

Saltire Series No. 6

**DREAMING  
SCOTLAND**

by

William McIlvanney





## About the Saltire Society

We are;

- An apolitical membership organisation open to all
- An international supporter and patron of the arts and cultural heritage of Scotland
- A champion of free speech on the issues that matter to the cultural life of every Scot
- A promoter of the best of what we are culturally, now and in the future
- A catalyst to ensure new ideas are considered and the best of them are made real

We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last seventy five years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

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# DREAMING SCOTLAND

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SCOTLAND



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## About William McIlvanney

William was born in Kilmarnock. He studied at Kilmarnock Academy and later at the University of Glasgow, after which he worked as an English teacher between 1960 and 1977. His first book, *Remedy is None*, was published in 1966 and won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. *Docherty* (1975), a moving portrait of a miner whose courage and endurance is tested during the depression, won the Whitbread Novel Award. *The Big Man* (1985) is the story of Dan Scoular, an unemployed man who turns to bare-knuckle fighting to make a living. Both novels feature typical McIlvanney characters-tough, often violent, men locked in a struggle with their own nature and background. *The Big Man* was made into a film starring Liam Neeson and featuring Billy Connolly. His novel, *The Kiln* (1996), won the Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year Award. William McIlvanney is also an acclaimed poet, and is the author of *The Longships in Harbour: Poems* (1970) and *Surviving the Shipwreck* (1991), which also contains pieces of journalism, including an essay about TS Eliot. His short story 'Dreaming' (published in *Walking Wounded* in 1989) which he turned into a television play, was filmed by BBC Scotland in 1990 and won a BAFTA. He was writer and narrator of the BBC Scotland football documentary *Only a Game?* in 1986, and the official history of Celtic football club in 1988.

William McIlvanney's work was republished by Canongate in 2013 starting with *Laidlaw*, *The Papers of Tony Veitch* and *Strange Loyalties*.

## **Editorial note**

In the Saltire Series we have invited individuals to spark fresh thinking, ignite debate and challenge our orthodoxies, through the publication of short commissioned essays. The Editorial note from a pamphlet produced in 1942 is still a strong expression of the proposition.

‘They will express the considered judgements of their own authors, to whom complete freedom has been given; and are not to be taken as representing the policy of the Saltire Society, whose objective is to promote that free and informed discussion without which no sound policy for Scotland’s future can be shaped.’

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It seems to me that the most dynamic force in contemporary British politics is not a coherent social vision but the careerism of individual politicians.

*Where there is no (social) vision, the people perish.*

Proverbs: 29, 18 (adapted)

The following is not a polemic designed to persuade anyone how to vote in the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence. The issue is so hedged about with misinformation, special pleading, unsubstantiated assertion and pontifical vagueness that I would find that a dishonest thing to do. I feel myself bombarded with advice from experts whose expertise I'm not sure I can trust.

Such experts seem more certain of the future than it is possible to be. Given that, I feel that all I can do is get personal and search inside myself to see if I can find, in that confused place, which way I should vote. All I am doing is trying to arrive at how I will vote and why.

*Tak' it amang ye, an' mak' a kirk or a mill o' it.*

‘Three Months?’

Nothing would be the same again. The two words hit the familiar order of my life like a demolition ball. They were spoken by my older brother as we stood in the back room of the grocer’s shop which served that part of the council housing-scheme in which we lived. We had come to ask if we could use their phone to contact the family doctor. Still holding the receiver to his ear, Hughie glanced at me and looked away. He didn’t have to elaborate on what the words meant. They were how long our father had to live.

I was to remember the sounds of people in the front shop, chatting and laughing and ordering their groceries. I felt a teenager’s outrage that my father was dying and the world hadn’t noticed. My father was dying and someone was buying cheese.

That was when I began to learn that illness and dying are isolating things. The routine of other people’s lives steps round them, like a derelict in the street. I became even more powerfully aware of how alone everyone is in confronting their dying when I saw my father get out of the ambulance that brought him home. He thanked the ambulance men and refused the stretcher, claiming the small dignity of using what was almost the last of his strength to walk into the house where he would die. He seemed to be haggling with death, demanding – as far as he could – to go out on his own terms.

The family closed around him. Our mother’s life contracted to his needs, became a casing to contain his suffering. Nothing defined him more impressively than his dying and in the process he taught his family, by the way, the incalculable value of an individual life, no matter how unheard of. As I was later to write in a poem about his death:

He was of those posterity won't claim,  
The walkers in a crowd who have no more  
Than an orphanage of letters to their name.  
Their legacy is boots beside the hearth  
And an empty jacket hung behind the door.

It was only in retrospect I realised that father and family had been less alone than we might have been. With hindsight I began to appreciate how much the social structures that were in place around us had helped us all in trying to come to terms with the inevitability of his death.

My father lived roughly as long as expected. The doctor, who came without charge, helped him till the end. There had been some family crises ongoing at that time and I think my father didn't want to leave my mother alone with them. He lasted till the problems were more or less resolved. Then, as my mother told me afterwards, when the doctor came yet again to see him, my father looked at him, glanced down at his own emaciated and needle-marked arm, looked back at the doctor and nodded. He was given an injection which slowly induced a troubled sleep from which he never recovered.

Later, I would think back to that time of my father's dying when I was watching a television programme about medicine in America. It told the story of a reasonably well-off couple who lost everything – car, house, savings – to pay off the medical bills incurred because their son had a hole in the heart. It struck me that health for sale is the ultimate capitalist obscenity. I was grateful all over again that that early experience had been mediated for us by the humanity of the society we lived in, without asking us if we could pay the bill for a man's dying. We were paying already, emotionally.

That, I thought, is what the good society does. It seeks to



remove unnecessary suffering from the lives of its people and allows them to meet – on terms as near to equal as possible – unavoidable suffering. Necessary suffering is everybody's birthright. Unnecessary suffering is an enormity, especially when it is socially engineered for profit.

I mention that phase in my family's life to illustrate what 'politics' essentially means to me – not just some abstract science but something which impinges dramatically on our daily lives, something which can partially determine the very nature of our experience. Without the establishment of the National Health Service, by the post-war Labour administration, my father's dying would have been less benignly mediated than it was for him and his family. He would have died differently.

That's one reason why I see the creation of the NHS as one of the two most important pieces of legislation in 20th century Britain, the other being the ludicrously delayed giving of the vote to women. There have been other high points, some of them coming, as far as I am concerned, from unexpected places. I had always tended to think of Harold Wilson as a kind of cipher of placid conformity – just a pipe, like a sedative-machine, with man attached. But maybe someone was putting opium in his tobacco, for he had a beautiful dream. It was called the Open University.

I had a friend who was involved in the OU and I sometimes spoke at their summer schools. It was an exhilarating experience. You felt yourself surrounded by men and women (very notably the women) who were being belatedly allowed to explore their own abilities. It was like a gymnasium of the intelligence. People were discovering intellectual muscles they hadn't known were there. Bliss was it in that dawn to be around. But the dark came early.

In 1971 the OU was charging £10 for a credit. Six credits could earn you a degree. Therefore, a degree could cost you £60. At present, if the information I have been given is correct, a

degree may cost you somewhere between £4,650 and £8,655. In other words, the Open University is shut. Only the ghost of a great idea remains. Its reality is gone, seen off by society's licensed serial killer – finance.

We shouldn't be surprised. Such back-tracking from progress is a recurrent motif in our history. In British politics every social improvement has a reverse gear by which it can retract its own achievement. Its natural condition is a kind of stasis in perpetual motion. This weird anomaly is for me most cogently revealed in the conflict between two formidable men who confronted each other in print towards the end of the 18th century: Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Thomas Paine in *Rights of Man*.

I have written about Burke before and I still feel about him as I did then. At the time I was trying to understand how what has been called 'Thatcherism', as if it were a political philosophy, had been able so swiftly to reverse the trend of British politics:-

Searching for answers, I thought of Edmund Burke, who has been justly called the foremost Conservative British political thinker. That passionate and intelligent Irishman, coming in as a clear-eyed outsider, analysed English political attitudes with the precision of someone who had to find out how to belong. Under the threat of dynamic changes coming from France, he expressed that analysis most cogently in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a book he raised like a bulwark against the invasion of new ideas from across the Channel.

I thought Burke answered my questions. The reason he suggests to me is that since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the British constitution (which simply means the English constitution assumptively extended to include the rest of the United Kingdom) has been a machine for the maintenance of reactionary attitudes. Brief spells of progressive government may occur but, when these reach a certain point, reaction switches on automatically.

One of the keys to this process is, I think, that 1688 had created a monarchical pragmatism in Britain. The idea of kingship no longer carried the weight it had done. Monarchy had become a system, not a concept. What Burke understood – and sought to strengthen by giving it articulation – was that England wasn't susceptible to the ideas that were raging in France. Its constitution had developed antibodies to any dramatic form of progress. It was precisely because this element of lip-service to kingship was alien to France, where the homage was more hallowed, that the Revolution was so violent. There it wasn't a case of tinkering with a system but of the collision of ideas seriously lived through.

Burke understood this English suspicion of ideas very well. He celebrated it as the foundation of their political identity: 'All your sophisters cannot produce anything better adapted to preserve a rational and manly freedom than the course that we have pursued, who have chosen our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines of our privileges.'

Any system so based on 'nature' and the hallowed accumulation of past practices is bound to be reactionary. New ideas are blocked by assumptions that guard the doorway to the sanctum of tradition, where such humility is demanded of us that we must remove our heads before entering. Thus, what English politics have tended to be concerned with is not human justice but national practicality, not political philosophy but political plumbing, not the rights of man but the acquired characteristics of Englishmen.

What this leads to is a kind of intellectual *mortmain*: the dead hand of the collective past clenched around the possibility of serious change. It creates a terminally static society, founded on the perpetuation of a historical injustice that can only be compensated for by the hope of an afterlife: 'The body of the

people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportionate to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.’

One thing, I suspect, that Thatcherism has effectively achieved is to provide a shallow, mindless echo of this impressively articulated and inhumanly vicious stance, one deeply - perhaps terminally - ingrained in the English political psyche.

‘You will observe’, Burke says, and we do, ‘that from Magna Carta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate especially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right.’

One of the problems here is that Burke – along with English politics – is very selective in defining who those forefathers are. The family tree from which the constitution claims descent has been very carefully pruned. ‘We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as *an inheritance from our forefathers*’. Yes, but *which* forefathers? Dissent has its own genealogy, one of the foremost English progenitors of which has been Thomas Paine.

While Burke saw politics as a means of enshrining the past, Thomas Paine saw politics as an engine for creating a different future. His *Rights of Man* was a direct attack on Burke’s book. Burke was a pragmatist. Paine was a visionary. He was such a visionary that he sometimes saw with impressive certainty aspects of the future which were destined not to happen: -

‘The farce of Monarchy and Aristocracy in all countries is following that of chivalry, and Mr Burke is dressing for the funeral.’ And ‘I do not believe that Monarchy and Aristocracy

will continue seven years longer in any of the enlightened countries of Europe.’

That was a pretty cloudy crystal ball he had there. Not only have we not got rid of the old aristocracy, we’ve created a new one – the lords of the money.

Yet his book remains a formidable assault on the assumptions of the past, a battering ram of intelligence with which to attack old fortresses of privilege and try to set free a more just future. He sees government as being not so much the master of the people as their servant:

‘Government is not a trade which any man, or any body of men, has a right to set up and exercise for his own emolument, but it is altogether a trust in right of those by whom the trust is delegated, and by whom it is always resumable. It has of itself no rights; they are altogether duties.’

The book, like all his writing, was two things in one: a manifesto for social change and a blueprint of how he would live his own life. He inhabited his beliefs. Seeing the revolutions in America and France as the hope of a brave new world, he went to both countries.

In America he fought on the side of the revolutionary forces. He also wrote a pamphlet called *Common Sense* which sold 500,000 copies to a free population of only two million people. John Adams, who became the second president of the United States, said of it: ‘Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense* the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain.’ In acknowledgment of his contribution to the freedom of America, Paine was given a small estate in New Rochelle by New York.

His support for the French Revolution took him to France, where his opposition to what he saw as the brutally unnecessary execution of the king helped to land him in prison. Only the fall of Robespierre saved his life.

On his eventual return to America, he found that he had

become too politically radical for his adopted country – not a difficult thing to do there, even from the country’s inception. His recent publication, *The Age of Reason*, had called Christianity into question. He admired the Iroquois Indians for their ability to live in harmony with nature. He was fervently opposed to slavery. His later writings are said to have been described by John Adams as a ‘crapulous mass’. When he tried to vote locally in an American election, he was turned away as an atheistic non-person. In 1809 he died in poverty at La Rochelle. The Quakers local to his district refused to bury him.

Many years after his death, Robert Ingersoll (a declared agnostic) described Paine’s burial: ‘At his funeral no pomp, no pageantry, no civic procession, no military display. In a carriage, a woman and her son who had lived on the bounty of the dead – on horseback, a Quaker, the humanity of whose heart dominated the creed of his head – and, following on foot, two negroes filled with gratitude – constituted the funeral cortège of Thomas Paine.’

Legend has it that there were six people at his funeral. Ingersoll mentions only five but maybe the sixth was whoever was driving the coach. Either way, it’s not a lot.

Yet, poor as he was, he left a rich inheritance of faith in a future different from the past.

Historically, Burke won the argument. The subsequent history of British politics testifies to that. But Paine’s alternative vision persists. More than a hundred years after his death some of the social advances he had advocated passed into law: child allowance, free education, old-age pensions and welfare benefits. That’s not a bad legacy to have left.

The mills of social progress grind slowly and sometimes they don’t seem to grind at all. But sometimes, however belatedly, they yield significant change. They can only do so when governments opt for the kind of humane priorities that Paine demanded.

Reactionary government tends to make great play of facing ‘the facts of life’, as if it were obeying some cosmic mandate. But the truth is that the facts of social life are partially created by governments, according to their priorities. Things become more or less affordable in relation to how far you see them as being necessary and adjust other expenditure accordingly. The just society is a deliberate political creation. It is the only society worth trying to create.

Paine’s social advances which were ultimately conceded would have been easily financed in his lifetime. What delayed them for so long was not the means to afford them but the political will to enact them, which was blocked by the determination to keep unjustifiable privilege and preposterous sums of money in private hands.

Isn’t that reminiscent of where we still are? Plus ça change. The more things change, the more they stay the same – we remain habituated to the past and often vote out of fear of change. Paine’s real legacy is to encourage us to contradict that impulse. He gave us the entitlement to dream of a society better than the one we happen to live in. That obviously includes the entitlement to dream a Scotland better than the one we currently inhabit. He taught us what a vote can mean.

X should mark the spot where hope of change is – not the fear of it.

Whichever way Scotland votes in this referendum there are risks. A no vote will be a vote for political inertia, an abjuration of change. That old Scottish shibboleth ‘better the deil ye ken’ will leave the future handcuffed to the past, and the key not in our possession for the foreseeable future. A yes vote will take us into unknown territory. There will be challenging hazards ahead, the biggest of which may be the fact that we will be reaffirming our nationhood at a time when events seem to be trying to render that concept less and less relevant.

In his interesting book *Who Are We?*, Gary Younge quotes from Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs McWorld*: 'By many measures corporations are more central players in global affairs than nations. We call them multinationals but they are more accurately understood as postnational, transnational or even anti-national. For they abjure the very idea of nations or any other parochialism that limits them in time or place.'

In illustration of that point Younge cites the case of Brazil, where in 2002 a left-wing government was elected for the first time in the country's history. Within three months, \$6 billion had been pulled out of the country 'and some agencies had given Brazil the highest debt-risk rating in the world.' An aide to the president said, 'We are in government but we are not in power.'

That's a bit of a frightener, isn't it? But let's not panic. Scotland is small enough to be lost in a corner of Brazil and is therefore more easily adaptable as a nation to changing circumstances. It has a political coherence Brazil can only dream of. It has a prolonged history of entrepreneurial experience. Think of the significant part it played in that long act of international rapine called the British Empire. And Scotland is already hooked up to a network of finance coming from beyond its borders. The providers of such finance could presumably adapt to an independent Scotland and still serve their own interests.

And such a change should not be regarded as a retreat into parochialism but rather as a reaffirmation of an international identity, which is something the multinationals wish to ignore. What they represent is not internationalism. It is inter-non-nationalism. It is a way of forbidding people from having a significant identity beyond being a potential market. They see countries as abstractions in a financial game. The world is their Monopoly board and all the nations just the inert pieces with which they play.

Why not try to use such limited powers as we have to bring



one of those inert pieces alive, namely our own country, and give it a political dynamic beyond the sterile preconceptions of the multinational companies?

All these reflections mean is that, come the referendum, I will take my cue from an anecdote told to my brother by a fellow sportswriter. I had the story second-hand but I'm sure I have the gist of it right. Once, when Reg Gutteridge was in Las Vegas, no doubt to cover a boxing match, he had occasion to talk to Siegfried and Roy. They were German showmen who had a dangerous act involving two tigers. To advertise the show, they would sometimes put leashes on the tigers and take them for a walk through part of Las Vegas. Asked if this didn't invite challenges from every dog they passed, one of the men dismissed the idea. These were tigers, after all. Then he paused and said something like, 'Oh, no. No. Wrong. One dog keep bark, barking at the tigers. Very small dog with square head.' Further enquiries established that the dog was a Scots terrier.

So, on September 18<sup>th</sup> (while being fully aware of the tigerish rapacity of the multinationals but also having a firm belief that Scotland has a lot more to offer than that small dog had) I will imitate the action not of the tiger but of the Scottie: 'Okay, tigers. Come ahead!'

I will vote yes.

One of the popular myths about contemporary Scotland is that it has a desire for a just society more radical than it has the parliamentary power to express. It's a myth I tend to share in. I've suggested before that a motto for modern Scotland might be – instead of the old, belligerent 'Wha daur meddle wi' me?' – something more gently insistent, like 'Wait a minute! That's no' fair.' Like a lot of people, I think Scotland is more Tom Paine than it is Edmund Burke. At the moment it can only be a theory

but I think it's time we tested it.

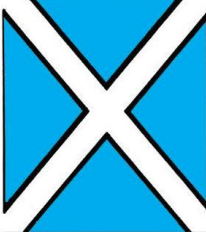
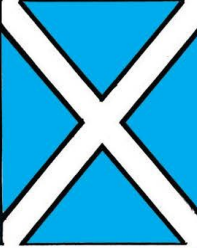
Politically, Scotland is like a living entity which has been cryogenically frozen and stored within the UK for over 300 years. Isn't it time to come out of history's deep-freeze and explore for ourselves who we really are? Whatever that reality turns out to be, let's confront it. It's time to grow up and take full responsibility for ourselves. A yes vote would do that.

Such a vote would, of course, involve risk but not, it seems to me, as much risk as voting no would entail – something like social stasis more or less indefinitely. I will see my vote as not merely a national vote (and certainly not a racial one) but as primarily a political vote. I will want such votes to impact on British politics, which I regard as being moribund at the moment.

We live in a time when the myopia of a woman who kept her horizons in a purse has narrowly redefined the parameters of British politics. No wonder she saw the mutation of the Labour party into New Labour as her greatest achievement. That twee term was like radicalism volunteering for a vasectomy and then offering to father significant change in society. New Labour is like a shop window with no habitable premises behind it. You can look but there is nothing you could 'buy'.

I will vote for the hopeful renewal in British politics of a radical belief in the quest for social justice.





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