

REVIEW: DEAR AULD GLESGA TOON

Seán Damer

Ian R. Mitchell, **This City Now: Glasgow and its Working Class Past**,
Edinburgh: Luath Press. 2005, 180 pp. £12.99, ISBN: 1842820826.

Glasgow, says the author of this book, is still ‘... a city dominated by its working-class and the history of their [sic] organizations and struggles’ (p.2). He then goes on to quote James Hamilton Muir’s **Glasgow in 1901**: ‘The glory of Glasgow is in what the unknown working class districts contain,’ and declares: ‘I take its comment as my starting point’ (p.2). The book, then, is a guide for the ‘urban Rambler’ to a selection of the numerous neighbourhoods which constitute the city of Glasgow, with the declared intention of ‘politicizing the pavements’ (p.4). So far, so good.

Mitchell then guides the reader through Pollokshaws, Govanhill, Gorbals, Govan, Clydebank, ‘Yokerstoun’ (Yoker + Scotstoun), Partick, Anderston, Maryhill, Possil, Springburn, Dennistoun, Parkhead, Rutherglen, and Bridgeton. While any book on Glasgow’s working-class past would have to include most of these neighbourhoods, Clydebank is *not* within the city of Glasgow, even although the author makes a case for its inclusion. An initial problem with a selection like this one is that it is highly personal, and some readers are always going to complain that *their* favourite neighbourhood was not included. For example, I would have excluded Clydebank in favour of Kinning Park, a neighbourhood with quite distinct cultural and urban attributes. And what about Cowcaddens, Cowlares, Temple, Plantation, or the Calton? I am also surprised that there is not more about Glasgow’s public-houses, and the role they played in its working-class history.

However, Mitchell’s affection for his city of residence – he is in fact an Aberdonian – is evident, and infectious. He pinpoints the major (usually)

Seán Damer is a former Senior Research Fellow in Sociology at the University of Glasgow, currently resident in New Zealand where he is following a second career as a writer.

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nineteenth-century, industrial enterprises in each of his neighbourhoods and supplies a plethora of detail about the local workforce, history, characters and notable incidents. Although he does not footnote his sources, nor provide a bibliography, they are evident to the discerning reader, and are well-deployed. There is an entertaining mix of the architectural, the statistical and the anecdotal. In short, the book is a good read. And at first sight anyway, Mitchell is on the right side. Anybody who asks for a memorial plaque to John Maclean's Marxist night classes in the John Maxwell School (p.15) gets my vote right away. And I agree with his sentiment that '... some of the best folk who trod this earth were the politicized generation of working-class people who came out the struggles of the first half of the twentieth century [in Glasgow]' (p.57).

Nevertheless, there are several serious defects in Mitchell's account. Firstly, much of what he says is already well-known to both historians and afficianados of Glasgow's past. Personally, I learned nothing new from this book. For example, John Maclean's life and death are very well-documented, and Mitchell's account is derivative. Secondly, there are several factual errors or errors of judgment which are not acceptable, given the extensive lexicon of Glasgow history. The repetition of the canard about drunks in the 'Wine Alley' (p.37) made me see red, especially given my own extensive, published deconstruction of that myth. Then, for Govanites, the point-of-reference known as the 'Black Man' refers to the Brechin Bar rather than the statue of Pearce outside. On page six, Mitchell says: 'We get volumes of poetry about the Highland Clearances, but where are the sonnets to the silent stones of Springburn?' There are in fact two volumes of poetry specifically about the silent stones of Glasgow, Hamish Whyte's magnificent collections, **Noise and Smoky Breath** and **Mungo's Tongues**. The latter contains the 1842 poem 'St. Rollox Lum's Address to its Brethren', set squarely in Springburn. Further, the tenement housing constructed by many of the shipyard barons was *not* squalid (p.40), but was in fact good housing by contemporary standards, a deliberate part of the 'social wage' paid to the labour aristocracy by canny employers – as in Linthouse, for example. Finally, for the moment, there is no excuse for reproducing incorrect words for Carl MacDougall's classic Glasgow ballad, 'Cod Liver Oil and Orange Juice'.

The strategic problem with **This City Now** is that Mitchell eschews a framework. He rambles round his neighbourhoods, and what he has to reveal about them is completely eclectic. He makes confusing leaps through time and space, and establishes connections between the architectural, the social

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and the political which remain at the anecdotal level. There is no analysis of his material, no politics, in short. Now, Mitchell might protest that his book is not meant to be a political guidebook to Glasgow working-class history. But his own sub-title refers to the working class which seems to me to predicate some kind of necessary theoretical or political implications. Instead, what we receive is in fact a form of sentimental antiquarianism, a couthy nostalgia for an imagined working-class community. This will not do. There is far too much uncritical use of terms like underclass and lumpenproletariat in this book, there are far too many liberal pleas for conservation of this or that landmark, or development of this or that neighbourhood and far too many patronizing remarks about punters. There is more than a hint of a nostalgia de la boue about the whole enterprise.

In four decades of taking foreign (i.e. non-Scottish) academics, students and film-crews round Glasgow, I myself utilized a framework of the parallel chronological development of industry and working-class housing. This enabled me to show visitors the nature of both early and later Victorian tenements, and to which units of production they related. Next, I was able to show them the original, experimental, pre-World War council housing, right slap-bang in the centre of the city. Then I was able to demonstrate the three basic layers of interwar council housing, with their unavoidable indicators of social class, not to mention the odd idiosyncratic development like Hamiltonhill – which is mentioned by Mitchell without any discussion whatsoever of its original tenancy structure. And so. But such a framework implies a theoretical/political 'take' on Glasgow urban development.

What Mitchell lacks is a sense of the political economy of housing and urban development. This is evident, for example, from his commenting continually on the literally toxic waste dumped by the 'industrial barons' of Glasgow's nineteenth-century development, but failure to note the systematicity of such practice, and its location in contemporary capitalist development. It was not just Lord Overton; it was all of them. They did not give a damn for the local working-class, and literally got away with murder. This waste is killing working-class people to this day, and to be fair to the author, he does mention this.

Some of Mitchell's remarks are quite staggering in their naivety. What on earth are we supposed to make of the following, where he is talking about the Allison Street area of Pollokshields (p.25)?

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The Pakistanis have been a great boon to Glasgow, making it not only the curry capital of the United Kingdom, but also bringing in some welcome additions to the local genetic stock, in the form of the gallus lads and gorgeous lasses of their community.

Is Mitchell unaware of the nasty racist murders committed in this area, or the fact that racial tension can be electric locally? Such blinkered liberalism leaves him wide open to charges of racism.

These are not carping remarks. The book raises some of these issues, but fails signally to address them. Because of the author's enthusiasm for his topic, which I share, I would like to have been more positive about this book. But its lacunae are too serious for unreserved approbation. Any book which will inspire a critical interest in Glasgow's working-class is to be encouraged, but a central problem with **This City Now** lies in its audience. I cannot see at whom it is aimed – except perhaps the *lumpenyuppies* who infest the trendy new housing along the banks of the Clyde, and elsewhere. However, if they think they will really have learned anything serious about the birth and growth of the Glasgow working-class, or its culture, communities or housing, from this book, they would be sadly mistaken. John Hume's work on the industrial archaeology of the city, or Irene Maver's on its industrial and urban development, remain benchmarks. Modesty forbids me to name the author of a *class* analysis of such development.

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