

1989

## Writing on the Borderline: The Works of William McIlvanney

Keith Dixon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dixon, Keith (1989) "Writing on the Borderline: The Works of William McIlvanney," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol24/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

Keith Dixon

Writing on the Borderline:  
The Works of William McIlvanney



William McIlvanney has been variously described as "the most outstanding of modern Scottish novelists,"<sup>1</sup> compared to George Douglas Brown, whose *House with the Green Shutters* marked a historical turning point in Scottish fiction, and accused of indulging in sentimental proletarian romanticism.<sup>2</sup> The dominant view, however, at least among literary journalists, would seem to be that with the publication of his third novel, *Docherty*, in 1975, and his subsequent writing, McIlvanney has made a lasting mark on Scottish literature. If this is so then it is indeed a breakthrough, since McIlvanney is the first major Scottish writer to have ventured successfully across the class borderline (in his case, he simply stayed put) and to have concentrated in his writing on the experience of the Scottish working-class.

McIlvanney was born into a working-class family in Kilmarnock (the model for Graithnock in his fiction-writing) in 1936. He was brought up on a housing scheme and went to the local primary school and on to Kilmarnock Academy. He was a student at Glasgow University, but unlike Laidlaw, the university-drop-out-cum-detective hero of his Glasgow

---

<sup>1</sup>Douglas Gifford, "Docherty," Book review in *Galgacus* (Spring 1976), pp. 58-9.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London, 1983), pp. 239-41.

thrillers, he successfully finished his degree course and graduated in English. This is the subject he taught in secondary schools from 1959 until 1977, when he took up full-time writing (he says that his writing career, which he describes as a compulsion, began at the age of 14). He spent a year teaching creative writing to American students in Grenoble, and has been Creative Writing Fellow at the universities of Strathclyde and Aberdeen. Although he has now an impressive list of published works to his name (six novels, three books of poetry, a book of short stories, a play and miscellaneous essays) and has received much journalistic attention and several literary awards (*Docherty* won the Whitbread Award for the best fiction of 1975), his writing has as yet attracted little academic critical interest, with the notable exceptions of essays by the Scottish critics, Douglas Gifford, Bob Tait and Isabel Murray,<sup>3</sup> and a paper by a Scots expatriate, Robin Spittal,<sup>4</sup> to the 1983 Scottish workshop of the French Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur.

McIlvanney is, to a certain extent, a public personality today in Scotland (more so than other contemporary writers like Mackay Brown or Alasdair Gray). He has conducted talk programs on B.B.C. Scotland, and is certainly not loathe to give his own opinions on current political or cultural issues. From his public pronouncements and interviews, we have some idea of the man and his aesthetic, philosophical and political opinions. We know, for example, that the distrust and demystification of the Scottish education system, its pretensions and occasional oppressions, which are recurrent themes throughout his fiction, take root in his own experience both as a student from a working-class background, and as a secondary school teacher. McIlvanney does not go in for corporate solidarity, and some of his more violent caricatures are drawn from the teaching profession. This is the case in *Docherty* where the repressive, anglicized Mr Pirrie acts as a catalyst for young Conn's rejection of the school:

...against that went Conn's sense of the irrelevance of school, its denial of the worth of his father and his family, the falsity of its judgements, the rarefied atmosphere of its terminology. It was quite a wordless feeling, but all the stronger for that, establishing itself in him with the force of an allergy.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Gifford, "Modern Scottish Fiction," *SSL*, 13 (1978), 260-61. "Scottish Fiction 1975-1977," *SSL*, 14 (1979), pp. 211-2. *The Dear Green Place: The Novel in the West of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>R. Spittal, "MacIlvanney," *Ecosse: Littérature et civilisation*, 5-6 (Grenoble, 1986), pp. 53-68.

<sup>5</sup>William McIlvanney, *Docherty* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 112. Subsequent references will

In a superficial reading of his fiction, McIlvanney comes across as a men's man—to quote a phrase used in a *City Limits* interview of the author—preoccupied mainly with male characters, male reactions, male situations. Thus the central characters of the two novels we intend to discuss, *Docherty* and *The Big Man*, are working-class hard cases. McIlvanney humorously concedes this point concerning his detective novels: "there are not a lot female heavies" in the Glasgow underworld. His representation of women, however, often marginal in the novels as a whole, cannot be said to reproduce dominant clichés uncritically. *The Big Man*, for example, gives what amounts to a feminist critique of the condition of a generation of Scottish working-class women.

They had sewn comfort out of rags, brewed surprising satisfaction from unimpressive ingredients, calmed storms and taught decency in the face of the injustice their own lives suffered. But the cost of it had often been themselves. They were the ingredients of their own magic, last ounce of spirit, last shred of ambition, smallest fragment of dream. The wastage—the good minds starved, the talents denied, the potential distorted—was beyond computation. So when Dan was to hear afterwards a woman who had married well make a small shrine of her mother, or a man who had been successful praise his mother's sacrifice, he appreciated their feeling but thought it would have been better not to need to feel it.<sup>6</sup>

The whole ethos of Scottish machismo—which McIlvanney claims is mainly about insecurity—is critically examined, and undermined, as both Tam Docherty and Dan Scoular come to understand the fragility and the futility of their hard-man stand.

The author of *Docherty* has been accused of didacticism, of laying it on too thick, of romanticizing working-class life, and of letting his personal sympathy for his mining families and working-class rebels override his better literary judgement. Although these are hardly original criticisms in the field of working-class writing, they should be taken seriously, if only because McIlvanney has explicitly rejected the type of dogmatic, tub-thumping "socialist realism" of which he has been accused. Unlike Lewis Grassic Gibbon in his famous letter to *Left Review*, McIlvanney, although a socialist, does not see his writing as propaganda:

I think idealism, social, philosophical or whatever, sits very uncomfortably in writing, because if you have an ideal what you do is—it's like a scientist cheating

---

be incorporated in the text.

<sup>6</sup>William McIlvanney, *The Big Man* (London, 1985), p. 148. Subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

on his experiments, gerrymandering the results of experiments to fit the theory, and that's bad science and as far as I'm concerned it's bad writing. That's why I think whether from a religious point of view, if you write I am Marxist or I am a proselytizing Christian it's bad for the writing.<sup>7</sup>

[The broken syntax results from the fact that this quotation is from an oral interview.]

Intentions, of course, are not enough, and as we will see McIlvanney does introduce political preoccupations in his writing, does give his authorial position on many issues, does portray working-class characters sympathetically and seldom introduces sympathetic middle-class characters. Nonetheless, we are a long shot from proletarian apologetics: McIlvanney's "working-class heroes," as Alan Bold sarcastically describes them, are doubters, constantly calling into question their own values and beliefs, often unsure of their past, always unsure of their future. The radiant certainties of turgid Stalinized proletarian fiction are definitely not for McIlvanney. Significantly, when recently interviewed on the dangerous combination of political commitment and creative writing, McIlvanney referred positively to the work of Bertold Brecht.

Although European and American influences are no doubt at play in McIlvanney's fiction (Camus would be an obvious example concerning his concept of the "rebel," and his Glasgow thrillers have been compared with Chandler's work) he is very much a Scottish writer, and not merely because of his frequent use of the vernacular. Thematically he has much in common with certain of the pre-war literary predecessors. Take for example, the theme of the dominant father,<sup>8</sup> and the resultant broken family, which is central to *Docherty* and is to such an extent recurrent in modern Scottish fiction since *The House with the Green Shutters* (itself echoing Stevenson's *Weir or Hermiston* and perhaps also Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*) that some critics have granted it the status of a symbol of the Scottish nation. The divided or schizophrenic nation is of central importance, for example in Edwin Muir's influential, polemical essay on Scottish literature, *Scott and Scotland* (1935), where he laments the loss of an "organic society" in Scotland, and the concomitant impossibility of an "organic" literature of the English type. He denounces the so-called Caledonian Antizyzygy, which he sees as the debilitating dissociation of intellect and feeling among Scottish writers, resulting from deep-rooted linguistic and social divisions in their society. Although Muir's organic soci-

---

<sup>7</sup>Interview in *Radical Scotland* (Oct./Nov. 1984), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>This is discussed by Gifford in his essay *The Dear Green Place*.

ety was no doubt a self-induced illusion, his insistence on the role of conflict and contradictions—be they social, family, or individual—in much modern Scottish literature was perceptive.

Returning to my original metaphor, I would suggest that McIlvanney's writing sits uncomfortably on the borderline between two distinct tendencies in modern Scottish fiction: what, for the want of more adequate terms, I will call the "sentimentalists" (or kailyarders) and the "realists." On the one hand, a deliberate, and far from outmoded, attempt to project an anodine, sentimental image of a homely and predominantly rural Scotland (although urban kailyarders do exist). As F.R. Hart has pointed out, at its best this tendency constitutes a liberal humanist affirmation of fundamental human goodness in reply to the darkly pessimistic Calvinist obsession with Original Sin. The heyday of this school was, of course, at the turn of the century with the success of Barrie, Crocket and McLaren. On the other hand, a denunciatory fiction, intent on revealing the seamy underside of Scottish social reality, the so-called "stunkin' fush" school, which begins with George Douglas Brown and John MacDougall Hay, and finds a contemporary echo in the works of James Kelman or Alasdair Gray, or in the calvinistically joyless scenes of incest and sexual obsession of Alan Sharp's *A Green Tree in Gedde*. Undoubtedly the stunkin' fushers have done more for Scottish literature than the well-meaning sentimentalists—they at least have tried to keep in some sort of touch with social reality—and equally surely McIlvanney has more in common with Brown or Grassic Gibbon (accused in his time of being a muck raker) than with James Barrie. His concern with social reality and its inevitable contradictions, his questioning of the religious, social and political status quo, his unpaternalistic adoption of popular modes of expression, all place him among the "realists." However, with the exception of Grassic Gibbon, the realists were intent on revealing "the Scot Malignant"—to use George Douglas Brown's phrase—through brutal caricatures ("types" Lenin would have said) such as Gourlay, Gillespie, or Brodie in *Hatter's Castle*. McIlvanney is, on the contrary, like Gunn and Gibbon, intent on celebrating the humanity of his characters, despite their unacceptable social conditions. He is what Hugh MacDiarmid would no doubt have stigmatized as sentimental humanist, and what Grassic Gibbon in self-description calls "a jingo patriot of humanity." Dan's angry response to the armchair revolutionary Vince Mabon, in *The Big Man*, illustrates the tone of McIlvanney's humanism: "You don't like people, Vince. You want to turn them intae ideas. Any future that has to sacrifice the present to get there isn't worth goin' to. Don't save me a ticket" (p. 264). His humanism does however border on homeliness, when, for example, he evokes the Docherties' family life, between the storms it is true—and he apparently endorses Tam's

view of the family: "He saw families as little fortresses of loyalty and sanity and mutual concern, set defiantly in a landscape of legalized looting and social injustice" (p. 93).

This then would set him apart from the realists; perhaps even the aggressively humanistic Grassie Gibbon would have disapproved of this plea in defense of family—albeit working-class family/values.

After this brief "diachronic" look at McIlvanney's place in Scottish fiction, I will situate him "synchronically." Since the Second World War, and certainly over the last fifteen or twenty years, the geographical center of gravity of Scottish literature has shifted, as have the dominant political and social attitudes among the writers themselves. The pre-war literature of the Scottish Renaissance was predominantly rural, and permeated with an essentially passé, pre-industrial utopianism. As Douglas Gifford has pointed out, the myth of the dear green place, of the Golden Age, is to be found intermittently in the works of most of the major writers of the period—Gunn, Gibbon, MacColla, and Muir. Today the locus of literary attention is urban, and the ambient ideology is harshly anti-utopian. The industrial West of Scotland has, belatedly, become the center of a literary movement—although the term is perhaps too strong—preoccupied with urban reality, urban modes of living and speech. This is exemplified in a great diversity of literary production: from the stolid, but occasionally inspiring prose of Archie Hind's *Dear Green Place* (see, for example, the slaughterhouse scene), or the demotic verse of Tom Leonard, to the vernacular novels of James Kelman, or the surrealistic fiction of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*. McIlvanney's work reflects this preoccupation with the city and industrial life. He has recently given his opinion on the centrality of Glasgow on the Scottish social and literary scene:

It seems to me that the thing Scottish writing would have to confront is the Scottish urban experience. Because the truth is that for most of us that is where we have been. You take the nexus around Glasgow that's still the eye of the hurricane. I think that's where our understanding of ourselves resides.<sup>9</sup>

I have chosen to discuss *Docherty* (1975) and *The Big Man* (1985), the former because it is generally considered to be a major step forward in his writing, the latter because in some ways it constitutes a meeting place for the two distinct strands in his fiction, a synthesis of his novels of social realism and his thrillers. It should be mentioned in passing, however, that *Laidlaw* and *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, have, perhaps because of their

---

<sup>9</sup>Radical Scotland interview, p. 25.

popular form, received scant attention from the guardians of the literary canon, and certainly merit some serious analysis.

Ten years separate the publication of *Docherty* and *The Big Man*, ten years during which the nationalist upsurge of the early seventies had subsided, while Scottish society and the Scottish economy had sunk deeper into a recession which was hardly alleviated by spin-offs from the North Sea, or the epiphenomenal implantation of multinational high-tech companies in Scotland's ill-described silicon glen. These changes are reflected in McIlvanney's fiction: the Scottishness of *Docherty* is attenuated in *The Big Man*. The later novel is very much a novel of the present slump, dealing with what is precariously posited as the disappearance of fundamental values in Scotland's changing working-class under the combined onslaught of music-centers and mass unemployment. Although the attitude of working-people to a rapidly changing society is already a key theme of *Docherty*, it takes on a greater acuity in *The Big Man*. The economic and social crisis, exacerbated by the free-market Luddism of the Thatcher administration (a "national lobotomy" according to McIlvanney) seeps through the pores of *The Big Man*:

When the money went, Graithnock turned funny but not so you would laugh. It had always had a talent for violence and that violence had always had its mean and uglier manifestations. Besides the stand-up fights between disgruntled men, there had been the knives and the bottles and the beatings of women. The difference now was that contempt for such behaviour was less virulent and less widespread. Something like honour, something as difficult to define and as difficult to live decently without, had gone from a lot of people's sense of themselves. Sudden treachery in fights had assumed the status of a modern martial art, rendering bravery and strength and speed and endurance as outmoded as a crossbow. An old woman could be mugged in a park, an old man tied and tortured in his home for the sake of a few pounds, five boys could beat up a sixth, a girl be raped because she was alone, the houses of the poor broken into as if they had been mansions. This was not an epidemic. Few people were capable of these actions but those who weren't were significantly less capable of a justly held condemnation. That instinctive moral strength that had for so long kept the financial instability of working-class life still humanly habitable, like a tent pitched on a cliff top but with guy-ropes of high-tensile steel, had surely weakened. (p. 17)

*Docherty* is a family saga type novel, describing the life and reactions of a rebellious Ayrshire miner's family from 1903, with the birth of the youngest son Conn, until the early twenties, and the death of the father, Tam Docherty, in a pit accident. It is a sort of urban *Sunset Song*, an elegy to the communal spirit and humor of the pre-first World War working-class, and like Grassic Gibbon's novel, a salute to a dying ethic. *The Big Man* is set in present-day Scotland, the action taking place between



Thornbank, a small village near the semi-imaginary Graithnock of *Docherty*, and Glasgow. Several of the characters are already familiar to the McIlvanney reader, since they are imported directly from his Glasgow thrillers. Just as *Docherty* revolves around the character and self-questioning of Tam Docherty, so *The Big Man* concentrates on the dilemma of the unemployed Dan Scoular, who is drawn into becoming a protagonist in a commercially organized "bare knuckle fight" sponsored by two rival gang leaders. Dan is caught between his loyalty to a traditional, but apparently dying, "straight" working-class culture and the "proletkult" gangsterism of Matt Mason and his mob. The bare knuckle fight, which occupies the core of the more recent novel is, in McIlvanney's own terms "like a metaphor—through the extremity of his experience the guy discovers some of the reality of his society." Both novels, it has been pointed out, deal with working-class experience of a changing society: in *Docherty*, Tam's messianic belief in a sort of fundamentalist laborism is undermined by the inability of the labor leadership to deliver the goods and the impatience of his sons, who, each in his own way, reject their father's utopianism. Not only is Tam's inarticulate political faith called into question as the novel develops, but also his physical prowess, which he uses to circumscribe his own area of apparent absolute power, and to right the wrongs of his own social microcosm: "He was like a gunfighter, practised to perfection, unafraid, heroically hard, and pitted against germ warfare" (p. 211). In *The Big Man*, Dan Scoular questions the values of his socialist parents in an increasingly materialist and individualist society:

While the weaponry ranged against them became modernised, while the tactics of social exploitation developed unforeseen subtleties that outmanoeuvred their past principles completely, they stayed stubbornly at their posts, though the battle had moved past them and they died there, still clutching beliefs that their confused leadership had forgotten to countermand. And even their own son, trained by his own experience in different methods, couldn't endorse their actions (p. 115).

Two specific aspects of these novels deserve more specific attention—language and ideology.

For many lowland Scots—those at least who do not come from the anglicized upper-middle-class and aristocracy, language remains problematic. Many are caught between the unformalized and inferiorized vernaculars of their early years and unguarded daily intercourse, and a standard of English which spontaneous utterances constantly interfere with. Since the literary revival of the twenties, and MacDiarmid's influential defense of linguistic pluralism, this has become an explicit preoccupation of lowland Scottish writers. Some have followed MacDiarmid's injunctions and

evolved various species of "synthetic" or "plastic" Scots, paradoxically often depriving themselves in this way of a wider popular audience; some have opted for a compromise in the form of a Scottish-flavored English; others, bewildered by the complexity of the problem, have quit the battlefield and signed a separate peace, going over completely to English or opting for another language altogether (a case in point here would be the fashionable Scoto-French poet, Kenneth White).

Although very much aware of the difficulties involved in what we have called "writing on the borderline" between Scots and English—what he himself calls "inhabiting the paradox"—McIlvanney does not indulge in the trenchant phraseology and programmatic declarations of the cultural nationalists. He suggests tentatively: "I think if you disenfranchise people from their own speech you take a bit of their head away as well, you disenfranchise them from their own experience to some extent."<sup>10</sup> McIlvanney uses urban Scots in his writing mainly in the dialogues. More importantly, in the manner of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, he draws heavily on the oral vernacular tradition, and the predominantly standard English of his narrative passages is permeated with the striking metaphors and unexpected similes which are so characteristic of pub story-tellers or building-site sagas. Thus of old Conn, Tam's devoutly Catholic father in *Docherty*: "Experience has become for him an endless circular journey round his rosary" (p. 211), or of Frankie, a third-rate petty gangster in *The Big Man*:

Fast Frankie was a person of great but misdirected enthusiasm, the sort of man who, if he had been more of a literary inclination, might have devoted two years of his life to learning Spanish in order to read Dante in the original (p. 65).

However, those writers who, like McIlvanney in *Docherty*, *Laidlaw*, and *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, opt for a half-way solution to the language problem—in this case a combination of English narrative and urban Scots dialogue (definitely not the "Lallans of unexampled flavour" advertised on the blurb of the Mainstream edition of *Docherty*)—have to face a number of unavoidable obstacles. Thus, a Scots writer using English in his/her narrative passages often produces what resembles a highly competent translation, whether or not he/she is aware of any linguistic inadequacy. Grassie Gibbon drew attention to this point when reviewing contemporary Scottish writing in the mid-thirties:

The prose—or verse—is impeccably correct, the vocabulary is rich and adequate, the English is severe, serene. . . . But unfortunately it is not English. The English reader is haunted by a sense of something foreign stumbling and hesitating

---

<sup>10</sup>*Radical Scotland* interview, p. 25.

behind this smooth façade of adequate technique: it is as though the writer did not *write* himself, but *translated* himself.<sup>11</sup>

This is probably the root cause of many of the ornate, precious or overwritten passages to be found throughout modern Scottish writing (A.J. Cronin's *Hatter's Castle* is an extreme example of this trend). Douglas Gifford criticizes this aspect of McIlvanney's prose writing in a review article on *Docherty*. Some of McIlvanney's more overwrought metaphors, for example, do sometimes tend to backfire in on themselves. Gifford cites the following example:

Menford Lane, a street that died like progress in a factory. To its crevices, clung the smell of wool and dye and human sweat, a fungus imparting dark dreams of manhood. Machines gnashed behind windows, chewing shouts and laughter....A woman's song drowned. After its shadows, the street bruised your eyes.<sup>12</sup>

If the dialogue is to be in Scots, it is no easy matter to avoid the built-in inferiorization effect produced by the juxtaposition of a more socially acceptable, and often richer, standard English narrative and more uncouth direct and less varied vernacular dialogue. This problem is accentuated by the fact that too great a diversity and density of the Scots used in the dialogues, although perhaps a more faithful representation of linguistic reality in certain Scots communities, make the text itself opaque for all but a handful of Scots-speaking readers and language specialists. The vernacular dialogue is in constant danger of becoming a mere indicator of local color, or worse, of ignorance and backwardness. The works of the Kailyard school and their successors are full of this kind of simplistic Scots, and innumerable Scots comedians and music-hall entertainers have played on the supposedly comic speech of their fellow-countrymen in order to ensure commercial success.

Perhaps some of these considerations explain the shift in linguistic emphasis between *Docherty* and *The Big Man*. The dialogues of the earlier novel are written in a much more explicitly Scottish medium. Many Scottish terms are used (weans, mucky fou', preuchin' aboot, ken) and spelling changes are used consistently to convey Scottish pronunciation or turns of speech (doacter, fur, oot, ye). The novel contains some powerful vernacular passages, which although never lexically dense are nonetheless an accurate representation of urban Scots, like Tam's violent affirmation of

---

<sup>11</sup>Lewis Grassie Gibbon, "Literary Lights," *Scottish Scene* (London, 1934), reprinted in *A Scots Hairst* (London, 1967), p. 144.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted by D. Gifford in "*Docherty*" book review in *Galgacus* (Spring 1976).

working-class values of solidarity and respect for one another in face of his son Angus's individualist revolt:

We walk a nerra line. Ah ken hoo nerra it is. Ah've walked it a' ma days. Us an' folk like us hiv goat the nearest thing tae nothin' in this world. A' that filters doon tae us is shite. We leeve in the sewers o' ither bastards' comfort. The only thing we've goat is wan anither. That's why ye never sell yer mates. Because there's nothin' left tae buy wi' whit ye get. That's why ye respect yer weemenkind. Because whit we make oorselves is whit we are. Because if ye don't ye're provin' their case....You're a fuckin' deserter. Ah don't harbour deserters. Ye're wi' the rest o' us or ye go elsebit (p. 277).

However, the main burden of communicating, and even formalizing, the thoughts and feelings of the characters lies heavily on the author's own shoulders. This has led Douglas Gifford to criticize McIlvanney for interfering too often and too directly in the text, and thus of abusing his authorial position. Given the structure of McIlvanney's novels, and the peculiar linguistic difficulties of his main characters, this abuse of authorial omniscience would seem inevitable. The following passage illustrates the shared dilemma of the inarticulate character and the interfering author:

The absence of certitude made a moor of the future, and inarticulacy lay over everything like a blight. He felt a grotesqueness in his efforts to impose himself on the forces he was up against, the pettiness of fights with pit managers, the ludicrousness of a family that had two religions. He had perceptions that enabled him to feel the pain, but not the words to make it work for him (p. 44).

McIlvanney, of course, provides the words.

There is, as we have already noted, a shift away from the use of Scots in the dialogues of *The Big Man*, and it is here perhaps that linguistic and ideological issues interrelate. McIlvanney has explained elsewhere his belief that certain dense forms of Scots are disappearing because of the influence of Anglicized or Americanized media—and the time gap between the action in *Docherty* and *The Big Man* is another explanatory factor in the anglicization of McIlvanney's prose. It may also be, however, that the general ideological climate in Scotland, and in Britain in general—with the rise of aggressive English nationalism and the decline of national agitation on the periphery—is less conducive to the literary expression of national particularities. I was myself surprised, in this respect, at the violence of certain English reviewers in their reaction to the televised version of Grassie Gibbon's *Grey Granite* which contrasted with the tolerant, if not enthusiastic reception of *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*, serialized in the mid-seventies when Scottish nationalism was still a force to be taken seriously on the British political scene.

I have suggested that McIlvanney is a "borderline" case in the history of modern Scottish literature, neither sentimental Kailyarder nor anti-humanist stunkin' fusher. Another reading of that history, suggested some years ago by David Craig in his essay in the influential *Red Paper on Scotland*, would situate McIlvanney's work from an ideological point of view in the radical tradition of Scottish literature.<sup>13</sup> This latter is characterized by a more or less radical critique of Scottish society, fed by egalitarianism, suspicion of institutionalized religion, sympathy for working-people and their struggles, and of course anti-militarism. Craig looks back here to the Burns of "A Man's a man for a' that," and on to the progressive folk revival of the nineteen seventies. His canon would include MacDiarmid and Grassic Gibbon; but also James Barke, communist novelist of the thirties and forties; and Hamish Henderson, the folk-poet whose "Freedom Come All Ye" is a high point in literary anti-militarism.

Battles will no doubt be waged over the ideological significance of McIlvanney's work: a sure sign of an open-ended, non-dogmatic literary production, his novels will be claimed for opposing visions—it is, however, unlikely that any Scots literary Tory will be able to mount the McIlvanney bandwagon. What I now propose in conclusion to this essay is perhaps an opening blow in this battle, but is in no way intended as a definitive explanation of the ideology(ies) underlying McIlvanney's work. I will rather advance some tentative interpretations and raise some unanswered questions. I will deliberately limit this discussion to what I believe to be a key element in McIlvanney's fiction—his vision of the working-class, and the articulation of individual and collective reactions in working-class communities.

McIlvanney's fiction in general, and the two novels here under discussion in particular, deals almost exclusively with the industrial proletariat and its "satellite" strata<sup>14</sup> (e.g. *The Big Man*). He approaches the experience of his West of Scotland working-class communities not in the manner of the social explorer (Jack London's *People of the Abyss*, or George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* or George Blake's *The Shipbuilders*), but to borrow a Lukacsian expression "from the inside." Much of the writing is so much "from the inside" that at times the author and the working-class characters seem to empathize: McIlvanney becomes the voice of the inarticulate. It is in this sense that he can be seen as a work-

---

<sup>13</sup>David Craig, "The Radical Tradition," *Red Paper on Scotland*, Edinburgh University Student Publications Board (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 289-304.

<sup>14</sup>With the exception of his first two novels: *Remedy is None* (1966) and *A Gift from Nessus* (1968).

ing-class writer. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically revolutionary (or even radical) about such working-class writing, and it may express a great heterogeneity of ideological positions.

McIlvanney's writing is not a paternalistic apologia in favor of the working-class ("the poor have fine feelings beneath the grime," explained James Barrie to his middle-class readership), but rather an attempt to apprehend and to communicate its "changing code of conduct." This is not done in abstract terms, but through the creation of two powerful characters, Tam Docherty and Dan Scoular, and the evocation of the high points in the communal life of the two working-class communities (New Year celebrations or the gala-day in the mining village in *Docherty*, or the pub scenes in *The Big Man*).

Despite their individual characteristics, and to use an expression drawn from *Docherty*, Tam Docherty is Dan Scoular's past, and Dan Scoular is very much the image of Tam Docherty's future. In a sense they are the same character—the working-class rebel—in a different historical setting. Tam Docherty and Dan Scoular are "types" (just as Chichikow is a "type" in Gogol's *Dead Souls*) not representing the plight of Scotland as one reviewer has suggested, but embodying the values of the Scottish industrial working-class which McIlvanney wishes to celebrate. They are "their ain men," independent to the point of being suicidal, tolerant despite their propensity for using their fists, questioning and self-questioning despite their inarticulacy (the term is recurrent in McIlvanney's work). They are the voice of a community, although their actions and reactions speak more eloquently than their words.

Although I have employed the term "realistic" to describe McIlvanney's fiction, its use is of course problematic. Many a proletarian (or bourgeois) realist believes he/she is "telling it as it is," putting a mirror up to an often hidden reality, and many a critic or reader takes this at face value. However, behind the proletarian "realism," the verisimilitude of word and gesture, there always lurks a certain representation of the working-class, an ideological construct. This is no less the case in McIlvanney's writing—although he manages to avoid the more explicitly commemorative or nostalgic evocations which are typical of this genre. Nonetheless, through the use of the novel form, the structure which he gives to his novels, and the evolution of his two central characters, he projects his own personal vision of the working-class. The vision is, perhaps justifiably, a pessimistic if not tragic one, and has many points in common with Lewis Grassie Gibbon's vision of the crofters in his Scottish fiction. The projected radiant future of the working-class does not interest McIlvanney. His is a strictly unteleological, anti-utopian vision: the following type of comment on Dan Scoular is used so often by the author of

*The Big Man* that one is tempted to attribute it with authorial approval: "He had always found that the mortification of the present in order to beatify the future was an obscene principle. He believed that the present was all anyone truly had" (p. 77).

McIlvanney's refusal of what he perceives as political utopianism, or worse, as unprincipled hoodwinking, leads him to present the situation of his working-class community in somber colors. In *Docherty*, for example, as Isabel Murray and Bob Tait have pointed out, despite the celebration of the communal spirit, the courage and the humanity of the people of Graithnock's High Street, there are recurrent images of imprisonment, as if there were no escape for the working-class, no future but a repetition of the present:

High Street, both as a terrain and a population was special. Everyone whom circumstances had herded into its hundred-or-so-yards had failed in the same way. It was a penal colony for those who had committed poverty, a vice which was usually hereditary (p. 31).

This representation of the working-class as being prisoners in a hostile society is reinforced by the structure of *Docherty*, which begins with the birth of Conn, a repository of Tam's great expectations ("Ah'm pittin' his name doon fur Prime Minister") and ends with Conn becoming a miner like his father and grandfather before him, and Tam, his illusions gone, committing a heroic suicide. Tam's despair (another recurrent term in the novel) and his sense of futility grow out of his awareness that his messianic "oor time is comin'" is nothing more than a palliative for an unbearable present. It is the Great War which breaks the confidence of the High Street community, and brings home to Tam, through the physical and psychological suffering of his son Mick, the futility of his belief in the inevitability of progress.

In both *Docherty* and *The Big Man*, the response of the traditional organizations of the working-class, in particular the Labor Party, to the plight of working people and to the changes taking place in these two critical periods of Scottish history, is shown to be unsatisfactory. Thus in *The Big Man*:

Better material conditions hadn't created solidarity but fragmentation. Working class parvenus were at least as selfish as any other kind. You couldn't simply vote Labour and trust that Socialism would triumph. The innocence of his parents' early belief in the purity of Socialism couldn't be transplanted to the time that followed Socialism's exercising of power, however spasmodic. In power, Socialism had found it hard to recognize itself, had become neurotic with expediency, had forgotten that it had never been merely a policy but a policy growing from a faith founded in experience. Lose the faith that had been justly

earned from the lives of generations of people and Socialism was merely words and words were infinitely flexible. You couldn't trust the modern generation of those who had formerly been the source at which Socialism had reaffirmed its faith. All around they were reaching private settlements with their society's materialism in terms that contained no clauses to safeguard others of their own who might be less fortunate (p. 116).

Given their apparently immutable situation, and the unlikelihood of any collective political solution to their problems ("collective," as opposed to "communal," action occupies only a marginal place in McIlvanney's fiction—thus the strike in *Docherty* is only briefly alluded to) the only option which remains open to those who, like Dan Scoular and Tom Docherty, refuse to buckle under, or to be bought off with what McIlvanney calls "hush money," like Angus in *Docherty* or the Sullom Voe workers of *The Big Man*, is individual revolt. Here the passage from Camus which McIlvanney quotes at the beginning of *The Big Man* takes on its full significance:

What is a rebel? A man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation.

All that remains to be determined is the form this individual revolt is to take; in both novels violence, be it indiscriminate or discriminating, is finally rejected. Violence, both individual and social, is a *leitmotif* of McIlvanney's fiction. *Docherty* can be read as a denunciation of a particular form of institutionalized violence, exemplified in the meaningless mass killings of the Great War. This would be in the mainstream of Craig's radical tradition. It is also, however, like *The Big Man*, a critique of individual violence within the working-class (a taboo subject for many a socialist writer). McIlvanney does not indulge in the gesticulatory moralizing of the Scottish press and pulpit—and he avoids the double-edged sensationalism of *No Mean City* and its successors. His violent characters—both Tam and Dan are fighting men—are sympathetically portrayed; their skill in physical confrontation is even offered for admiration. However, both are led to discover the futility of their own violence, of the ideology of the "square go." This discovery of the meaninglessness of physical superiority, and the fragility it reveals, are key developments in both novels. Through this realization, both characters obtain a more precise sense of themselves and their situation—Tam, tragically and Dan Scoular perhaps less explicitly so.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Whether Dan Scoular has made a "tragic" decision remains an open question at the end of *The Big Man*.



In *The Big Man* Dan dismantles his own hard-man image during the fight:

Dan seemed to himself to be fighting all those working-class hardmen who had formed the pantheon of his youth, men who in thinking they defied the injustice of their lives had been acquiescing in it, because they compounded the injustice by unloading their weakness on to someone else, making him carry it (p. 176).

The novel form has its own built-in tendency of valorizing individual as opposed to collective experience, and of centering on individual solutions to society's problems. McIlvanney does not react against these structural constraints of the genre (by the use of a "folk-voice" as in Grassie Gibbon's fiction, or by fragmenting the points of view as in Dos Passos), and willingly concentrates on his protagonists' individual attempts to come to terms with their uneasy rejection of society. However, as he leads Tam Docherty and Dan Scoular into greater self-awareness, stripping them of their political illusions, deflating the importance they initially attach to physical prowess, he forces them into a vacuum. No positive solution is posited; their revolt seems destined to fail. In fact, both Tam and Dan Scoular finally opt for suicidal solutions—Tam sacrifices his own life to save a fellow miner as a tunnel caves in; Dan assaults the Glasgow hood, Matt Mason, for whom he was paid to fight, knowing the fatal consequences this may have. No future then, for Dan Scoular, Tam Docherty and the community they represent? Or perhaps we are crossing here another borderline, over which McIlvanney is understandably unwilling to venture—that which separates the fiction-writer from the propagandist.

*St. Etienne University*