and of themselves. It is anomalous that, given the emphasis in Glasgow on the legend of Red Clydeside, the heroes of the time, and the numinous quality this era has assumed in the consciousness of the city, that the very novels which document this so realistically should have drifted into obscurity. Why did the former Second City of Empire, and the novels that represent it so realistically during the interwar era, enter into a state of permanent liminality?

#### Renaissance Glasgow - Literary Evaluation

There is a paucity of surviving literary criticism from the interwar era pertaining to the realistic Glasgow novels. Throughout the period literary critics continued to lament the lack of an epic novel to represent the life of Scotland. This was a failure to take cognizance of the realist novels already published, three of which fulfilled the epic role: *Major Operation*, *The Shipbuilders*, and *Gael Over*

*Glasgow*; as had the component parts of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* published in 1934.<sup>1</sup>

In a survey of the historical development of the novel in Scotland (1978), encompassing fifty novelists and over two hundred Scottish novels, Francis Russell Hart notes, 'The Scottish novel suffers from a passive conspiracy of neglect',<sup>2</sup> and then proceeds to neglect the existence of most of the Glasgow interwar realist novels. This may of course have been because most of them were already out of print at his time of writing. Hart himself admits that his survey of the Scottish novel is, 'lamentably incomplete', suggesting the reason for this being the 'unavailability of many of the novels'.<sup>3</sup> As an expression of the Scottish epic his survey discusses only one of the interwar realist novels, *The Shipbuilders*, together with Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*.<sup>4</sup> Hart overlooks *Major Operation* and *Gael Over Glasgow*, yet both of these novels comply with his definition of the epic:

The epic novel of modern Scotland was to project a new ideology of national survival and at the same time demythologise a past that had become a force of romantic betrayal. Each demanded a protagonist with strong roots in a national past who could still present an admirable, viable identity in the face of a hostile, depersonalised modern world.<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation has argued that prevailing socio-economic conditions produced a particular form of literary representation of Glasgow during the interwar years. A new genre of urban social realist novels in Scottish literature came into being during this period. The era also gave rise to the Condition of Scotland discourse. Both of these genres could have been considered to be a manifestation of the Scottish Cultural Renaissance taking place at the time. Oddly enough however, the novelists of interwar Scotland encountered hostile skepticism from the Scots Renaissance establishment. Hart reveals that: 'MacDiarmid often expressed the view that the novel is an inherently inferior form... Edwin Muir saw the lack of vitality in the novel as an index of disbelief in

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Hutchinson & Co: London, 1946, repr.1971).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel from Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.viii-x.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.viii-x.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.213.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.215.

Scottish society. In 1935, Linklater endorsed this unhappy diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> Muir argued in relation to the 1930's Glasgow novelists that: 'When people no longer believe very strongly in a society they cannot believe very strongly in representations of it either'. Eric Linklater judged *The Shipbuilders* a failure for the same reason as Muir, because they believed that George Blake, although talented at 'painting epic panorama', sentimentalised his main characters beyond plausibility: 'He is not able to believe very strongly in the specific importance of Clyde shipbuilders, their wives, and their conservative employees, and therefore he has not given his representation of them sufficient force'.<sup>7</sup> Blake himself in a mea culpa moment of later years admitted to an 'insufficient knowledge of working-class life', and to the adoption of 'a middle-class attitude to the theme of industrial conflict and despair'.<sup>8</sup> However it is also plausible to argue the converse: that the demise of the Clyde Shipbuilding era is represented with great passion and conviction in *The Shipbuilders*, and it is these strong convictions that lead Blake and the other realistic interwar novelists into the passages of nostalgia and sentimentality, flawing their attempts at objective realism.

Both sentiment and nostalgia serve to simplify the features of the object described, whether it be a worker or 'The Workers', and are more appropriate to features of idealism than realism. Therefore evidence of this must be regarded as a fault line within realist texts. Sentiment creates a one-dimensional effect; nostalgia oversimplifies the relationship with current preoccupations, it has a selective memory retaining those features of the past corresponding to a present ideal that is no longer attainable. A progressive attempt towards realism conflicts with a more backward looking impulse towards romantic idealism in all the interwar Glasgow novels - the very kailyard flaw they were projected to reject. Many of the inconsistencies in their realism spring from this slide towards idealism, and a glossing over the inherent contradictions of real life. Jack Mitchell argues that this was a problem with many attempts at social realism of the time. After hailing *Major Operation* as the only one of the five

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel from Smollett to Spark*, p.207.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Linklater, *The Novel in Scotland*, *Fortnightly Review* (Nov 1935), p. 621-624.

<sup>8</sup> George Blake BBC Interview 1950 quoted in Hart, *The Scottish Novel from Smollett to Spark*, p213.

novels considered here that fits the rubric of the ‘genuine working class novel in Scotland’,<sup>9</sup> Mitchell criticizes Barke’s characters as lacking any real conflict or contradiction, and as a result his novel ‘ultimately fails at the aesthetic level to provide an answer to no-mean-cityism’.<sup>10</sup> As a reason for this he posits the following important argument which is worth quoting in its entirety as it is pertinent to the analysis of all the realist novels and their writers presented here:

Disgusted with the corruption and ineptness of the ruling class and intoxicated with the first superficial draught of historical materialism, many left intellectuals romanticised the workers and then embraced their own romantic creation. Their attitude had more of moral idealism than historical materialism. The proletariat is seen not so much as a historicised developing class but rather as an absolute and therefore dehistoricised moral category whose superiority over the bourgeoisie lies in its moral excellence and lack of that inner conflict which ham-strings the middle class and its intellectuals. In fact it was a kind of escape into the state of “conflictlessness”, a tempting wish-dream for intellectuals.<sup>11</sup>

The juxtapositioning of idealism with realism in the novels cannot merely be dismissed as an expression of the oft discussed contradictory impulses in Scottish literature. These supposedly opposing literary tendencies, and a perceived contrariness in the Scottish character, were first identified in print by literary critic G. Gregory Smith in 1919 as: ‘The Caledonian Antisyzygy ...almost a zigzag of contradictions ... an antithesis ... a combination of opposites .... a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn’.<sup>12</sup> Smith delineated what he considered to be two basic trends in Scottish literature: the impulse towards realism, facts and logic, evident in a persistent, ‘zest for handling a multitude of details rather than for seeking broad effects by suggestion’; juxtaposed with an impulse towards fantasy, sentiment, superstition and romance, which he defines as the, ‘polar twins of the Scottish Muse’.<sup>13</sup> John Buchan extrapolated this by proposing, ‘two master elements in the Scottish character, hard-headedness on the one hand and romance on the other: common sense and sentiment:

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Mitchell, ‘The struggle for the working class novel in Scotland’, *Scottish Marxist* Part III No 8 January 1975, p.42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.44.

<sup>12</sup> G.Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*. (Macmillan & Co: London, 1919), p.3-5,

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* pp.19-20.

practicality and poetry: business and idealism’, and ‘the peculiarity of the Scottish race is that it has both in a high degree’.<sup>14</sup> The concept of Antisyzygy was taken up by writers and critics, most famously by Hugh MacDiarmid, but also by Edwin Muir who argued it was a negative trend.<sup>15</sup> However the contention can be made that this contradiction is not necessarily exclusively Caledonian or Scottish, but a component characteristic of humanity, torn between the tug of sentiment and reason, a trait that is evident in much of so-called realism.

Possibly the most interesting contribution of the proletarian novels lies in their observation of Glasgow in the 1920s and 1930s; their realistic representation of the everyday life of the city at a time of great social change and upheaval; and their portrayal of the effects on the Glasgow population of the Great Depression. Thus in this aspect the five novels are expressions of social realism, which differs from the self-absorption of Modernism with its placing of self at the centre of the work, in that they emphasise the concerns of the wider society and contain objective descriptions of social and economic realities. Throughout this dissertation non-fictional representations of the city that correspond with the depiction of events and situations in the novels have been sourced for comparison and verification of the realism.

Three of the novelists were journalists, and the style of all the novels could be described as journalistic, written as social commentary and exposé with an intention to convince their audience. For example, Edwin Morgan’s suggestion that Blake is ‘likely to endure rather as an acute social commentator and historian than as a novelist’,<sup>16</sup> could be applied to all the interwar realist novelists discussed here. Lewis Grassie Gibbon suggests that Barke is at his best when writing about Glasgow, ‘dealing with life in that deplorable city, the vomit of a cataleptic commercialism’. In an ironic review of an earlier novel of Barke’s, a review which can in part be applied to the later novel *Major*

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<sup>14</sup> John Buchan, *Some Scottish Characteristics*, *The Scottish Tongue*, ed. by W.A. Craigie, John Buchan, Peter Giles and J.M. Bulloch (Cassell & Company: London, 1924), p.58.

<sup>15</sup> Muir argued that the existence of the Scots language is proof that Scottish consciousness is divided as the Scots feel in the Scottish tongue, and think in standard English, which results in a separation between emotion (poetry) and intellect (prose). Edwin Muir, *Language, Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (Routledge: London, 1936), pp.17-22.

<sup>16</sup> Edwin Morgan, ‘Who will publish Scottish poetry’, *New Saltire*, No 2, Nov 1961, pp. 51-56.

*Operation*, Gibbon describes Barke's writing style in terms of its strengths: 'all the Scots virtues and most of the faults; he is apt, acute and passionate', and weaknesses: 'And he preaches and prosed and halts through long stretches to tell the bored reader, over and over again, just how his hero felt and considered and was spiritually uplifted and spiritually tormented.'<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately an overly conscientious attention to detail can occasionally become tedious in the realistic Glasgow novels.

Journalistic attention to detail is a signifier of successful realism, although an aspect that can slither too easily into naturalism. This is a characteristic which Georges Lukács argues distinguishes much of modernist literature, while realism uses devices such as the historically typical character and action which are both representative and prophetic.<sup>18</sup> The interwar realist novels are not necessarily prophetic of future possibilities, but they are representative of typical Glaswegian characters and the life of the city during a particular moment in history. Blake's realism is commended by Linklater: 'he can find abundant riches in crowded places or in a small domestic atmosphere'.<sup>19</sup> Gifford *et al* aver that an expression of the legacy of the 'Democratic Intellect' is evident in 'all the unpretentious and unglamorous protagonists whose role in countless Scottish novels is to be the ordinary member of community',<sup>20</sup> a reference to the historical legacy of the Reformation and the Scottish Enlightenment and the influence on Scots writers. Hugh MacDiarmid (as himself C.M. Grieve) refers to this tradition when describing Barke:

He was one of the all too few Scottish writers of his generation who made the same choice that all the great line of Scottish radical writers have made, ...who sided with the working class and lived and wrote for the Social Commonwealth... animated by the cause of Social Justice.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Scots Novels of the Half Year, *Free Man* 2:21, 24 June 1933, p.7.

<sup>18</sup> Georges Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. (Merlin Press: London. 1920)

<sup>19</sup> Linklater, 'The Novel in Scotland', pp.621-624.

<sup>20</sup> Douglas Gifford and others, eds. *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh 2002), p.234.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Murray Grieve's speech at New Kilpatrick Cemetery, Bearsden at the committal service of James Barke, Author, 24 March 1958 – taken from the copy in Box 10 of the Barke Papers in the Mitchell Library Glasgow.

Lukács' discussion of social realism posits that literature will be the truest mirror of reality if it fully reflects the contradictions of social development, and demonstrates insights into the structure of society and the future direction of its evolution.<sup>22</sup> If realism needs to be an attempt to describe life without idealism or romantic subjectivity, then there are certain aspects of all the novels that would fall short of this goal as discussed earlier. It can be argued that there is a contradiction inherent in social realism: progressive ideas are being presented in what is essentially a conservative genre.<sup>23</sup> On the social-historical level, the subject matter of the interwar proletarian novels is the discussion of radical disruption; on the literary level, the medium of realism is the stable text, it is descriptive, it does not challenge. So in the novels there is a stable form describing an unstable situation: a possible answer to the question of why the novels have not survived? A key characteristic of modernism was a disruption of this stability through a disintegrated text where the reader's vantage point was no longer fixed but challenged by the text itself. For example *Scottish Scene* by Gibbon and MacDiarmid is a deliberately disruptive contradictory mix of genres.<sup>24</sup>

It is possible to posit that the interwar realist novels are progressive neither in style or content. In this latter respect they are not a total departure from the kailyard - as evidenced by their nostalgia and sentimentality, and they do not offer a strong political vision. Perhaps in both aspects they reflect the lack of sufficient movement to enable revolution against the dominant forces of the status quo. The novels are critical of the existing order of things, and they may have a subtextual belief in the possibility of a different society, but they don't offer an alternative vision to what actually exists. The Glasgow realist novels are therefore diagnostic rather than remedial, delineating the problem rather than offering solutions to it, and thus do not offer up any models for the salvation of society, other than a Rousseau type back-to-the-land utopia in *Gael Over Glasgow*, and an undefined possibility of revolutionary transformation in *Major Operation*.

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<sup>22</sup> Georges Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. (Merlin Press: London. 1920)

<sup>23</sup> Alan Riach, Pers. comm. University of Glasgow, May 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene or The Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn* (Cedric Chivers: Bath, 1934, repr.1974).

Subsequent analysis of a realist text may lead to readings against the grain as any work is 're-authored' by the socio-economic, geographic, political and historical stance of the reader. As with most textual representations, the realistic Glasgow novels contain contradictions, gaps, silences and slippages. The texts tend to serve as a mouthpiece for the philosophy of their writers and in doing so introduce the ethos of an era, some of which can be difficult for the reader to access in the twenty-first century. This includes a narrative posture of skeptical humour which reveals particular anachronistic prejudices. Gifford *et al* claim that 'The Scottish novel was by the mid-1930s increasingly extending its perspective of ironic social realism to the city.'<sup>25</sup> However the novels examined here hold inconsistencies within their ironic stance and contradictions within their project. This may be a result of an inherent ambivalence in the writers' subject position. The novels critique the capitalist system while identifying with middle-class values. They are all silent around disability. They are fundamentally flawed by the prejudices of the time, for example misogyny, and racism against 'dagos', 'yids', and 'coolies'. Different ethnic groups and women are written into the texts as some form of inferior, 'othered' class; a stance which does not wear well historically. And of course there is the inevitable sectarianism endemic to Glasgow. They are all silent on the issue of homosexuality, although *Gael Over Glasgow* contains lyrical passages of sublimated homo-erotic longing, the emotional male-bonding between the opposing class protagonists in *The Shipbuilders* and *Major Operation* are perhaps more of the same, and there is an element of this in the gang culture of Johnnie and his boys in *No Mean City*.

Women historically played a significant role in the political struggles of interwar Glasgow, but the images of Red Clydeside are mostly male, and the eulogized aspects of Glasgow's industrial past revolve around the male-dominated industries of shipbuilding and heavy engineering. This imbalance of gender representation is reflected in the novels. Four out of the five social realist novels discussed here are written by men, although this could too glibly be regarded as a reason why their depiction of female characters is uniformly one-dimensional. Neil McMillan argues this is a phenomenon that continues today

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<sup>25</sup> Douglas Gifford, *Scottish Literature*, p.716.

within a tradition of male Glasgow fiction that, 'persistently identifies womanliness with negative bourgeois aspirations',<sup>26</sup> a trend evident in the interwar novels where the little visible presence accorded to women allocates them just such conservative, middle-class pretensions.<sup>27</sup> The elitist attitudes of the women in the novels may be ciphers for a reactionary element of Glasgow's middle classes at the time. A possible speculation is: the characters in the novels were drawn from life, and if this mind-set was prevalent in Glasgow it would have acted as a brake on any movement towards revolution.

All the novels contain a sub-text of the irrelevance of individual struggles against larger class interests, in some cases contradicting their obvious intention to the contrary. Despite their circumstances, many of the characters in the novels are aspirational, not just in terms of political will, but perversely enough in their desire to better their standing within the class system - to move from the working class to the middle class, thus displaying an ambition not to destroy the upper classes but to become them. In *The Shipbuilders* and *No Mean City* there is a lack of awareness of the true nature of class-relationships, an acceptance of unequal power relationships, and a sense of the powerlessness of the individual to act as a subjective agent against the determinist forces of the capitalist state. These two novels could thus be judged as an embodiment of false consciousness and a reinforcement of the status quo, even if this was not the project of their writers. The novels all do in fact appear to have been written from a determinist position which begs the question of the ability of the individual to act freely. All the characters are bound up in a dance over which they have no control. The right to protest in the novels is more of a predicament than an empowerment. If this sense of helplessness were external to the novels then perhaps it could go some way to explaining why revolutionary change in Glasgow remained incomplete. It could be that the writers of the realist novels, being as they were, white, liberal, middle-class (mostly), Scottish Intelligentsia, as such were out of touch with the true temper of the city.

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<sup>26</sup> Neil McMillan, 'Wilting or the "Poor Wee Boy Syndrome", Kelman and Masculinity', in *Edinburgh Review* No.108, p.49.

<sup>27</sup> A notable exception to this is Jock MacKelvie's wife in *Major Operation*.

Furthermore the determinism of the interwar novels may reflect an inherent conservatism, not allowing much space for the agency of the individual, freedom of choice or escape from oppressive social conditions. They document lives enslaved by poverty, low wages, drink and violence, and so also contain an ethos of existential tragedy inherent in their project. The novels, to a greater or lesser degree, chart their protagonists' journey towards a point of political realisation, even if that realisation is one of impotence. This could indicate an acceptance of the status quo and thus resignation, and so be another deterrent to revolution. The characters in the novels in most instances seem to be destined to failure. There is a grim inevitability in Johnnie's progression towards his demise in *No Mean City*, while only a miracle could save Pagan's shipyard in *The Shipbuilders*. In fact it is only a miracle that enables *Gael Over Glasgow* to end on a positive note, though it is doubtful that few folk in 1930s Glasgow had a fairy-uncle ready to rescue them. The title of *Hunger March* is misleading as it does not posit the Unemployed Workers Movement at the centre of the narrative, or revolution as a real possibility. *Major Operation* is the most deserving of the sobriquet social realism, evident in the narrative conclusion suggesting the possibility of impending revolution. In the final lines of the novel, in his funeral oration for George in *Major Operation*, Jock the worker leader quotes from the *Communist Manifesto* regarding the best representatives of the bourgeois class coming over to the proletariat - so providing a vaguely hopeful possibility for the future.

Who was the intended audience for the realist novels? Were they written for the bourgeoisie as social documentation, or is their creation an act of indignation? Are they intended as historical witnesses and testaments to the reconstruction of an era? Jack Mitchell argues that Barke is writing for intellectuals because he places the ideological battle at the centre of the narrative in *Major Operation*, with the hospital ward set up as 'clinical debating chamber ... Such an emphasis was geared to interest and win over the potential intellectual ally'.<sup>28</sup> The uneven tone of *No Mean City* is interspersed with a patronising narrative voice indicating it is addressing a middle class audience. Contemporary Glaswegians must have read, and identified with, the realistic novels during the interwar

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, 'The struggle for the working class novel in Scotland'. p.43.

years. If a reader identifies with images presented in a narrative, to what extent did the readers of these novels recognise themselves reflected in the characters? As discussed earlier, characters in the proletarian novels tend to be one-dimensional, each the mere embodiment of an idea, demonstrating a weakening of realism, a slide into idealism, and a limitation of the possibilities of the characters. Characters in a novel only become believable when portrayed with complexity and difference, light and dark, competence and error, ability and fallibility, contradiction and paradox. However this is not always evident in the Glasgow realist novels.

Dystopian views of the industrialised city were not new, but after the idealised depictions of the city that went before with the Scottish urban kailyard, the realistic interwar novels reflected the truth of Glasgow's dark side for the first time. The novels can be read as a realistic manifestation of the zeitgeist of the Great Depression. In order to realistically represent the era, the proletarian novels of interwar Clydeside had to be pessimistic, gritty, and dark. It can be averred that these novels set up the conceit of Scotland as being, 'Prolier than thou', an imagery for future representations of the city, illustrating failure in the workplace and the world, the breadlines and the violence and the dole. However they also provided the basis for the proletarian novels of Glasgow that came later in the twentieth century.

Perhaps the crucial literary proposal to be made about the Glasgow interwar novels is that, as a formal procedure, realism may not be adequate. More was needed - a leap of imaginative faith; one taken later in what became known as 'The Monumental Glasgow Novels': Archie Hind in *Dear Green Place*, Alasdair Gray in *Lanark*, William McIlvanney in *Laidlaw*, James Kelman in *How Late it was How Late*.<sup>29</sup> It can be argued that the significance of the interwar novels is that they provided a creative springboard for these later novels with Glasgow as their theme and setting. This is also suggested by Douglas Gifford *et al* in a discussion of how *The Shipbuilders* ran counter to the dominant trend of the time which celebrated Clyde mythology: 'George Blake favours an elegiac strain

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<sup>29</sup> Alan Riach, Pers. comm. University of Glasgow, March 2009.

which prefigures Clyde mythology as doomed ...in a manner prophetic of a major strand of modern Scottish fiction, which continues to the present.'<sup>30</sup>

The work of the interwar novelists accurately reflects the reality and expresses the alienation of the time. What is to be done is to recognise the significance of the novels as historical documentations of the era, and a literary basis for a new genre in the narrative of Glasgow. What is required is a re-evaluation of the realistic novels of interwar Glasgow, to provide a recovered understanding of the past from whence the present of the city evolved.

### **Revolutionary Glasgow - Historical Evaluation**

The economic context in which the creation of the realistic novels of Clydeside took place was the crisis in world capitalism during the interwar period, then particularly devastating to Scotland and the heavily-industrialised area of Glasgow. Because the emphasis in these novels is on the effects of the economic crisis on the working class of Glasgow, the dissertation has concentrated on the political and revolutionary rather than the cultural and renaissance aspect of the era.

The culture of Glasgow was created by its workers in the heavy manufacturing and shipbuilding industries that were so intrinsic to the development and identity of the city. It was nurtured in the working-class neighbourhoods surrounding the industrial areas; in the streets, the closes and the tenements of the city. Glaswegian culture flourished because of, and despite, some of the harshest working and social conditions in the world, it grew out of unemployment, poverty, exploitation, bad housing, overcrowding, alcoholism, social squalor, and all the human alienation and anomie of the industrial revolution. This awareness permeates with great poignancy the realistic Glasgow novels published during the 1930s. Thus these novels serve as a documentation of socio-cultural conditions of the period, conditions which continue in many

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<sup>30</sup> Douglas Gifford and others, eds. *Scottish Literature*, p.717.

parts of the city seven decades later, despite the economic circumstances giving rise to them having long since disappeared.

The influence of Scottish Presbyterianism has had both positive and negative effects on the culture of Glasgow. The democratic, egalitarian traditions of the Kirk influenced Glasgow's history of trade unionism and socialism. Many of the Glasgow socialist leaders of the interwar labour movement were atheist, but had religious roots that emerged in the strong ethical and moral idealism of the movement. They fervently believed in the ideal of improving the living and working conditions of their people. John Grierson, the Scots documentary-maker of the 1930s, argued that, 'at the heart of our national philosophy', is an 'obligation to work and aspire for the common good'.<sup>31</sup> However some are more equal than others. The rhetoric of equality in Scotland was and is undermined by the reality of a deeply embedded social hierarchy at all levels, and this in turn was subject to sectarian divisions. The influx of Catholic Irish into Glasgow during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in a culture of job protectionism and a hierarchical organisation of the workforce with Protestants as the labour elite in some of the more traditional industries. These old sectarian divisions are still to be found in the city, an unusual anachronism in a sophisticated society.

Scotland, and most particularly Glasgow, provided many of the ideas and inventions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that facilitated the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism. However, during the twentieth-century Glasgow became known as a city with a dependency culture.<sup>32</sup> The proletarian novels of the interwar era all have as their unifying theme the enervating effect of unemployment on the skills and morale of the working class. The loss of the highly skilled craftsmen and artisans of Clydeside can never be regained. It is possible to argue along with George Malcolm Thomson, that emigration was what deprived Scotland of its potential leaders and

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<sup>31</sup> John Grierson, *The Salt of the Earth, John Grierson's Scotland*, ed. by Forsyth Hardy (The Ramsay Head Press: Edinburgh, 1979), p.32.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Herman attributes the undermining of entrepreneurial spirit in Scotland to the co-option and corruption of the Scots ruling classes by English values, and an obsession with bourgeois respectability which stifled innovation and creativity. Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots Invention of the Modern World*. (Fourth Estate: London, 2002), pp.349-353.

entrepreneurs: ‘the drain of the educated, intelligent, and energetic middle-class youth who would normally become the leaders of the commercial, political and intellectual life of the country.’<sup>33</sup> This ‘brain-drain’ provided much energy to the Scottish Diaspora and enhanced the reputation of the Scots for being an entrepreneurial nation

The efforts during the 1930s to revive and regenerate the interwar economy culminated in the Glasgow Empire Exhibition of 1938, just before the Second World War. This was a marketing device for Scottish enterprise, a display and celebration of a British Empire that would only last another four years, destined to destruction by a Nazi Empire designed to last 1000 years. The reported reaction of Glaswegians who attended the Exhibition was their overwhelming impression of contrast: between the possibilities of the brave new modernist world portrayed by the exhibition and the grimy Glasgow of the interwar era and; the wonder of the working-class at the profligacy of the water wastage of the numerous exhibition fountains compared with the ‘one tap in the kitchen’ home in which the majority lived; and the fantasy contrast of the whitewashed exhibition buildings as opposed to the blackened tenement buildings of Glasgow in the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> With hindsight it is possible to acknowledge that the 1938 Exhibition was made possible only owing to the skilled manpower available from the shipbuilding industry in Glasgow at the time. The construction of the pre-fabricated Exhibition buildings was a transferable skill from the fitment workshops of the shipyards. It is lamentable that this expertise was historically lost, along with the possibility of its relocation to other industries when the shipyards closed.

Evidence of class demarcations and the ongoing class struggle can be witnessed in all the novels, and the political and industrial action specific to the interwar era is represented in *Gael Over Glasgow*, *Major Operation* and *Hunger March*. This class struggle may not have led to revolution, but it could be regarded as

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<sup>33</sup> George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* (Kegan Paul: London 1927), pp. 47-51.

<sup>34</sup> In September 2008 the Glasgow Film Theatre (GFT) screened the Glasgow Digital Studio’s recreation of the 1938 Exhibition along with documentary and home movie footage from the time, and much interesting feedback from the audience, some of whom could recall the event.

influential in Glasgow's demise as an industrial powerhouse. The workers were preoccupied fighting a local war with their immediate bosses to the extent that they did not realize the danger from foreign competitors in the changing global economy. The owners of the means of production too seemed more concerned with the potential danger posed by a rebellious workforce rather than that of dwindling orders and the need to transform technology (the anomaly here is the representation of the benevolent shipyard owner in *The Shipbuilders*).

It is evident from the novels that the police and press in a bourgeois society exist to uphold the interests of the property-owning classes. The myth of Red Clydeside seems to stem more from the echoes of these struggles and the fear and paranoia of the ruling elite in a volatile situation, than from any real threat of imminent insurrection at the time. Bloody Friday 1919 in George Square did happen, but evidence indicates it was caused by a massive over-reaction on the part of the media and the authorities, precipitated by the paranoia induced after the success of the Russian Revolution and Europe-wide industrial unrest. This is similar to the way in which the press and police ratcheted up the perceived threat of gang warfare in Glasgow and throughout Britain during the interwar era. The advent of the Great Depression could only add to this unstable *mélange*. Yet the myth of Red Clydeside continues. As John Foster argues: 'The vigour with which this episode has been contested and redefined, the sheer refusal of its ghost to disappear, bears witness to its continuing importance for the ways Scots define themselves today'.<sup>35</sup>

Glasgow's prevailing image as revolutionary city is mediated by contradictory forces. Alongside the left-wing politics are influences on the culture that are conservative and reactionary, emerging from religious sectarianism, and a trade union movement historically concerned with protecting their own interests over the cause of overall progress. A case can be made that the uncompromising attitude of the Clydeside trade unions contributed to the dissolution of the region's economy. At a time when other nations were moving towards modern manufacturing techniques, the Glasgow shop stewards were preoccupied with

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<sup>35</sup> John Foster, 'Red Clyde, Red Scotland'. in *The Manufacture of Scottish History*, eds. Ian Donnachie & Christopher Whatley, (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1992), p.108.

job demarcation. It is also possible that the oppressive nature of social conditions deprived the unemployed of the will to organise into a revolutionary force. This is evident in the realistic novels which show how the energy of the unemployed is dissipated by the very hunger they are marching against.

An impression is gained from the realist novels and the accounts of the Red Clydeside leaders, of a Glasgow interwar population with a strong work ethic, whose related social ambitions left them little opportunity or desire to overturn the existing order of things. There is also indication of a complacency to dispute the use of excessive force by the authorities. The fear of losing their precarious social position mitigated against risk-taking behaviour in those who had jobs, however badly paid. This in addition to the fixed class-distinctions which appear in the novels, reveals a population in which people 'knew their place', and took pride in their collective identity of greatest shipbuilding city in the world and Second City of the British Empire. These are all aspects of false consciousness which preclude understanding of the material conditions of reality or acknowledgement of exploitative social relations. George's act of sacrifice at the end of *Major Operation* could be regarded as a symbolic statement of the need for the leap of faith from safety into uncertainty, the risking of security necessary for revolution.

There is a viewpoint which argues that social revolution needs to be rooted in the material conditions and radical ideology of the skilled working class. Sydney Checkland argues that this was not the case with the labour movement in Glasgow, where much like in the rest of Britain, it was not as affected by socialist ideas as were workers on the continent of industrialised Europe. He also posits that: 'there was relatively little response among the workers to the intellectualism of the radical middle class, or even those who like Maclean, had come from the working class, and little incentive to propound revolutionary solutions among themselves'.<sup>36</sup> There are revolutions, such as the one which occurred in 1917 Russia, that are led not by the oppressed masses or the workers, but by a vanguard of bourgeois intellectuals. Many of the Scottish

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<sup>36</sup> Sydney Checkland, *The Upas Tree: Glasgow 1875-1975* (University of Glasgow Press: Glasgow 1977), p.31.

intelligentsia of the interwar era were employing a sufficient radical Marxist critique of prevailing socio-economic conditions, but it can possibly be argued that they were too much involved in the cultural revolution of the Scottish Renaissance to contribute to the political activism necessary to achieve social revolution.

To speak of false consciousness being a deterrent to revolutionary force on the part of the proletariat, and the negated potential for vanguardism on the part of the bourgeoisie, is not to assume that the natural order of things is for the 'enlightened intelligentsia' to lead the way for 'the lumpen proletariat'. However it is to acknowledge historical precedent, the restrictive nature of material conditions of existence, and the power of ideological hegemony. More importantly for this project, it is to reflect the reality of the material conditions presented in the novels under discussion.

Evidence from their work indicates that both Gibbon and Muir, along with the writers of the realistic novels and the Condition of Scotland texts, were concerned with socio-economic above aesthetic issues. These intellectuals denounced the exploitative conditions of capitalism and the inauthentic human values advanced by bourgeois society. But how many of the Scottish intelligentsia at the time were with them, and how this translated into political action are possibly questions for further investigation. It is one thing to articulate an understanding of reality, it is quite another to act upon it. Gibbon in *Scottish Scene* provides an interesting insight into the tensions between ideology and practicality:

There is nothing in culture or art that is worth the life and elementary happiness of one of those thousands who rot in the Glasgow Slums. There is nothing in science or religion. If it came (as it may come) to some fantastic choice between a free and independent Scotland, a centre of culture, a bright flame of artistic and scientific achievement, and providing elementary decencies of food and shelter to the submerged proletariat of Glasgow and Scotland.<sup>37</sup>

Muir's concluding question at the end of the chapter entitled 'Glasgow' from *Scottish Journey* was this: 'The fundamental realities of Glasgow are economic.'

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<sup>37</sup> Gibbon & MacDiarmid *Scottish Scene*. p.141.

How is this collapsing city to be put on its feet again?’<sup>38</sup> This can perhaps best be answered with a quote from Gibbon’s chapter entitled ‘Glasgow’ from *Scottish Scene*, in which he makes an appeal for an appreciation of diversity: ‘Scotland’s salvation, the world’s salvation lies in neither nationalism nor internationalism, those twin halves of an idiot whole. It lies in ultimate cosmopolitanism’.<sup>39</sup> Gibbon was referring to the multi-ethnic nature of the Gorbals during the interwar era, an absence worth noting in the narrative of *No Mean City*. Glasgow society has never been homogenous, and now even more than then, needs to integrate an understanding of this into its culture: to be conversant with its many spheres of diversity, and not be parochial or judgemental of difference. Unfortunately a component aspect of the liminality of the city is the fixed quality of its prejudices, not obvious in its dominant ethos or the image it displays for public relations, but in the prevailing attitudes of certain sections of its population. The most alarming aspect of reified social relations may be the inability of individuals to recognize the inhumanity of their own exploitation and the effect it has on their relationships with others. Instituted reifications may be at the root of endemic social problems such as hate crime. Now, as averred by Gibbon during the interwar era, a transformation is needed towards a culture in Glasgow that celebrates diversity and rejects the intolerance that has long divided the possibility for collective synergy within the city.

A post-colonial analysis may interpret divisions within Glasgow as a manifestation of the divide and rule strategy of British Imperialism, a complex project in which the Scots have played a role both as semi-subaltern and servitor-imperialist.<sup>40</sup> In an attempt to find a solution to the problems of the nation during the interwar period, MacDiarmid called for Scotland to resume an identity distinct from England. Complaining of the lack of political transparency or serious journalistic concern with Scottish affairs he argued, ‘Less is known of the “powers behind the scenes” in Scotland - of the actualities of Scottish

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<sup>38</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Mainstream Publishing Company, Edinburgh, 1935, repr.1979), p.162.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon and MacDiarmid, Hugh, *Scottish Scene*, p.146.

<sup>40</sup> Sylvia Morgan, Unpublished conference paper, 2006

finance and ownership and control - than of any other country in Europe'.<sup>41</sup> His denouncement of the infrastructure of Scotland as being set up by Westminster for military purposes was what Alasdair Gray would label decades later in his novel *1982 Janine* as, 'Scotland is wired for war, especially the bit north-west of Glasgow',<sup>42</sup> referring to the arsenal of nuclear submarines at the Faslane military base on the Firth of Clyde just west of the city. Despite Devolution in 1999, many of the same concerns persist, and the calls for an independent Scottish state continue.<sup>43</sup> Scotland may have regained a modicum of control over its own affairs, but the underlying issues of Scottish Nationalism remain the same as they were during the interwar era: identity, and control over wealth and war.

Much has changed in Glasgow since the interwar period, though much remains the same. In the twenty-first century the problems of the city are more global than they were in the 1930s. The Clyde was a working river well into the mid-twentieth century, but now all is quiet along the riverside where once echoed the pounding of riveters and the screech of machinery. The new generations in the city are economically detached from shipbuilding, although it continues to remain strong in the living memory and the mythology of the city. Glasgow is no longer the city of dreadful night. It has cleaned up its air, its buildings, streets, parks, housing and its image, though not always to the best effect. The need for breathing space and the ambition to transform and regenerate the city is a notion that runs throughout Glasgow's history. Liminal City became Possibility for Elsewhere. City planners historically attempted to rid the city of its claustrophobic slums by social engineering: resulting in a Glasgow Clearances. The Gorbals and Govan, once busy working-class residential areas and shipyard communities, today resemble a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The depressing image of crime and urban degeneration in the Gorbals, fostered by fiction and the media, was transformed in large part. But the crumbling, damp, tenement slums of the Gorbals and similar inner-city areas were replaced with crumbling, damp, high-rise apartment blocks on the margins of the city, dominating the

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<sup>41</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene*. (Cedric Chivers: Bath. 1934:1974), pp.39-41.

<sup>42</sup> Alasdair Gray, *1982 Janine* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1984), p.134.

<sup>43</sup> In a survey by the Scottish Government Feb 2009, 75% of Scots identify themselves as Scottish rather than British (BBC news).

skyline like ironic incarnations of the possible power of a proletariat symbolised as monstrous by interwar writers. Poverty and unemployment persist in Glasgow, they have merely been moved out of site and sight to the housing schemes or dormitory suburbs. These have become in their turn the focus of literature and media documentaries of urban deprivation in the liminal city.

The significance of the interwar era on the culture of the city is still evident in the first decade of the twenty-first century. There is a plaque to John Maclean, the best known, perhaps most admired, of the Red Clydesiders, outside the concert hall in Candleriggs, describing him as a ‘socialist pioneer who spoke here frequently to unemployed workers’. It overlooks four poems on the pavement below by Edwin Morgan<sup>44</sup> commemorating the working people of Glasgow, one of which reads: ‘Ghostly workers sleep below / They hear no rain or heel and toe / Think of them where the forges glow / In the Glasgow of long ago.’<sup>45</sup> Alan Riach comments on the fact that these pavement poems are not overtly attributed to Morgan at the site: ‘the anonymity says something about the way they work: their commemoration is of the people they name and suggest, more than their author.’<sup>46</sup> Riach reminds us of an important idea about literature, an idea that sometimes gets lost in the logic of critical analysis, that ‘art makes long conversations possible with those who have gone. And popular art - popular culture in the most general sense now - can help bring such living possibilities closer.’<sup>47</sup> And it is these conversations with the dead, through the textual representations of a time long gone in the realistic novels of interwar Glasgow, that can increase our understanding of the history and the city and its people. As we are now, so they once were.

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<sup>44</sup> Edwin Morgan Poet Laureate of Glasgow and in 2004 appointed first ‘Scots Makar’ or Poet Laureate of Scotland.

<sup>45</sup> By Edwin Morgan.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Riach, *Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of the Modern Nation* (Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2005), p.231.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Most of the interwar realist novels were out of print by the time Alasdair Gray made his famous pronouncement that Glasgow had only been the subject of a few bad novels and therefore did not feature in the literary imagination ... so possibly he was not referring to them.<sup>48</sup> It is difficult to discern the reasons for the neglect of the realistic novels of Clydeside. The most obvious one today is that they are out of print and unavailable. Reasons for the disappearance of novels may lie in the changing marketing strategies of publishers, a history of reader reception, fashions in literary styles, and gate-keeping by literary critics and publicists. The identification and deconstruction of a canon of work, no matter how it may have been regarded previously, is a complex process. These novels are about events that are important. They are also literary artefacts that say something important in themselves. Deciphering the texts is made all the more difficult as they were created within, and deal with, a particular shifting, liminal moment in the history of Glasgow: a city about which much has been said and a lot of it contradictory. Furthermore the sentimentalism of the novels and their lack of high literary merit may be a factor in their demise. Their time of first publication was also one when the focus was upon the Scots Renaissance establishment and their projects, which may have marginalised others. The novels could be interpreted as a basis for the Monumental Novels of Glasgow, but it could be argued that the very success of the latter occluded the former. In fact the desire to purge the cultural scene of the kailyard tendencies of sentimentality and nostalgia, also evident in the interwar realist novels, might have led to the condemnation of the literary merit of the works, discarding what is valuable with what is not.

The interwar period was a liminal moment of becoming for Glasgow, an economic, social and cultural threshold which saw the emergence of a new global economy, workers' movements, the Scottish Cultural Renaissance, Nationalism, the revival of the Scots language, and the development of the city's revolutionary reputation. However it can be argued that Glasgow never did

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<sup>48</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (Palladin Books: London, 1981:1987) p. 243

successfully make the transition to a new way of being. It is possible for a society or culture to become permanently liminal, fixed for years in a twilight zone, a threshold of becoming, in which it never quite achieves fulfillment. The crisis of capitalism during the interwar period was a liminal moment not just for Glasgow, but for the world, and it is not surprising that the novels written during this period articulate this. Not only do the texts reflect a liminal time, but in the context of Scottish Literature, they encapsulate a liminal state. As the first stirrings of an attempt to move from the kailyard to a more realistic view, they perhaps fail as idealism is still all too evident, but they lay the foundations of a new genre to come. The novels were written in, portray, and themselves reflect, a liminal state, albeit one within a seminal age. But a limen is something to pass through. It is the state before and the state after which becomes the main focus. The liminal should not become the label ... it should not be the sticking place.

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