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James Barke

Politics, Cinema and Writing Scottish Urban Modernity

Elder, Keir

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James Barke: Politics,
Cinema and Writing
Scottish Urban Modernity

Keir Elder

PhD

University of Dundee

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Dedicated to the memory of Gail Wylie (1972 – 2004)

Declaration

I, Keir Elder, certify that this thesis has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, that all references cited have been consulted by me, and that it has not been previously accepted for a higher degree.

Date:

Signature:

I, Keith Williams, certify that the conditions of the relevant Ordinance and Regulations have been fulfilled.

Date:

Signature:

Abstract

This thesis examines the early works of the Scottish novelist, playwright, would-be screenwriter, commentator and political agitator, James Barke, to argue that he was a more significant figure on the Scottish literary scene than his place in the canon would suggest. The purpose in so doing is to suggest that his writing was symptomatic of a modernisation in Scottish society and letters during the 1930s. In prosecuting this endeavour, the research considers four aspects of the author's early output: the political dimension; his aesthetic sensibilities; the impact and representation of the city; and finally the part played by the experience and influence of the cinema. Equally, it is argued that these novels are emblematic of both the author's own migration from country to city and the longer-term transformation of Scotland's demography from largely rural-dwelling to largely urban-dwelling. The theoretical method engages with a Marxist critique and anchors Barke's early novels to his constantly evolving political commitment which tracks, but does not entirely subscribe to, the development of a broad range of Leftist ideologies of the era.

The jump-off point and principal underpinning of the research is an appreciation of James Barke's *Major Operation* (1936) as a Scottish novel of significance for its literary innovation, approach to, and rendering of, Scottish urban modernity. In the thoroughgoing 2002 analysis of the field in *Scottish Literature* edited by Douglas Gifford, *Major Operation* is identified as one of the Scottish novels 'extending its perspective of ironic social realism to the city' and a novel that 'had

no time for non-political and non-economic considerations.¹ This thesis contends that this is to diminish the scope of *Major Operation's* engagement with innovative forms and considerations of the dichotomies that comprise the modern city. I argue that, inspired by the stylistic achievements of James Joyce, in many respects *Ulysses* and *Major Operation* are contiguous, each author concerned with a 'peripheral' city in an Empire, each coloured by its national tradition, residual parochial features, idiolect and political situation. In a bold literary form, Barke's novel celebrates and critiques Glasgow in a manner unsurpassed in Scottish letters, his approach to modern urban Scotland in his early novels being a uniquely informed and cosmopolitan one.

¹ Douglas Gifford and others, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 718.

Epigraph

The city is the high point of human achievement, objectifying the most sophisticated knowledge in a physical landscape of extraordinary complexity, power, and splendour at the same time as it brings together social forces capable of the most amazing sociotechnical and political innovation. But it is also the site of squalid human failure, the lightning rod of the profoundest human discontents, and the arena of social and political conflict. It is a place of mystery, the site of the unexpected, full of agitations and ferments, of multiple liberties, opportunities, and alienations; of passion and repressions; of cosmopolitanism and extreme parochialisms; of violence, innovation, and reaction. The capitalist city is the arena of the most intense social and political confusions at the same time as it is a monumental testimony to and a moving force within the dialectics of capitalism's uneven development.²

² David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 229.