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James Barke

Politics, Cinema and Writing Scottish Urban Modernity

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Keir Elder

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Introduction

By the early decades of the twentieth century the modern cities of the world – Paris, London, Berlin and New York – had become emblematic locales and were establishing themselves as central in their influence on, and presence in art. Peter Keating describes the enduring fascination and potential of the modern cityscape:

The vastness of the metropolitan world; the endless range of life it contains; the extremes of moral worth, social status, and material circumstances to be found in it – these make the metropolis not just part of the world but a world in its own right, each area of which is largely unknown to the inhabitants of other areas.¹

As the locus of modernity, the city embodied the essential physical and psychological topography of Modernism, eliciting what Raymond Williams describes as a ‘range of basic cultural positions’: from ‘an eager embrace of modernity, either in its new technical and mechanical forms’; to the ‘equally significant attachments to ideas of social and political revolution’; and ‘conscious options for post or exotic cultures, as sources or at least fragments *against* the modern world.’²

Yet, however diverse the cultural reactions to modernity could be, the overriding representation of the city in literature and the arts at this time was as an alienating challenge. Thus the industrial metropolis was widely regarded as the degraded antithesis of the traditional model of ‘natural’ rural living. Conforming to this dominant idea, Lewis Grassie Gibbon provides in *Scottish Scene* (1934), a joint publication with Hugh MacDiarmid, this rather colourful, if histrionic, description of the City of Glasgow:

But no Scottish image of personification may display, even distortedly, the essential Glasgow. One might go further afield, to the tortured imaginings of the

Asiatic mind, to find her likeness – many-armed Siva with the waistlet of skulls, or Xipe of Ancient America, whose priest skinned the victim alive, and then clad himself in the victim's skin...But one doubts anthropomorphic representation at all. The monster of Loch Ness is probably the lost soul of Glasgow, in scales and horns, disporting itself in the Highlands after evacuating finally and completely its mother-corpse.³

Gibbon goes on to 'concur' with his 'distant cousin, Mr. Leslie Mitchell' who, he suggests, had described Glasgow as 'the vomit of cataleptic commercialism,' and continued in this vein by comparing the city to a corpse upon which the 'maggot-swarm [...] is fiercely alive.'⁴ MacDiarmid too expresses a similarly apparent instinctive distaste for the city, though he does sound a more optimistic note that Glasgow's 'horrible slums are masked by the multifarious activities and bustle of a great city.'⁵ This view, embedded as it is in ironic vitriol, points to the truth of the urban dichotomy where these slum conditions are an integral part of the city, the grime and the glitz existing in tandem. This treatment of the big city is typical of representations that shaped the perception of the metropolis over the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Feelings of revulsion became an intuitive motif in considerations of the city in literature and wider culture.

Following on from similar sentiments expressed in the writing of the late nineteenth century, some of the more significant texts of Modernism represented the city as just such an antithetical topos grudgingly accepted as the now immutable centre of modern life. In their poetry both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound portrayed the city as a dark and insidious place where humankind was compelled to exist contrary to an intrinsic nature. Indeed, Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) stands as testament to the defining attitude of 'anti-urban values' and is one of the received images that colours the way the city has been viewed in literature.⁶

Similarly, Pound's *Hell Cantos* (1924 – 1925) portrayed the modern metropolis as a torment. Pervasive though these depictions of the city 'wracked' by modernity were, as Raymond Williams suggests, these were not indicative of a homogenised Modernist attitude toward the disorienting experience of modern urban living. In fact, Modernism's defining treatment of a city, in literary form, does not emerge from the clamour and relentless deprivation of a huge urban conglomeration but is instead set in the comparative backwater of Dublin.

Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) takes the reader on a tour of 'drink-soaked, poverty-stricken, priest-ridden Dublin,'⁷ but his portrayal of the City is also frequently a celebratory and fondly meticulous one. The disorientation and vertigo of the urban landscape are present, but the expressions of life with commerce, communication, transport, perpetual movement, random intersections and relationships (the '*Kraftlinien*, or "lines of force", in whose networkings – physical, social, semiotic – ordinary citizens are caught up.'⁸) ensure that the paralysis integral to Joyce's earlier treatment of the city in *Dubliners* (1915), is signalled, but never more than fleetingly, and potentially redeemed through Leo Bloom and Stephen Dedalus.

These impressions of city life are at the root of the literary innovations of prominent modernists such as Joyce and Woolf, and are key to the link between their writing and specular forms, in particular the cinema. As Paul Edwards explains:

It was the ability of a cinematic aesthetic to convey both the objective reality of the city's material networks and the subjective experience of its constant circulation and exchanges that James Joyce and Virginia Woolf carried over into their literary recreations of urban experience in *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*.⁹

Similarly, it was precisely these ‘material networks’ that prompted Gibbon to describe ‘the long beat of traffic down Sauchiehall’, or the ‘eddy and spume where St. Vincent Street and Renfield Street cross.’ The ‘eddy and spume’ and ‘long beat’ convey the rhythm and pulse of a sensory interaction with the city. Gibbon also suggests his own thoughts elicited by these scenes when he imagines ‘what excellent grounds the old-fashioned anthropologist appeared to have for believing that man was by nature a brutish savage, a herd-beast delighting in vocal discordance and orgiastic aural abandon.’¹⁰

In its influence on the literature of Modernism, the crucial experience of the metropolis was not so much the material realities of the built environment but rather the sensation of being at the mercy of this powerful ‘eddy and spume’. ‘Modernity’s philosopher,’ Georg Simmel, argued that,

The most significant aspect of the metropolis lies in this functional magnitude beyond its actual physical boundaries and this effectiveness reacts upon the latter and gives to it life, weight, importance and responsibility. A person does not end with limits of his physical body or with the area to which his physical activity is immediately confined but embraces, rather, the totality of meaningful effects which emanates from him temporally and spatially.¹¹

The meaningful effects created in the metropolis are of primary significance to the experience of the inhabitant. From this we can deduce that the relationship with the city is as much an intellectual and perceptual process, as it is one based on an assumption of delineated and fixed physical parameters. For any individual, the experience of the city is only ever ‘suggestive of a whole,’ its true character, in actual fact, being contingent, ‘fragmentary and inconclusive.’¹² So the task of representing a city was one that necessitated emulating an experience of accumulated sensations, forces and interrelations, rather than simply striving

for a textual facsimile of the city as a physical entity: describing the city may be necessary, but not sufficient to convey the sense of it. Joyce's claim that one could rebuild Dublin using only *Ulysses* as a blueprint takes on an added significance when considered in terms of the urban atmosphere and sensations.

James Barke's *Major Operation*

Influenced by Joyce and his depiction of Dublin, one Scottish writer sought to produce a modern treatment of 1930s Glasgow. As signalled by the subtitle of James Barke's novel, *Major Operation: The Saga of a Scottish City* (1936), the city is a central character. In light of the Glasgow novels that had gone before, and when contextualised in the canon of his subsequent and preceding works, *Major Operation* is a remarkable novel. If he could be said to be remembered in the Scottish canon at all, Barke is known principally for his 'Immortal Memory' quintet of novels that imaginatively recount the life of Robert Burns. It is indicative of an interest in Burns more than in Barke, that these novels (with the exception of the posthumously published *Bonnie Jean* (1959)) have been republished intermittently over the years, most recently *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* in 2008. At the time of its original publication, the Burns series stirred up considerable controversy amongst some Burns devotees alarmed at Barke's effrontery in 'realistically' fictionalising (rather than overtly romanticising) the life of the Bard.

Barke's 1930s novels, *The World His Pillow* (1933), *The Wild MacRaes* (1934), *The End of the High Bridge* (1935) and *Major Operation* have remained largely overlooked and out of print since the author's death in 1958. Of the novels outside the Burns series only *Land of the Leal* (1939), though not as

widely acclaimed as it arguably deserved, has displayed any longevity and remained consistently in print. In this Scottish equivalent to a Russian socialist realist epic, Barke produced a quasi-biographical account of the changing fortunes across three generations of a Galloway farming family, from the second half of the nineteenth century through to their eventual migration to Glasgow, where the novel concludes on the eve of war in the 1930s. While *The Land of the Leal* is in marked contrast to his previous novel, *Major Operation*, it is evident that a few of the modernist stylistic touches of his more experimental 1936 novel do remain. These two novels even share some characters, most notably the working-class hero, Jock MacKelvie, who appears in both as a figure of political inspiration. Such textual nods to his previous experiment with modernist techniques notwithstanding, *The Land of the Leal*, it can be argued, is a work of literary realism comparable to Lewis Grassie Gibbon's lionised *Scots' Quair* (1932 –1934), which remains to this day a trilogy of novels widely regarded as among the most significant works of Scottish fiction.

With some key formal influences derived from *Ulysses*, Barke's novel of the city can be understood, in part, as a Scottish response to Joyce's work. It was intended to do for Glasgow what *Ulysses* did for Dublin in communicating the essential character – in this case an unmistakable Scottishness – of one of Modernity's 'peripheral' cities. As Andy Croft insightfully remarked of *Major Operation*, '[I]t is a crazy picture, slapstick and satiric, allusive, inclusive and nonsensical, the life of the city caught in snapshots, snatches of conversation and thought: James Joyce writing about Glasgow with a Communist Party card in his pocket.'¹³ In his emulation of Joyce, it is evident that Barke aims for some of the symphonic highs of *Ulysses*, as typified in 'The Wandering Rocks' episode. For

both authors, this involves a break away from ‘dependence on plot, individual protagonists and conventional narrative structure, into a radically synoptic mode.’¹⁴ Though it cannot be claimed Barke achieves the sustained level of literary innovativeness of Joyce, in *Major Operation* there is at the very least evidence of a shared ambition to relate the modern city in radical forms. Barke employs passages of interior monologue to explore and communicate his characters’ thoughts; breaks his novel up into distinct, staccato ‘filmic’ episodes; uses humorous and ironic headings throughout the text to ape the news media (as per Joyce in his ‘Aeolus’ chapter); and includes an expressionist episode reminiscent of Joyce’s ‘Circe’ chapter.

Leaving aside the formal influences for the moment, the fundamental thematic difference that sets *Major Operation* apart from Barke’s other works of fiction is overwhelmingly its location in the city, whereas all his other 1930s novels predominantly concern themselves with rural life. The transition from country- to city-dwelling does feature implicitly in *The End of the High Bridge*; as a process that Duncan Carmichael undergoes (then rather implausibly later reverses, in *The World His Pillow*) and in only the concluding chapters of *Land of the Leal*. *Major Operation*, however, is the author’s only novel in which the life in the Scottish city is the central concern and the virtually exclusive habitat of his characters. It is also the most daring and ‘modern’ treatment of Scottish urban modernity of its era.

As a friend of Lewis Grassie Gibbon (the two corresponded on literary and political matters) Barke was considerably more optimistic about the city than his frequently sardonic fellow writer. Barke saw Scotland’s urban locale, in contrast to the rural setting, as a potentially fruitful site for the mobilisation of

the masses and the attainment of a new political and cultural unity. His treatment of the city, though something of a rarity, is not altogether radically new. As Raymond Williams points out, Wordsworth, steeped as he was in the narrative of Romanticism that revelled in and revealed the natural beauty of the countryside, also recognised that the alienated city offered ‘new possibilities of unity.’¹⁵ The 1850 version of *The Prelude* saw Wordsworth testify to a new confusion of perception and form of alienation, but also recognise forces of liberation emerging from this ‘threat’:

Among the multitudes
Of that huge city, oftentimes was seen
Affectingly set forth, more than elsewhere
Is possible, the unity of men¹⁶

In his essay on the metropolis Williams also offered examples where Engels and Dickens admitted the potential benefit of the urban conglomeration.¹⁷ In short, Barke had literary antecedents to his endeavour and was not entirely a lone, pioneering voice in his more positive attitude toward the city. He can, however, be numbered among the very few articulating such sentiments in a Scottish accent in the 1930s.

Literary and Social Context

While the great metropolises of the western world were becoming a staple for both authors and filmmakers, and given the treatment afforded Dublin by Joyce, it is curious to note that Scottish fiction steadfastly retained what Moira Burgess refers to in her survey of Glasgow fiction, *The Glasgow Novel* (1971), as the ‘blind spot,’ whereby the ‘great majority of novels ignored the urban and industrial scene in favour of the rural and parochial.’¹⁸ Describing a significant

part of this voluminous body of literature as the Kailyard School, Burgess identifies these authors' persistent backward gaze to an era where Scotland comprised villages and small towns, rather than 'looking around them at the already largely urban and industrialised Scotland of their day.'¹⁹ This reflex that Scottish writers such as Linklater, Gibbon and MacDiarmid (though as we have seen in the case of Gibbon and MacDiarmid, they expressed reservations about city dwelling) sought to expunge from the traditional cultural output would establish the 'character of modern Scotland' and attempt to devise a progressive mode for Scottish literature and culture to reinvent itself.²⁰ This task was set in motion and, in MacDiarmid's opinion, the primary aims were two-fold: 'to re-establish the independent Scottish literary tradition, and at the same time, to face the changing reality of the modern world.'²¹

The 'changing reality of the modern world' in the late 1920s and into the 1930s was for Scotland: a consolidation of the move from the rural, small town and village into the industrialised city (albeit paradoxically by the 1930s the industries integral to its thriving were in chronic decline); the rapid increase in urban population, mechanisation and commercialisation of the city; and an era of economic uncertainty, heightened political concern, and mass activism. In fact, Burgess identifies the end of the First World War as approximately coinciding with the end of the 'kailyard proper,' and the following decade as the point at which Scottish literature, to some extent, turned to 'social and political concerns in the works of Dot Allan, George Blake and John Cockburn.'²² Despite the demise of the kailyard and an infusion of politics into some Scottish novels of the day, there remained a recalcitrant reliance on some elements of the kailyard – including those that were ostensibly representations of the city – and which

Burgess categorises as ‘the little world of the urban kailyard,’ embodied by a ‘restricted vision’ and ‘reductive idiom.’²³ Taking as its typical setting the ‘tenement homes of the respectable working-class’, the urban kailyard essentially (and simply) transposed the ‘small farmers, artisans and weavers’ from a rural to an urban setting.²⁴ Burgess speculates on the impulses that perhaps made Scottish writers so reluctant to let go of their kailyard sensibilities:

We may consider as possible reasons the exceptionally swift and brutal impact of the Industrial Revolution, with, as it were, a stupefying effect on contemporary writers; the lasting influence of Scott’s novels with their historical-romantic view of Scotland; a desire to record, with perhaps more enthusiasm than accuracy, the picturesque elements of an obsolescent way of life; and the predominance of the writing scene of the middle-class, comfortably off, reasonably educated, established section of the community.²⁵

Maintaining this pastoral veil over contemporary Scotland was inevitably going to become more and more tenuous as political, social and cultural upheavals rippled out. The kailyard was put under pressure by the emergence of the proletarian novel – a contentious term that will be addressed in due course – fuelled by social and political change. Scottish writing seemed to have leapt from backward-looking, romance fiction to the strident realism of the socio-political novel without having addressed the advent of urban modernity in any comprehensively modern way. The literature of Scotland had failed to produce the forms felt to reflect the sensations found in the urban environment and specific to the task of its representation, as posited by Simmel and Bergson. When the Scottish authors did turn their attention to the big city it was largely in the form of gritty gangland drama or prurient explorations of slum-dwelling hardship (and these were by no means mutually exclusive).

In Scottish writing in the late 1920s and 1930s, influenced as it was by

political concerns that shaped culture, there was a hierarchy of discourses in which realism had become highly prized. This hierarchy remained a tacit yet underpinning qualitative element in Scottish fiction, as evidenced in *The Glasgow Novel* (1986) in which Moira Burgess repeatedly assesses works of fiction on the basis of their realism. Whether this remains the case now is debatable, however in the 1930s verisimilitude was the badge of authenticity for the Scottish writer. As ‘most professional writers still had little or no experience outside the middle classes,’²⁶ genuine proletarian writing, which was preferred to emanate from the ranks of a Glasgow gang or from the slums (ideally both) – witness the success of Alexander MacArthur and H. Kingsley Long’s *No Mean City* (1935) as the enduring emblem²⁷ – was the dominant representation of Scottish city life. This class divide in Scottish literature tended to produce middle-class literature on the city in the urban kailyard style, working-class struggles in the ganglands of Glasgow, or more politically-motivated works – though not always the product of those with genuine proletarian credentials – such as *Hunger March* (1934) by Dot Allan. In all these genres, the treatment of the big city in modern modes, Scotland’s experience of modernity, is underplayed.

As previously suggested, Barke’s interest in the city was most certainly not exclusively aesthetic and he did view the modern city through a class-conscious political lens. While the city was assuming an ever more central importance in the everyday life of an increasing proportion of the Scottish population, it is Barke’s emphasis on the inherently antagonistic social relations between the classes that brings sharply into focus an additional dimension to the city’s fragmentary nature. It is this feature that inspired Andy Croft to offer his

‘James Joyce writing about Glasgow with a Communist Party card in his pocket’ description that hints at the multi-perspectival nature of Barke’s novel.

In Barke’s work it is implied that city life is essentially the lot of the populace: the inescapability of city life for most is inevitable. This aspect is further explored in *Land of the Leal* with a consideration of the socio-historic forces that collude to create *Major Operation*'s urban topography. In a passage in which the younger brothers of the central character, David Ramsay, are becoming aware of an impending change to their rural modes of living, the narrator vocalises this creeping realisation:

They were dimly conscious that the basis of the agricultural life was breaking up. The introduction of machinery and labour-saving devices was shattering the old life that was governed by the rhythm of man and beast. Economic necessity drives men to look away from the fields and the byres towards the industrial centres that produced machines. The railway linked them with those centres. In the cities there was work and the vitality of a new life.²⁸

The conflict in the dichotomy of the city is clear: the changing rhythms and vitality of life in the urban population centres are alluring and engaging; they simultaneously foster the sense of a degraded existence, ultimately antithetical to the ‘essence’ of the nature of humankind.

In Barke’s urban landscape themes of duality pervade, not least in the fact that the social classes live ‘cheek by jowl’ but in starkly contrasting conditions. This, it seems, is an unavoidable aspect of life in Glasgow. Unlike some preceding depictions of urban disparity, in Barke’s novel the opposed classes, though maybe not always an active part of each other’s quotidian experience, are constantly aware of the existence, proximity and different opportunities of the other.²⁹ Working-class poverty and slumdom in particular impose their olfactory signature on the Second City: ‘Already a faint but tangible odour was arising

from the slums and tainting the remaining three-fifths of the City...Windows were flung open to admit wafts of germ-laden air...midden recesses...cement paving.³⁰

The stagnation in these areas also carries symbolic connotations of a moral decay among these sections of the population. By use of ellipses, Barke draws the reader to conclude that there is more than just surface meaning in his description of the flower girls: 'But the flower girls at the infirmary gates, lacking a cellar, experienced some difficulty in keeping their flowers from wilting...'³¹ The effect of the open-ended sentence is to introduce an element of innuendo that maps the wilting of the flowers onto the wilting of the girls in both a physical and moral sense. But this stagnation and decay exist in tandem with bustle and activity. In this passage Barke thus also celebrates some essential facets of the city that make it unique and vital to modern Scotland.

Perhaps the most magnificent and most characteristic setting [of the sun] was provided by the Dumbarton Road at Partick. Here, by a railway bridge, across which ran a gargantuan advertisement for an Irish firm's stout, the effort was such that it attracted the attention of a Highland policeman. The policeman, who had been born and brought up in the Isle of Skye, had little use for the more noteworthy and spectacular of Nature's effects. But for a brief moment he was impressed.³²

The material elements of the city converge in a form of modern metropolitan ley-line: transport in road, rail and pedestrian form; (international) commerce and advertising; the presence of incomers settled in the city, in this instance the police constable from Skye and (as described later in the passage) his sergeant, a 'Gael' from Sutherlandshire.

It has already been said that the sub-title of Barke's novel presages the

treatment of the city as a central character. Indeed what is apparent in Barke's novel is that his treatment of the city ensures it is not just central but is virtually an independent character. Without achieving quite the wholesale, dizzying synoptic heights of *Ulysses*, Barke does present the Second City as a loosely unified, yet amorphous entity in such phrasing as 'the Second City slowly accustomed itself to the uniqueness of heat.'³³ This pathetic fallacy amalgamates the various experiences of the individual citizenry into a collective one experienced by the city itself.³⁴ This literary device emphasises the development of the city from a purely material backdrop to an essentially ineffable though virtually sentient psychologically unified whole.

The relative independence from the forces of nature that the city enjoys can be attributed to the technologies of modernity. 'Natural' time cannot compete with the new power of 24-hour metropolitan daylight. This is the essential force that utterly deposes the old rural rhythms:

Finally, before overlong exposure evaporated it [the sunset] completely, the smoke of the City reduced it to a faint and disgusting smudge...For at Dalmarnock, and other electrical power stations belonging to the Corporation's lighting department, switches were pulled on: and down the street with electrical instantaneousness, powerful electric globes flashed into action.³⁵

Diurnal activity pulses to the rhythms of an unnatural urban beat where night does nothing but signal the shift from a daytime to a night-time economy. The city subordinates the long-standing authority of nature: the policeman, a native of the Isle of Skye, retains no interest in nature now as the chronology of the city has established its primacy in the lives of the residents. In the city, a common working week is established and each individual working day does not start and end by the dawning and setting sun.

Come the weekend, this new society that has toiled will now *en masse* pursue what leisure activities it can. Here, as with the city's industrial and commercial activity, communication technology is an integral part of the organisation of leisure, particularly for the middle classes: 'By ten o' clock telephone lines were abnormally busy...The early May morn of hiking was upon industrial civilization.'³⁶ The weekend and the call of temporary escape to the Great Open Spaces resounds for those with the wherewithal to wrest themselves from the city's clutches. Barke lists the variety of leisure activities that go on over the weekend: 'cricket...football...trotting...pipe-band contest...dancing competition...sails. Phoenix Park instrumental band.'³⁷ His taxonomy of leisure-time activities foreshadows the cultural and anthropological interest of the Mass Observation movement begun in 1937, the impulse for society to turn the documentary lens on itself.

Life in the city, above all, is an intensely visual experience. Assumptions are made and great stock is placed upon the appearances of the citizenry.

A worker's wife is still a worker's wife without her drawers, but what is a City gent without his bowler? A man, a rebel, liable to be suspect of Bolshevik licence. So in Gordon, Buchanan, Saint Vincent and Renfield Streets the bowler hat retained its customary prominence.³⁸

Daily existence, particularly for the middle classes, involves a large measure of performance and theatricality with the residents of the city realising the streets are the stage upon which the constantly shifting urban spectacle plays. The symbolic attire of the middle classes exposes the contingency of this social grouping as well as hinting at the commodification with which it is particularly associated. Such high-profile trappings of status are presented here as necessary to set them apart from the proletariat in the urban environment.

Barke, Politics and Aesthetics

In so far as Barke is included in the Scottish canon, he tends to be categorised as a 'proletarian' writer. This label carries critical connotations and assumptions that do not necessarily wholly apply to Barke: there comes with this epithet a certain expectation of social realism, the fundamental character of which would have been writing that was considered 'unpremeditated and unselfconscious.'³⁹ This definition immediately produces more questions than satisfying answers, as any notion of an author producing writing that is truly unpremeditated and unselfconscious would be problematic. What may be argued is that, with a tendency to be rooted in empirical experience, working-class writing in general in the 1930s was distinguished by and valued for its ability to tell in plain words the 'simple truth' of life within the families and communities of Britain. The idea of tell-it-as-it-is documentary or testimony as the only viable mode for the representation of the lives of the working classes seemed to crystallise in the 1930s, and documentary or social realism became for many (and often in tandem with a Leftist political position) a literary-critical term of qualitative authentication.

The 'anti-modernist' backlash of the 1930s saw revolutionary political and social ideas rigidly correlated with what Ken Worpole terms the 'dull and unimaginative expectations of what is possible in literature,' citing 'pedestrian verse and prose' that is only distinguishable from its 'bourgeois counterparts by the worthiness of its morality.'⁴⁰ In *Major Operation*, Barke unquestionably strove to establish the 'worthiness of its morality' and leave the reader in no doubt as to the nature of the novel's (and author's) revolutionary politics, but he also defied doctrinaire expectations of working-class literary realism. Instead – and

following in the wake of the Scottish exemplar of such an endeavour, Lewis Grassie Gibbon – Barke fused Modernist formal techniques with didacticism, radical politics and social commentary. Thus it could on the one hand be regarded from a literary-critical perspective as a sufficiently flawed endeavour to provide ammunition for the critic to deride the experiment; on the other, Barke's literary rendering of Glasgow can be seen as a relative rarity in the canon of Scottish novels in providing an alternative, optimistic discursive template on which to map the modern city.

Given that he was writing the life of modern Glasgow, the 'Second City of the Empire,' in the wake of representations of Dublin, London and New York provided by Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), it is only fitting that these provided the basis for Barke's mode of representing the Caledonian metropolis. With so many Scottish novels before (and since) conforming to either the mythologies of the urban kailyard or those of the gang-infested slums, these two staples largely monopolised imaginative portrayals of the city. Barke's Glasgow (while acutely class-conscious) is progressive and even-handed in its treatment of urban life to the point of displaying frequent optimism. His is a literary exegesis that avoids much of the pessimistic focus on the interlinked scourges of violence and slum-dwelling, typified in *No Mean City*. Equally, Barke does not apply a sentimental gloss to city life in the manner of the urban kailyard novels, an accusation that may be levelled at Dot Allan's *The Deans* (1929) and John Macnair Reid's *Homeward Journey* (1934). In Barke's novel many issues of contemporary urban Scotland are explored: the results of long-standing internal migration from Scotland's traditional small communities into the urban centres; industrial decline

and economic instability; social deprivation; an increased network of transport and communication technologies; the proliferation of consumerism; cultural modernisation, and in particular the influence of an American-dominated mainstream cinema; class and gender relations; the collision of the private and the personal; and politics on both a grand and small scale.

The chronological setting of *Major Operation* is the recent past, around the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s. Though not more specifically dated, the novel spans the era of the global economic crisis and begins sometime after the General Strike of 1926, covering a timescale of approximately seven years. One of the historical reference points is the mass demonstrations held in Glasgow, at their peak during 1931. In common with Barke's representation of a workers' march in *Major Operation*, these used Glasgow Green as their focal point and saw up to 100,000 people involved in protests that were often rowdy and frequently descended into disorder. These demonstrations afford the novel a feature of city life at that time that provides both topicality and a dramatic focal point for the promulgation of Barke's revolutionary, anti-capitalist ideals.

One of the contentions of this thesis is that, as a novelist, Barke was ideally placed to offer a more rounded view of the onset of modernity in the Scottish city. He could, in fact, be regarded as an author wholly symptomatic of a reaction to cultural Scottish modernity. The son of a Galloway farm labourer, born in 1905, James Barke moved to Kincardine as a child and then on to the city of Glasgow in 1918 at the conclusion of the First World War. There he eventually took up employment as an office manager in the brickworks at Elderslie Docks. In this respect he may be regarded as having proletarian roots, though his non-manual job and subsequent training as an engineer prior to his

becoming a professional writer in the late 1930s may render that epithet increasingly problematic as the decade wears on. Barke's own social mobility does not necessarily describe a typical pattern. His pursuit of a literary career during the 1930s produced what Andy Croft describes as a 'series of novels about recent Scottish history,'⁴¹ during which time he undertook regular paid employment. His move to the city also resulted in his becoming imbued with a Leftist political conviction, aligning his sympathies with those of the Communist Party. Beset by doubts and contradictions that frequently railed against the party line (particularly over cultural matters) he developed the bespoke Scottish socialist principles that he espoused in his early fiction.

A vehicle for Barke's acute political sensibilities and class-consciousness, *Major Operation* follows the fortunes of two polarised characters. His working-class character, Jock MacKelvie: a red-leader (the author demonstrating a Joycean penchant for a pun, MacKelvie is latterly an unemployed *red-leader*) at a Clydeside shipyard, prominent figure in the South Partick workers' organisations, family man and sagacious political philosopher. The middle-class foil is George Anderson: coal merchant (latterly bankrupt), politically naïve resident in a well-to-do Glasgow suburb, cuckold and impotent notional figurehead of a dysfunctional and disintegrating family group.⁴² Anderson's lack of awareness sees him drifting along with the insouciance and under-examined political opinions that the author implies are inherent in his class.

Throughout the novel there frequently bubbles to the surface a strong sense not only of political but also social and cultural didacticism. In this sense there is a breakaway from narrative impersonality and Barke muddies the 'distinction between narrator and characters,'⁴³ which is where it diverges from

one of the defining characteristics of the Joycean template. For instance, once Anderson happens upon MacKelvie (when both are laid up for a number of weeks in hospital awaiting, then recovering from, stomach surgery) the ensuing mentor-student relationship provides a literary device for Barke to expound his political philosophy and hopes for a socialist future.

This exemplifies one of the features that renders Barke's novel open to the criticism that, in places, it unabashedly propagandises and is also, both overtly and implicitly, aimed at the re-education of the middle classes. The manifestation of the former comes in the shape of sometimes pages-long passages of polemic, usually delivered through the mouthpiece of Jock Mackelvie, describing the iniquities perpetrated by the bourgeoisie and suffered by the working classes. The manifestation of the latter entails meticulous descriptions of the tenement dwellings, slum areas and arduous working life of the lower classes, which has no balancing equivalence in terms of the detail devoted to the middle classes. The implication of this weighting is that the dwellings, areas and working environments of middle-class characters largely coincide with those of Barke's perceived readers who would be sufficiently conversant with this habitat to render description redundant. Undoubtedly there is an element in Barke's writing designed to reveal to the working-class readers the cause of their own subjugated situation and the possibilities of a Socialist revolution. However, another of the novel's pedagogic aims is to open the eyes of the middle classes to their complicity in an unjust capitalist system by awakening them to the disadvantage and poverty of the oppressed classes. The portrayal of the modern Scottish urban environment offers the best opportunity of success in this endeavour.

Major Operation is, to a certain extent, the coming of age of the big city novel in its Scottish guise and at the very least is an experiment that strives to establish a new literary relationship in which the city is neither solely decorative backdrop nor deterministic slum-land. Barke portrays a dynamic civic space in which social change, the embrace of modernity and political progress, a new cultural identity, and the unity of the masses are all possible: as Simmel pointed out, ‘cities are above all the seat of the most advanced division of labour.’⁴⁴ Barke recognised the potential of the urban topography, with its jarring geographical and psychological proximities, to be the forum in which to convey his political conviction, which was an opportunity not so readily afforded in the rural setting. We can again turn to Simmel to provide a synopsis of the problem for the individual assimilated in city life:

The deepest problems with modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life.⁴⁵

It is this friction between the ‘weight of historical heritage’ and the ‘independence of individuality’ (delicately defined to avoid straying into a bourgeois notion) that concerns Barke in a political sense and which infuses his novel, played out in the modern Scottish landscape. The urban environment is, paradoxically, both the site of greatest alienation and also potentially the greatest realisation of human potential.

Barke and Cinema

Though heavy with political purpose and social comment, *Major Operation* is formed under the influence of much more. In common with Joyce,

cinematic forms can be detected in Barke's writing. As well as numerous references to cinema-going in *Major Operation* (and his earlier novels) there are more subtle effects evident in Barke's published works throughout the 1930s. For instance, in *Major Operation* Barke presents us with what appears to be (though there is a degree of uncertainty) the middle-class playwright Rowatt's stream of consciousness as he observes his class peers at a bridge meeting: 'If they saw and heard themselves jabbering like apes they did not recognize themselves as such.'⁴⁶ This image is strikingly reminiscent of the scene in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, die Symphonie der Großstadt* (1927), in which the filmmaker montages scenes of bourgeois gatherings alongside 'chattering' monkeys in a zoo (fig. 1a – 1b).

As regards *Major Operation's* formal aspects, it is apparent that in its use of the Joycean template and multiple levels of cinematic influences, Barke's portrayal of the city owes as much to intertextuality – or, more precisely, *intermediality* – as it does to the lived experience on the streets of Glasgow. Further to this, Christopher Whyte identifies the influence of what he deems 'a not entirely convincing naturalisation of American modes' that he suspects are 'mediated through the cinema rather than literature'⁴⁷ common to both George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* (1935) and *Major Operation*. In support of Whyte's assertion, in Barke's novel his middle-class protagonist, George Anderson's dialogue with his potential love interest seems to be highly reminiscent of the all too pervasive vernacular of American cinema. It is not immediately obvious whether this is indicative of Barke's own personal influences or a subtle satire on the influences that were acting on his middle-class character; in either case this confirms the effect of such phenomena and their infiltration of Scottish society

and culture. What may be inferred is that, while his own personal experience obviously underpinned his writing, Barke's portrayal of the city, by the very diversity of its nature and in light of the perceptible influences from literature and cinema, is unlikely to have been derived solely from first-hand empirical sources. Keith Williams points to Barke's inevitable 'inheritance' of 'Joyce's interest in cinema's impact on how we see the world' in that he was consciously attempting to produce a Scottish *Ulysses*, or at least a response in kind to Joyce's book.⁴⁸ However, it is certain that there are supplementary influences in Barke's writing that derive from his own relationship with the film medium in addition to the secondary ones from Joyce's emphatically cinematic text.

Barke's literary influences in terms of cinematic writing were not limited to Joyce. That most overtly cinematic writer, John Dos Passos and in particular his New York City novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, also provided textual and intermedial inspiration for Barke. We may epitomise how Dos Passos' introduced a cinematic style into his own writing in the following excerpt:

His eyes fell on the headline on a Journal that lay on the floor by the coal-scuttle where he had dropped it to run for the hack to take Susie to hospital.

MORTON SIGNS THE GREATER NEW YORK BILL
COMPLETES THE ACT MAKING NEW YORK WORLD'S SECOND
METROPOLIS

Breathing deep he folded the paper and laid it on the table. The world's second metropolis...And dad wanted me to stay in his ole fool store in Onteora.⁴⁹

The reader may notice that it is not until Ed Thatcher's eyes focus in, having first taken in the peripheral details of the scene and items such as the coal scuttle, that the headline is revealed to the reader as if a camera lens were zooming in on the front page of the newspaper itself. The text is presented in a recreation of

newspaper headline, its insertion into the narrative disrupting the textual layout. Though text, it has the qualities of an intrusive visual image similar to the manner in which the flow of images in silent film was disrupted by intertitles. An example of this in operation in film can be seen in King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1927), when Sims receives his acceptance letter from the advertising agency, which then acts as an *ad hoc* intertitle (fig. 2a). Likewise, Barke employs this device in the presentation of a note to Jock MacKelvie in *Major Operation*:

Dear Jock:

Just had Peter's report. Regret that you had such a hell of a time [...] Demonstration was a great success though we could have done with your speech on the Green. There weren't enough speakers for the crowd. Best of luck!

Bob.⁵⁰

Filmic features such as this signal the increasingly pervasive influence of the cinema for the inhabitants of the metropolitan centres of America and Europe, and the way cinema comes to cross-fertilise with the novel.

Equally, the comparison with Barke's epithet of Glasgow as the Second City of the Empire is obvious. Each city is subordinate to some other metropolis, which could be interpreted as a symptom of perpetual inferiority, a constant comparison and awareness of life on a grander, global scale. However, in the case of both Dos Passos' and Barke's novels there is a more liberating effect that allows these cities a potentiality of growth and development. Also, there are elements of interior monologue narrating the character's stream of consciousness 'unmediated' to the reader, a technique common to both novels. Moreover, here Dos Passos employs a 'camera-eyed'⁵¹ technique that suggests a cinematic influence at play in the textual realisation of his imagination. An economy of language is symptomatic of this technique, with close interplay between the imagistic and the textual.

As Bud arrives in New York and walks from the ferry toward town, ‘his hands deep in his pockets,’ the narrative is interrupted by the sentence, ‘EAT on a lunchwagon halfway down the block.’ Like the fragmentariness of a montage of images commonly used to construct a cinematic representation of a city, there is no presage to this image as it breaks into the narrative, and the immediate yet fleeting nature of the sights of the city are simultaneously represented in textual form. Again, Barke adopts a characteristically political take on this technique when Anderson travels across the city and encounters an event omitted from the headlines: ‘Unemployed demonstration. Hadn’t seen anything about that in the papers. Unemployed becoming a menace.’⁵²

Though these are relatively subtle influences on Barke’s writing, he takes a more direct approach to sending up the American cinematic idiom and analysing the susceptibility of the Second City youth to its influence. He takes off the jazz patois in an episode titled ‘Greta Garbo and Flora MacDonald’:

Oh yeah! The world moves on. Time’s a certain-sure go-getter. And the sweetie that inspired the guy to put the soft pedal on his love lilt in Eriskay ain’t nobody’s darlin’ hereabouts. Maybe a few saps liked to rave about her even yet – renaissance dope pedlars and the national culture suckers. But we here lads from the Second City of the Empire are not taken in by them word dazzlers, no sir. Loch Lomond’s a swell place for a bunch of seeds to drum up and put a little pep into a little music.⁵³

The ease with which America spreads its cultural influence trans-Atlantically is one of the facts of modern city life; here and elsewhere Barke identifies the aping of American culture and is critical of the Second City’s westward-gazing citizenry. It is not just the preservation of a homespun Scottish culture that is at stake; undue influence from across the Atlantic becomes a real concern in light of America’s catastrophic economic collapse that had been replicated in the

downturn of the British economy. However, though Barke feels compelled to deliver a prophetic warning of the dangers of the dominance of a redoubtable mainstream American industry, it is also a medium with which he is highly engaged. His satirical use of the American vernacular articulates a suggestion that it carries at least an energizing charge.

Summary

Making extensive use of material from the James Barke archive – which holds a considerable collection of manuscripts, typescripts, personal letters, pamphlets, books, musical scores and various diverse items collected by the author throughout his life – retained at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, each of the following four chapters deals with a separate topic: politics; aesthetics; city; and cinema. Particular aspects under consideration are the nature of politicisation of literature in Scotland in the 1930s; Barke’s aesthetic approach to his political concerns; Scotland’s discursive metropolis; and Barke’s own personal experience of, and relationship with, the cinema and Scottish metropolitan life. In so far as possible, the following chapters each deal with its topic discrete from the others. Rather tellingly, however, the influences are never neatly divisible, there being an inevitable measure of overlap. The central aims of this thesis are organised along the following lines: Chapter One is concerned with the author’s political allegiances, his position in the Scottish literary and political scene, how these aspects are transmitted in his writing, and how his novels reflect what certainly amounts to the rise and fall of his Leftist idealism, if not a waning in his broad socialist commitment. Chapter Two considers aspects of the author’s aesthetic sensibilities, the literary influences and concerns that shaped the form and style

of his writing, and uses a close analysis of *The End of the High Bridge* (1935) to chart Barke's journey to modernist experimentalism in his following novel, *Major Operation*. Chapter Three explores the city's influence on Modernism, as well as the impact and expression of the author's experience of living in the modern Scottish metropolis, and how this forms the basis for the only substantial attempt to produce a truly modernist Scottish city novel (and *de facto* response to Joyce's *Ulysses*), *Major Operation*. Chapter Four examines how the experience of film and cinema-going influenced Scottish society and, more specifically, Barke's writing and perception of his urban environment, helping to draw together all the influences on his literary output to produce a unique form of fiction in Scotland in the 1930s.

- ¹ Peter Keating, 'The Metropolis in Literature', in *Metropolis 1890 – 1940*, ed. by Anthony Sutcliffe (London: Mansell, 1984), pp. 129 – 145 (p. 131).
- ² Raymond Williams, 'The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism', in *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, ed. by Edward Timms and David Kelley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 13 – 24 (p. 19).
- ³ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Glasgow', in Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene: or the Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn* (London and Melbourne: Hutchison and Co., 1934), pp. 114 – 115.
- ⁴ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, p. 115.
- ⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Dundee', in Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene: or the Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn* (London and Melbourne: Hutchison and Co., 1934), p. 160.
- ⁶ Michael Long, 'Eliot, Pound, Joyce: Unreal City?', in *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, ed. by Edward Timms and David Kelley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 145 – 157 (p. 145).
- ⁷ Michael Long, p. 147.
- ⁸ Keith Williams, 'Symphonies of the Big City: Modernism, Cinema and Urban Modernity', in *The Great London Vortex: Modernist Literature and Art*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Bath: Sulis Press, 2003), pp. 31 – 50 (p. 33).
- ⁹ Paul Edwards, preface in *The Great London Vortex: Modernist Literature and Art*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Bath: Sulis Press, 2003), p. 10.
- ¹⁰ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, p. 115.
- ¹¹ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. and with introduction by Donald N. Levine (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 335.
- ¹² Keith Williams, p. 39.
- ¹³ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 277.
- ¹⁴ Keith Williams, p. 40.
- ¹⁵ Raymond Williams, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ William Wordsworth, 'Book Eighth', in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth and others (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 309.
- ¹⁷ Raymond Williams, p. 18.
- ¹⁸ Moira Burgess, *The Glasgow Novel: A Survey and Bibliography*, 2nd edn (Motherwell and Glasgow: Scottish Library Association, 1986), p. 31.
- ¹⁹ Moira Burgess, p. 27.
- ²⁰ Tom Normand, *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art 1928 – 1955* (Aldershot and Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 2000), p. 2.
- ²¹ Manfred Malzahn, 'Coming to Terms with Industrial Scotland; Two "Proletarian" Novels of the 1930s (George Blake: *The Shipbuilders*, James Barke: *Major Operation*)', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth Century*, ed. by Joachim Schwend and Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 193 – 205 (p. 193).
- ²² Moira Burgess, p. 42.
- ²³ Moira Burgess, pp. 38 – 39.
- ²⁴ Moira Burgess, p. 40.
- ²⁵ Moira Burgess, p. 31.
- ²⁶ Andy Croft, p. 280.
- ²⁷ Written as a 'human document' by the slum-dweller Alexander McArthur, assisted by the London journalist Kingsley Long, the book's docu-drama details the daily brutality of life in the Gorbals.
- ²⁸ James Barke, *Land of the Leal* (London: Collins, 1939; repr. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1987), p. 204.
- ²⁹ Enduring cinematic examples being Cavalcanti's *Rien Que Les Heures* (1925), Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927) and Fritz Lang's epic, *Metropolis* (1927), in which the underworld workers and surface-dwelling bourgeoisie live vertically-delineated separate lives.
- ³⁰ James Barke, *Major Operation: Saga of a Scottish City* (London: Collins, 1936; repr. 1955), p. 18.
- ³¹ James Barke, *Major Operation*, pp. 18 – 19.
- ³² James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 16.
- ³³ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 18.
- ³⁴ We can here draw a parallel with John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), in which the 'hot June Saturday was dragging its frazzled ends down 110th Street.' pp. 21 – 22.
- ³⁵ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 16.
- ³⁶ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 17.
- ³⁷ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 17.
- ³⁸ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 19.
- ³⁹ Tony Davies, 'Unfinished Business: Realism and Working-Class Writing', in *The British Working Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London; Victoria, Australia; Baltimore, Maryland: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 125 – 138 (p. 125).
- ⁴⁰ Tony Davies, p. 126.
- ⁴¹ Andy Croft, p. 275.
- ⁴² Anderson was said to reside in Scotstounhill, an area comprising wide, tree-lined streets and late Victorian terraced villas which was part of a larger geographic area known as Scotstoun. The wider area was bounded by Knightswood, Yoker and the shipyards on the Clyde, and the southern portion of Scotstoun comprised tenements populated by many shipyard workers. In effect, the middle-classes and working classes existed in close proximity with each other between Dumbarton Road and the Yarrow Shipyard though they were living in greatly contrasting conditions.
- ⁴³ Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Ideology in Action in *A Scots Quair*', a paper presented at the Association of Scottish Literary Studies Conference, 10 June 2001.
- ⁴⁴ Georg Simmel, p. 335.
- ⁴⁵ Georg Simmel, p. 324.
- ⁴⁶ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 62.
- ⁴⁷ Christopher Whyte, 'Imagining the City: The Glasgow Novel', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth Century*, ed. by Joachim Schwend and Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 317 – 333 (p. 319).

⁴⁸ Keith Williams, 'Ulysses on the Clyde', draft introduction to unpublished edition of *Major Operation* (1998)

⁴⁹ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), pp. 5 – 12.

⁵⁰ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 144.

⁵¹ Dos Passos was very conscious of this technique and included numerous sections called 'camera eye' in his *USA* trilogy, as well as writing a story entitled 'The Camera Eye.'

⁵² James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 128.

⁵³ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 19.



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b

Dear Mr. Sims:

It gives us great pleasure to forward
you our check for \$500 for the GRAND PRIZE AWARD
for your slogan "Sleight-O-Hand, The Magic Cleaner"

We are certain the slogan will prove
a great one.

The Holland Cleaner Company

By *A. J. Harrington*
Board of Awards

Fig. 2a