

'SENSE AND WORTH': A REVIEW ESSAY

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William McIlvanney (1996), **The Kiln**, London: Hodder and Stoughton, pb, £6.99, ISBN 0340657367.

The 'Big Man' of Scottish Literature had hardly published his latest novel, **The Kiln**, towards the end of 1996 when it was awarded the Saltire Prize. Willie McIlvanney has thus added yet another trophy to his long list of literary honours, which include the Whitbread Award and the Crime Writers Association's Silver Dagger. McIlvanney must be doing something right, for apart from being honoured by his peers, he is massively popular in his own country, is translated into French and German, and is taught in literature courses in the universities of these and other European countries. Yet McIlvanney is praised with faint damns by many of the literary critics in Scotland. He is variously old-fashioned/not innovative; sexist/macho; romantic/reactionary; nationalist/chauvinist; and aggressive/obsessed with violence. It is curious, therefore, that a writer with so many obvious lacunae should be one of the most-borrowed writers in Glasgow District Libraries. One would think that the reading public would recoil from all these warts. But apparently not.

This essay, in discussing **The Kiln**, attempts to give a highly personal overview of McIlvanney's prose oeuvre in an attempt to reconcile these apparent contradictions. It will not engage with the copious technical critical literature on McIlvanney's work, but will rather try to evaluate it in McIlvanney's own terms, in the territory where lit. crit., history, sociology, philosophy and real life intersect - as in any one of Jack Laidlaw's pubs in either Glasgow or Graithnock, for example. However, reference will be made to the 1993 articles by Jeremy Idle and Alexandra Howson in this journal to the extent that they are exemplars of critical perspectives on McIlvanney's prose. The former could be included in the dismissive school of literary

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criticism; the latter, in a feminist sociology. This essay will not deal with his poetry.

The Kiln is a wonderful novel. It is set mainly in Graithnock in the summer of 1955, when Tom Docherty is 17, about to leave school and go to university. It is narrated as a flashback from contemporary Edinburgh where the older Tom, a writer, is reviewing his life. It is, therefore, quite literally, McIlvanney's 'Portrait of the Artist as an Adolescent', for Tom is of course the author's alter ego. This is a well-worn theme in literature, and yet the author manages to bring to his portrait a freshness, insight, wit and compassion which is compelling, as we shall see. More than that, McIlvanney tells his story with an almost desperate honesty which is truly courageous. As he himself says, young Tom is a '...passionately confused boy'. We get the passion and we get the confusion, we get the sense of teenage wonder at the unknowability of the world. While it goes without saying that **The Kiln** is another canto in McIlvanney's ongoing elegy for West Central Scotland's manual working-class, there is more to it than that. These deeper concerns are summed-up in the quotation from Robert Burns which I have taken for the title of this essay.

It has seemed to me for a long time now that one of McIlvanney's *idées fixes* is the sheer emotional cost of social mobility out of that class. This is an important problematic which sociology has under-recognised for far too long. For while it is true that many people cannot wait to get out of the bleak housing-schemes of places like Graithnock, some find that the social mobility afforded by higher education involves acute personal, familial and class identity problems. I have personally observed this in the three west of Scotland universities in which I have taught. Believe it or not, I know more than a few mature students who have elected not to do an honours degree, or continue on into post-graduate work, because they feel in some sense that it would betray their class background, their roots. McIlvanney's skill lies in exploring such angst delicately.

The Kiln is a series of vignettes on this theme, with particular reference to Tom's family and friends. It is the culmination of what has effectively become a saga of the Docherty family, for young Tom is the son of Conn the miner who is the son of Tam the miner who is the son of Conn the Irishman. And Tam, of course, is Docherty. **The Kiln** is, then, a classic *rites de passage* novel. It contains a sensitively-drawn picture of Tom's loving and supportive manual working-class family in a Graithnock council house, embedded in its own particularistic rituals and oral history, and we recognise both personnel and incidents from earlier novels. There are scenes of the

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young Tom at school, standing up to the teachers who want him to stay on for a sixth year to do the Bursary Competition, which brings them and the school credit in the league-table of performance, rather than any self-fulfillment for the boy. There are colourful scenes of Tom at the (pre-disco) dancing, evoking a world which some of us of a certain generation will remember all too clearly - and which produced a burst of acute nostalgia in this reviewer. There is a vivid portrait of the seventeen-year-old Tom labouring in the heat and filth of **The Kiln** of the local brickworks, the metaphor for the title of the novel, and winning his spurs by banjoing Cran, the Works hardman, for insulting his family. But a central motif is male adolescent obsession with sex, or more correctly, how to get it. One would think that it was almost impossible to say something new about this, but McIlvanney manages to do so in an evocative manner. For example, he writes a powerful erotic scene where young Tom is eventually seduced by Maddie Fitzpatrick, an older experienced woman. Finally, with the warm blessing of his own family, and the raucous encouragement of his mates, the seventeen-year-old Tom sets off on his odyssey from Graithnock to the University of Glasgow - wearing a brand new university blazer and scarf. And we wish him well, while smiling at his naff gear!

As always, McIlvanney's prose style crackles. And this, it seems to me, is one of the keys to the critical distaste for his work. McIlvanney writes so well and so clearly that he engages directly with the reader. In this sense, we do not need the intervention of the critics to translate his meaning. McIlvanney is as popular as he is not just because he is a very good novelist, but also because he strikes - and means to strike - central chords in the tone-poem of manual working-class culture in west central Scotland. While some may feel that he is obsessed with this region to the exclusion of the rest of Scotland, it seems to me that there is simply no argument as to what he is writing about. He tells us explicitly, not once, but many times, in different ways, in each of his novels, from **Remedy is None** to **The Kiln**. Thus I use the term *idée fixe* quite deliberately and non-pejoratively, in the way it is used of Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique', for example.

This brings me to another critical point sometimes made about McIlvanney's prose: that he overwrites, that he uses four subordinate adjectival clauses where none would do, that he tells too much rather than shows, in the celebrated phrase. Well, what we are talking about here is literary taste, and literary fashion. And I would argue that my taste is as good as yours, and that McIlvanney is a very tasty writer indeed. We don't have to do lit. crit. classes to know that literary fashion is manipulated, or, dare I say it, socially constructed. As McIlvanney resolutely declines to write à la mode, the

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chances are that he will always be unfashionable, in this country. So these arguments about style simply do not impress.

These two points can be conflated by looking at some of McIlvanney's own words. In **The Kilm**, the young Tom/Tam, while at senior secondary, meets a boy who was at Primary School in Graithnock with him, but whom he now seldom sees:

Their intermittent exchanges have acquired the guardedness of sentries talking across the borders of separate countries. Education can do that to you, Tam thinks. Your head emigrates and you're a full citizen neither of where you were nor of where you are.
(p.82)

Yes, we are being told something here. And no, I don't mind being told it, because it is a strikingly insightful observation. Here are three observations about roots:

To challenge conditioning without trying to eradicate it, to modify it honestly in the light of individual thought, was to become yourself. The rest was an act of psychic self-deceit. He wouldn't be pretending to be who he wasn't.
(p.114)

And:

You cannot talk beyond your own time by denying its specificity. You must try and inhabit it so intensely that you may, with luck and honesty and talent, say some words that relate to any time, to the nature of times.
(pp.163-4)

And:

The only basis for morality becomes love of your kind.
(pp 190-1)

These observations are not the only observations, nor possibly even the most profound observations, which could be made - or have been made - about either life or writing; but they are tenable positions, honestly, unambiguously and courageously stated. And they resonate with intelligence. They absolutely demand to be confronted on their own grounds.

So let us praise a famous writer, first of all, before examining in more detail the alleged deficiencies of McIlvanney's writing. In his first novel, **Remedy**

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is None, published as long ago as 1966, we see McIlvanney lay down some of his *idées fixes*. Charlie Grant is summoned back to Graithnock from university to attend his dying father. (I take Charlie Grant and the Tom Docherty of **The Kilm** to be isomorphic.) We are then given a moving description of a death-bed scene, and a superb account of the intricate emotional scaffolding of working-class family life. Charlie's grief at the death of his father and his inability to express it leads him to lash out - improperly - at his girl-friend, Mary. This is honestly and movingly described. Men's lack of emotional intelligence in such situations is echoed in subsequent novels, notably with Jack Laidlaw and his woman-friend Jan. En route, McIlvanney tells many stories about working-class life; some, like 'The Night That Uncle Hughie Fought the Egg', in **Remedy is None**, are very funny. It might be argued that such an exercise is at best romanticism, at worst, nostalgia. Neither is true. McIlvanney is telling an iconic story about his class, and his family, the way they experienced their lives then, and he is an incomparable story-teller.

But the theme of the relative lack of self-awareness on the part of many of his male characters is continued in his bleak, pessimistic, and indeed somewhat nihilistic second novel, **A Gift From Nessus**, which I find very hard to place. In it, he shows, as he does elsewhere, that he has a mercilessly accurate eye, and ear, for the poisonous exchanges, malevolent masks and melancholy deceits of doomed relationships - in this case, a marriage. These insights are expressed in a series of vivid similes: 'Allison smiled, her teeth showing like a row of icicles' (p.49). In this novel, he also establishes a theme which perhaps unconsciously runs through much of his work: a pessimism about heterosexual relationships. This is a theme to which I will return.

Docherty was published in 1975, and earned McIlvanney the Whitbread Award. Until **The Kilm**, it was without a doubt his best book. It is a loving portrait of a mining community, sociological in its detail. It has many strengths: it offers a sensitive discussion of religious mixed marriages, a volatile topic in the west central Scotland of the day; it provides an accurate and respectful discussion of the women of such communities, particularly Jenny, Tam's wife, as carers, keepers of the traditions, oral historians, wise women; the picture of childhood is affectionate, colourful, and wholly unpatronising; it offers a graphic description of Tam Docherty's kamikaze pride and independence; it points to the emotional inarticulacy of the men of the community; in a picture of a Hogmanay party, it provides an atmosphere you could cut with a knife and take home to savour; and it contains a truly impressive picture of a death, wake and funeral. The prose is plangent:

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The gas-mantle putted like a sick man's heart. Dimmed to a bead of light, it made the room mysterious as a chapel. The polished furniture, enriched by darkness, entombed fragments of the firelight that moved like tapers in a tunnel. The brasses glowed like ikons. Even in the half-light the cleanliness of the room proclaimed itself.
(pp.18-19)

The fictional ethnography rings these familiar major chords again:

Where so little was owned, sharing became a precautionary reflex. The only security they could have was one another. Most things were borrowable, from a copper for the gas to a black suit for funerals.
(p.32)

And:

He saw families as little fortresses of loyalty and sanity and mutual concern, set defiantly in a landscape of legalised looting and social injustice.
(p.93)

A comparison of these warm sentiments with those of 'My Childhood', Bill Douglas's near-contemporary filmic portrait of an east coast Scottish mining-village (Newcraighall) proves instructive. For Douglas's portrait is as relentlessly bleak as McIlvanney's is warm, perhaps providing a corrective to the latter's unswerving *gemütlichkeit*.

A couple of years later, in 1977, McIlvanney published **Laidlaw**, the first of his (so far) three novels about the Glasgow-based Scottish Crime Squad cop, Detective-Inspector Jack Laidlaw. Laidlaw also comes from Graithnock - not Glasgow - and is a contemporary and pal of Tom Docherty of **The Kiln**. With Laidlaw, McIlvanney has created a highly original character who nevertheless belongs squarely in the crime genre, one plainly influenced by Raymond Chandler at that, but one who speaks with a distinct west of Scotland accent. Laidlaw is not half a character. He is a cop who is a moral philosopher, with Kierkegaard, Camus and Unamuno in his police-station desk, a humanist who refuses to believe that neds are necessarily morally worse than cops, a bevvie-merchant who drinks a lot of 'The Antiquary' when in angst, which is frequently, a streetwise sociologist, a connoisseur of the urban surreal, a master of the lightning repartee, an unhappy husband and therefore perenially guilty lover and father, a man who encapsulates the Caledonian Antisizygy in his whole persona:

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He was potentially a violent man who hated violence, a believer in fidelity who was unfaithful, an active man who longed for understanding.
(p.9)

Needless to say, Laidlaw evinces some of McIlvanney's *idées fixes* in characteristic prose. Talking of Glasgow's four large peripheral housing schemes, Laidlaw says:

And what's there? Hardly anything but houses. Just architectural dumps where they unloaded the people like slurry. Penal architecture. Glasgow folk have to be nice people. Otherwise, they would have burned the place to the ground years ago.
(p.32)

The second Laidlaw novel is **The Papers of Tony Veitch** (1983.) In this one, the character of Laidlaw becomes fuller, and we re-encounter such memorable neds as Cam Colvin and John Rhodes, and there are no prizes in Glasgow at any rate for guessing on whom the latter is based. McIlvanney's portraiture of the hardmen and their curious morality - or amorality - is totally convincing, as is the edge which these men have to have, and which he shows us. But there are a few observations in this novel which lift it above the merely competent run-of-the-mill crime thriller. Laidlaw shows us on several occasions that he is vitally concerned about the brotherhood of man, and that contrary to his enemy, fellow-cop and arch-berr Ernie Milligan, he is both morally non-judgemental, and compassionate as a man. Laidlaw/McIlvanney has concerns other than mere police procedure and detection:

No death is irrelevant. It's part of the pain of all of us, even if we don't notice.
(p.187)

Then suddenly, the eye is stopped by a remark all the more arresting for being made by a cop:

...literature is an intensification of life, not an insulation against it.
(p.102)

Just so. Discuss with reference to....

The Big Man was published in 1985, and comes between the second and third of the Laidlaw novels. It is the work of McIlvanney which has attracted

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the greatest obloquy, which lays itself open most easily to charges of romantic machismo, a charge even more justifiably made of the television film of the same name. Yet in this story of Dan Scoular, an unemployed worker who is cajoled into a bare-knuckle fight for money, there are the by-now familiar flashes of empathy for the state to which Thatcherism has reduced the local working-class - and McIlvanney said explicitly in a television interview that the bare-knuckle fight in **The Big Man** was a metaphor for struggle against Thatcherite capitalism (Channel 4, 'The Media Show', 1990):

The wastage - the good minds starved, the talents denied, the potential distorted - was beyond computation.
(p.173)

And:

They had been well trained in futility.
(p.240)

But there are equally the familiar flashes of resistance to this oppression:

You couldn't choose who you were but you could choose how to use who you were.
(p.243)

I would have to say that I find this to be a curious novel, whose central metaphor does not convince me, even although I can see that McIlvanney is trying to find another way of expressing his anger and revulsion at the Thatcherite offensive against the working-class, particularly miners. It does not convince me because, at the end of the day, violent individual insurgency against the system gets you only the jail, the asylum, or dead. And in spite of McIlvanney's patent belief in the brotherhood of man, Dan Scoular makes no effort to mobilise locals, either men or women, on a collective, class basis against the destruction of their community by either the forces of capitalism or Glasgow neds. So in this instance, the critics are correct: the metaphor is both distinctly romantic, and macho.

Strange Loyalties (1991) is McIlvanney's third Laidlaw novel, and the last one before **The Kilm**. It is in its own right an enthralling detective story, in which numerous Runyonesque characters pop up again - Gus McPhater, Fast Frankie, Tommy Brogan, Matt Mason. Dan Scoular, **The Big Man**, also pops up - dead. Laidlaw persists in his idiosyncratic metaphysical quests, yet such is McIlvanney's talent that he takes us with him: there is no problem about

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the disbelief being willingly suspended. But in many senses, this novel contains the most elaborated statement of the author's philosophy about the human condition, albeit Laidlaw is his spokesman. The *idée fixe* about social mobility appears again:

If you lose where you come from, you lose where you're going.
(p.127)

And again:

We were all from working-class backgrounds. The chance we had was held in trust from others ... Whatever talents we had belonged to the man in the street. Each of us had to find our own way of reconnecting with him.
(p.349)

On ordinary human decency:

We had both grown up in a house where we were taught to believe the best about people. You gave the world what you had and the world gave back.
(p.126)

And on working-class women:

She was one of a courageous multitude of women who without too much fuss made all of our lives better than they would otherwise have been.
(p.195)

Call me old-fashioned, sorry, pre-modernist, if you will, but I happen to think that these are values with a certain fundamental humanity, possibly even nobility, about them. A feminist perspective on this last quotation might well argue that it is all about subservience, not 'nobility'. However, I would argue that you do not necessarily have to make a fuss to be a feminist, and that many working-class women of the kind McIlvanney describes, at the time he describes them, were strong women's women. They cannot be blamed for having neither the discourse nor the sexual politics of the post-1960s Women's Movement at their disposal. They dug in where they stood, and fought back, granted as frequently against their men as against the system. But at least they were active; McIlvanney's verb is 'made'. It seems beside the point to accuse them of not waging a war of movement: they didn't have access to the manual.

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So what is it about such a talented writer who so obviously wears a decent heart on his sleeve, that can attract such disdain from critics like Jeremy Idle (1993)?

In a recent essay, Douglas Gifford says of McIlvanney:

His is an older voice which survives into a contemporary Scotland, restating old loyalties and yearning for old class bonding and community and simpler solutions, a yearning which seems increasingly poignant in its despair and romantic anachronism.
(Gifford 1996, p.43)

While it is possible to see what Gifford means here, 'yearning' is of itself neither necessarily desperate nor anachronistic. Earlier in this essay, I used the word 'elegy' of McIlvanney's prose. But elegizing the past is a major component of Scottish literature, as Gifford allows in this same essay. Grassic Gibbon elegized the passing of the peasantry of the Mearns; Rush elegized the passing of the Fife herring fishermen; Mackay Brown elegized the passing of the Orcadian villagers of Greenvoe. It seems to me, therefore, that McIlvanney is in good company. Gifford, elsewhere in this same essay, accuses McIlvanney of 'melodramatising' violence (Gifford 1996, p.42), of 'drawing too heavily on traditional Irish and West-of-Scotland male-dominated ideology', and of 'angry confusion' (ibid., p.43.) But one person's melodrama is another person's drama, and as Gifford does not provide an exegesis of his point, he stands accused of attacking McIlvanney by inference rather than argument.

Let us look more closely at Gifford's critical points involving the 'West-of-Scotland male-dominated ideology', and 'angry confusion'. I take it that Gifford is implying here that McIlvanney is uniquely pessimistic about the overall contemporary human condition, that his male characters are prisoners of their gender, that the writer provides unsympathetic or sexist discussions of the female characters in his novels, and that the whole context is in some sense reactionary. Well, by way of comparison, let us consider the male characters of James Kelman, an infinitely more fashionable writer than McIlvanney. Are they any freer than McIlvanney's? Are they any less alienated? Do they transcend the 'West-of-Scotland male-dominated ideology?' If they are/do, I fail to see it. Kelman's male characters seem to me to be equally trapped in their existential angst, but are distinctly different from McIlvanney's characters in that they are unapologetically parasitic on family and friends while they indulge in their head-trips. At least McIlvanney's characters fight back against their oppression, however

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ineffectively, and seem to retain a certain respect for their families, and particularly the women within them. But ironically, both Kelman and McIlvanney appear to me to share a fundamentally conservative vision of the future. And this, as Roderick Watson has pointed out, is no new thing in Scottish fiction:

the fabric of Scottish identity, as woven by the early writers of the modern Literary Renaissance, contains a curious amalgum [sic] of radical and conservative elements, neither of which can be entirely separate from each other.
(Watson 1996, p.292)

Perhaps it is time to return to Idle's 1993 article on McIlvanney in this journal. This article has already been called to task rather gently elsewhere (Dixon 1996), but I wish to re-investigate it in the light of the recent publication of **The Kiln**, as I believe that the paper seriously traduces McIlvanney.

Idle focuses on McIlvanney's 'masculine values rather than his general novelistic talent' (Idle 1993, p.50), and takes the writer to task in the four areas of 'Superiorism', 'Alcohol and Democracy', 'Dependent Women and Independent Men', and 'Myth, History and Real Life'. In the first section of his paper, Idle discusses McIlvanney's Detective Inspector Laidlaw as someone:

who despises the effete world of academic studies in the arts, but does read:

quite a lot of philosophy in a frenetic way, like a man looking for the hacksaw that must be hidden somewhere, before the executioner comes. Unamuno says something like: if a man loses his sense of his own continuity, then he's had it. His bum's out the window. Sorry, Miguel, if I'm not quoting accurately.

There is something decidedly bogus about such defiant offhandedness.
(ibid., p.51)

There is something decidedly bogus about Idle's offhanded dismissal of Laidlaw's view of academics in the arts, for, apart from the fact that he has got the quotation wrong, I cannot find his phrase about 'despising the effete world of academic studies' anywhere in any of the three Laidlaw novels. On the other hand, Laidlaw does make some very acerbic remarks about academics in the Arts; these are in Chapter 14 of **The Papers of Tony**

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Veitch. But Idle neither quotes these, nor addresses them. Thus he is smearing Laidlaw/McIlvanney by unsubstantiated inference.

Idle's second allegation is that McIlvanney and his characters are into pub culture, which was exclusive of women. There are three paragraphs in this section. In the first, Idle refers to MacDiarmid's 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', and repeats the well-known point that MacDiarmid thought bevvie was a good thing. So what? So Laidlaw bevvies? Booze is part of the genre, for God's sake. In the second paragraph, Idle discusses Dan Scoular's drinking habits in **The Big Man**. Quite apart from the fact that Dan Scoular is a very moderate drinker, Idle notes that at the end of the novel, having won the big fight, Dan goes to his local against the wishes of his wife. He is escorted home by the local men, so that the bad guys can't get at him. Idle translates this thus: 'Dan's personal resolution to take better care of his family pales into insignificance in relation to the images of male bonding' (p.52). Naw. McIlvanney depicts Dan Scoular as a family man who is not unsurprisingly troubled at his lack of work. His visits to the pub are part of the ordinary cultural context of that kind of unemployed worker. And that culture is patriarchal. Maybe it shouldn't be, maybe it involves the systematic oppression of women, but that is the way it is and was. Dan Scoular to me is a patently good man trapped in a culture which predicated segregated gender roles. McIlvanney portrays it accurately. Idle criticises McIlvanney for not maintaining a critical distance from his material, for not challenging the patriarchy. But as we have seen above, McIlvanney's belief is that the writer's first task is to 'intensify life'. Most critics seem to agree that to the extent that novelists preach against perceived wrongs, or advocate their version of rights, so the artistic merit of their work suffers. Thus in his last paragraph, Idle accuses McIlvanney of 'tub-thumping' about the alleged democratic values of Scots as opposed to the English, and quotes David McCrone's ironic remarks about the myths surrounding such values. And therefore McIlvanney is rubbished yet again. But Idle cannot have his cake and eat it. He would do well to read the rest of McCrone's chapter, for, good sociologist as he is, he points not only to the 'falseness' of myth, but also to its roots in reality, and to the more important fact that myth serves some real function in society. McIlvanney describes this process in rich ethnographic detail in his fiction, demonstrating these functions; Idle makes the elementary mistake of conflating myth with falsehood.

Idle's third section accuses McIlvanney of presenting his women as victims, as unequal to men, as seen only in relation to men. But the points he makes here are made with much greater clarity and incision by Howson, so I will subsume his criticism in the latter's. Howson's main point is that, in the

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twentieth century, Scottish women have found identities as workers, political agents and consumers, as well as in the traditional domestic caring roles. She asks if McIlvanney represents this; the fact of the matter is that he does not. Howson says:

The fiction of William McIlvanney [and Robin Jenkins] in particular encapsulates the marginal positions allocated to women in representational terms which distort their political and cultural activities in contemporary Scotland.
(Howson 1993, p.41)

Howson expands on this point to really make her case:

Where are the women in McIlvanney's novels? They are beside and peripheral to their men. It is not that women explicitly experience less hardship than men in this genre, but within McIlvanney's work it becomes plain that such hardship is acceptable as part of being a woman, rather than as a consequence of their class position - which is clearly the implication for men. The social position of women therefore becomes intractable, whereas for men, proletarianisation and its associated identity always offers a solution to social and political oppression.
(ibid., p.42)

It seems to me that the first point is true, and the latter untrue. If by 'proletarianisation' Howson means the process of recognising that working class interests are inevitably locked into systematic exploitation by the bourgeoisie, and then taking action on these interests - the classic formula of a Leninist 'class-for-itself' - then nothing could be further from the truth in McIlvanney's prose. Although he pays lip-service to trades unions and strikes in novels like *Docherty*, class action is explicitly eschewed in favour of some kind of romantic existential stance emphasising individual independence, as we have already seen. Perhaps Howson means that McIlvanney is a male workerist; if she does, she should say so. I could go some way to agreeing with that.

This having been said, Howson's observations about the residualisation of McIlvanney's women characters are well-made. The issue here is the representation of women. McIlvanney never gives his women a voice which complains about, or criticises, their domestic situation. They are never portrayed as taking action on their situation; their perennial role is to react to the totemic world of their men:

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The passivity portrayed by women stands in stark contrast with the dynamic heroism of the men, and presents a sense of sacrifice which glorifies a type of masculinity associated with power, aggression, and insecurity - material and emotional.
(*ibid.*, p.43)

These are telling observations. McIlvanney's women are the symbolic backcloth to his men's personal struggles, which more often than not - not always, but frequently - are physical. To the extent that McIlvanney has not gained an insight into this failing in his fiction in just over thirty years of writing is to his discredit - for this particular criticism has been made frequently, including by myself (Damer 1990, 1996), and in more elaborated form by a woman critic who is more than well-disposed to his fiction (Dickson 1993) And in all honesty, **The Kiln** shows little sign of an increased awareness of the wider social, economic and political implications of the sexual division of labour he describes so well.

This having been said, I would like to offer two pleas in mitigation. Firstly, McIlvanney self-evidently both likes and respects the women in his working-class novels. I beg to differ from both Idle's and Howson's reading of Jenny in Docherty, for example. I do not perceive an uncritical portrait of a totally dependent, passive woman. I see an affectionate and respectful testimony to her, and all the women from McIlvanney's class background, whose self-fulfillment may have come from their devotion to their families, but whose personalities were neither spiritless nor uncritical. In **The Kiln**, for example, Tom's mother Betsy is a very spirited woman who stands up against her husband for her son's right to go to university. The point is that within what sociology has called the 'traditional working-class', the historical evidence demonstrates that a telling performance in the ascribed role of wife/mother was the main way in which 'respectable' women gained self-fulfillment and social respect, until relatively recently. This was the case because such women were either systematically excluded from the more skilled occupations in the labour-market, or, if in waged labour, their occupations were systematically devalued when skilled (McIvor 1996). Secondly, McIlvanney is writing mainly about men, men from a particular industrial culture in a particular region of Scotland. He frequently highlights the emotional semi-literacy of these men. And he frequently admits to the greater emotional intelligence of women on many occasions in his fiction. Indeed, it is possible to read the masculinity of his characters as a plea for help in escaping the confining role of their machismo. His failure is not to articulate these acute insights with the wider political economy.

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It seems pointless, then, to proceed any further with Idle's article. It seems to me that he has his own agenda, which has little to do with either the substance or the spirit of McIlvanney's fiction. It would be idle to pretend that he makes any effort to grapple with the deeply humanistic and philosophical preoccupations of McIlvanney, whether expressed through Dan Scoular, Jack Laidlaw or Tom Docherty. Idle nowhere acknowledges that McIlvanney, nothing if not a realist writer, resolutely declines to have his characters thump any tubs or preach any sermons or sell any party lines or peddle any utopias - a quite striking difference from many other writers concerned with social realism. McIlvanney's main male characters are always, in actual fact, riddled with self-doubt. To omit to note all this leaves Idle wide open to the charge of gross bad faith. Perhaps we can leave the last word on this kind of so-called analysis to McIlvanney himself, in an aside in **The Kiln**:

But these are meretricious times, in which slogan passes for thought and the intellectual scatter-gun is the favoured weapon of political precision.
(pp.190-1)

On the other hand, Howson produces a telling feminist critique of an important aspect of McIlvanney's fiction, one which requires a response. Although I have offered a defence of his writing, the real response must come from McIlvanney himself, in his own words, quite literally.

Before moving towards a conclusion, there are two last last aspects of McIlvanney's writing which I would like to address. Firstly, nearly all the critics say something about his depiction of violence, the implication being that he is guilty of the mortal sin of machismo. As was quoted earlier, no less a critic than Douglas Gifford refers to his 'melodramatisation of violence'. In other words, McIlvanney is himself uncritical of male violence. In my view, such a perspective requires modification. For a kick-off, McIlvanney does not write only about male violence; his *idées fixes*, as I have suggested earlier, are much wider in scope. But it would be foolish to pretend that the culture of manual working-class men in west central Scotland is not redolent of violence. This is not to say that it is the only aspect of that culture. But in the period about which McIlvanney is writing, which is this century, it certainly was a major dimension of that culture. As McIlvanney himself argued in a television programme about the 'hard men', violence was a method of communication within that section of the working-class, and there was some dignity to be gained by 'fighting-back', and violence was one way of fighting-back (Channel 4, op. cit.). To state this is to state the obvious. It is neither to condone this violence, nor to suspend critical judgement of its

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ultimate futility; it is to say that it was real. Inter-male violence was - and still is - a response to powerlessness. It was not the only one, but it was an important one. McIlvanney would be deceitful if he did not write about it, and its mythical power within that community - amongst women as well as men, it must be said. For my money, he not only does it well, but contrary to what some critics like Gifford argue, I think he does it critically, for he depicts the costs to the proponents of this violence.

Secondly, there is the question of McIlvanney's personal philosophy as expressed through the mouths of his main male characters. Again, there is no mistaking what this philosophy is; we are told repeatedly. For example, it is explicated on p.243 of **Docherty**. But in reading the critics, I cannot find a single occasion on which McIlvanney's philosophy is criticised as philosophy. This is a startling critical omission. And it is precisely what leads McIlvanney time and time again to his pessimism about heterosexual relationships. I am amazed that no one seems to have given it a square-go as philosophy.

To conclude: **The Kiln** is the apogee of McIlvanney's writing career thus far, in the opinion of this reviewer. It is a beautifully-written novel which combines insight with sensitivity and humour, and which displays the writer's good faith and courage for all to see. It is the culmination of a series of novels and short stories which have made an outstanding contribution to the fiction of the west of Scotland manual working-class, particularly to the men of that class. Now that that class, and these men, have all but disappeared under the onslaught of Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite capitalism, it is vital that they have a fitting epitaph, so that we can remember whence we came. In his life's writing project, and especially in **The Kiln**, Willie McIlvanney has provided a timeless elegy to several generations of people well worth remembering. His great gift in this last novel, the gift of all fine writing, is to convince the reader that it is his own experience. **The Kiln** produced an uneasy sense of déjà vu in me; it could have been written about my own childhood. The great pity is that McIlvanney does not seem to want to convince the female reader that it is also her own experience.

In a very real sense, I think that McIlvanney has a problem with what he writes next. To coin a Graithnock-appropriate phrase, I suspect he has now worked-out the seam of his own background. Personally, I would be interested in where Jack Laidlaw goes next. If he's not already retired from the polis, he must be on the point of retirement. And he plainly was in love with that attractive but rather enigmatic woman Jan. I wonder, could they

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could get it together? It would be a challenge for Willie McIlvanney to write about a mature, insightful, less aggressive, more laidback Laidlaw, one who is working on his emotional intelligence, and who is living with Jan, a strong, resourceful, independent, intelligent woman, active in her own right. My feeling is that McIlvanney might well give us all a big surprise. I certainly hope so.

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