Smiles Better

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- Buy*On Glasgow and Edinburgh* by Robert Crawford
  Harvard, 345 pp, £20.00, February, ISBN 978 0 674 04888 1

Can places, like people, have a personality, a set of things you can love or not love? Do countries speak? Do lakes and mountains offer a guide to living? Could you feel let down by a city? Can you get huffy with a conurbation or fancy the essence of a town? Can you dedicate a book to a dot – two dots – on the map?

The poet and academic Robert Crawford has a soft spot for nice spots and he dedicated his 1990 collection, *A Scottish Assembly*, 'to Scotland'. Some countries and some cities – like some people – openly insist on being loved, and some of them behave as underdogs, which only ramps up the need. (A dedication 'to North Korea' would be something else.) Crawford's interest in places has never been confined to the country he lives in and calls his own. The following is from his poem 'Planetist':

> I love all windy, grand designs, all blashes
> Splattering the dark, heaving the moon
>
> High over spruces, under the weathered
> Cloud rivers turning in their beds.
>
> From the tip of my tongue to the pit of my stomach,
> From my eyeballs to the balls of my heels
>
> With my lanky body I thee worship,
> Scotland, New Zealand, all national dots.

Not all poets love places. And not many poets love cities the way Frank O'Hara loved New York. Crawford, like his nearest literary forebear Norman MacCaig, loves places both rural and urban: in his work, he can throw his voice 'deep down the larynx of Glen Esk', and he can marry Iona, or bring the reader into close contact with his 'Inner Glasgow', a place of abolished pit bings and empty quays full of 'hard nostalgia'. And 'love' is often the word he uses, as here, in his short poem (a free version of the Latin poem by Arthur Johnston) about St Andrew's, where he has lived with his family and worked for more than twenty years:

> I love how it comes right out of the blue
> North Sea edge, sunstruck with oystercatchers.
> A bullseye centred at the outer reaches,
> A haar of kirks, one inch in front of beyond.

Like that beautiful word 'haar', you feel these places aren't just choices but compulsions. To him an air of belonging hangs about the place, and about the word: it appeals to him in the way the stony ground of Ireland appeals, in every sense and whatever its troubles, to Seamus Heaney. Some writers – Joyce, Milosz, Stevenson – have to stand well back from the native canvas in order to see the composition, but others dwell inside the painting, loving the paint, the smell of oils and the fine smear of themselves.

This new book – written 'for both with love' – is about the two cities the poet appears to care about most. Those of us with a small dog in the race are apt to keep a sharp eye out for favouritism one way or the other. Liverpool v. Manchester, Mumbai v. Delhi, Sydney v. Melbourne, Madrid v. Barcelona: it's a familiar sort of rivalry. Such is my wholly prejudiced, bullying and sneering preference for Glasgow, and so keen was I for evidence of a secret love expressed in code, that I read this book at times as if it were a parish romance. 'Aha! Look! Crawford

is clearly a Glasgow boy at heart. Look how subtly he reveals latent Edinburgh snobberies and coldness and sets them against the warmth and political energy of the greater city.'

Alas, he is fair. His personification of these cities is so thorough, and so in keeping with his overall aesthetic as a poet who tenders contradiction, that you cannot – despite my evil attempts – use the book as a primer on how to stoke up the ancient and holy rivalries. For that, we will have to content ourselves with Alex Salmond and Irvine Welsh, my two prime provocateurs and opponents when it comes to establishing Glasgow's obvious claim to being Scotland's only true city.

Here are my compelling arguments:

1. In Edinburgh they're not very hospitable and they always think: 'You'll have had your tea.'

2. Edinburgh wasn't very nice to Robert Burns.

3. Edinburgh is colder.

4. And it smells of hops.

5. It's full of bankers.

6. They put prices up during the festival.

7. They think they're great.

You may be glad to learn that Crawford's book is a little more discursive, open-minded and generally responsive to the idea that there might be great things to be said about both cities, but for some reason my eye kept digging out the more deadly quotes. In response to the autobiography written by the forgotten Edinburgh scribe Alexander Carlyle and his view that Glasgow in the 1740s was 'far behind' in 'taste', with 'neither a teacher of French nor of music in the town', Crawford suddenly soars with great style, wielding his pen like the sword of truth over the heads of these self-satisfied popinjays. 'Glasgow,' he writes, 'for this East Coast writer, could be summed up in the phrase "coarse and vulgar" – a snooty Edinburgh perception of the place which has not entirely vanished today.'

Many writers were drawn to point out the 'tragic heart' of Glasgow's hellish industrial reality and set it against Walter Scott's 'ain romantic toon', the Edinburgh of magical hallucinations and historical fantasies. In that sense the argument between Scotland's two biggest cities – and most of it resides in jokes – is little more than an enjoyable clash between two notions of the country itself, each well-earned, each valid, each full of spirit. Here's Crawford on the Victorian poet Alexander Smith:

> Smith's Edinburgh is a wonderful museum of itself; his Glasgow, a working industrial city. This contrast perceived by a poet of both places was true to the self-image of each … Glasgow was very much a site of the heavy-industrial and commercial Victorian present. If the Edinburgh of the book you are reading is essentially inflected by its Enlightenment and Romantic cultural inheritance, then this volume's Glasgow is a city crucially shaped by the Victorian British Empire.

Edinburgh/Glasgow is a culture clash between two cities forty miles apart, and Crawford's book seeks to do it honour. He calls it 'a treasured rivalry', and he isn't wrong: each city would be slightly less without the other's countervailing charm. We love Edinburgh for its innovations and its geniuses and scoff at it for thinking it invented human nature. (David Hume, late of that parish, invented human understanding, or a treatise of that name, and that's quite different.) Meanwhile, we can love Glasgow for its rebel spirit and its demotic energy while noting the piousness of Bearsden and Milngavie. Scotland likes to argue with itself (and with anybody who points that out), which makes Crawford's book a helpful guide to the classier types of culture war that break out between the two cities. 'Classier' because they are as nothing compared to the divisions that can exist within

each city's own boundaries. I offer you Celtic v. Rangers on the one coast and locals v. tourists on the other. Neither city has ever been a singularity.

The charms of Edinburgh were lost on Wilfred Owen, who wasn't drawn to the glimmer of the ancient castle but to the sight of 'a newspaper-seller standing in the gutter', a 'pale rain-flawed phantom of the place'. Edwin Muir, in his autobiography, is riding on the Glasgow tram when he suddenly notices the passengers' eyes moving in their heads like the eyes of animals. (He was always falling from the Edenic Orkney of his childhood.) Crawford brings us word of Hugh MacDiarmid, who felt that Scotland's capital was 'too stupid yet/To learn how not to stand in her own light'. These were writers in revolt against the complacencies of familiar places, the received wisdom of belonging. Maybe Crawford is just a happier man, not undone by locations and what they might ask of you in terms of speech or belief. He is more amused by the clashing civic pieties than any of those Scottish poets were who once gravely lined the bar at Milne's, the drinking establishment on Edinburgh's Rose Street, where they used to gather to discuss with enmity the same small magazines and glance with longing at the same few girls. Crawford, as he noted smilingly in his poem 'A Quiet Man', is not one for bars, and his cities are places to think about not drink about.

Writers are Crawford's subject. There isn't much on city planners, binmen, bankers or bus drivers – the people who make the cities turn – and much more about the gaslighters noticed by Stevenson, the Bruntsfield Place of Muriel Spark, the graves of the Canongate where the geniuses lie. You could take a walk in each city with the book in your hand and see where ideas have shaped the stone. It's a tale of two cities as represented by their storytellers, their makars, their minstrels and their celebrants.

Important anomalies are picked up. Despite the Rent Strikes in Glasgow, some notable acts of sedition, a riot in the town centre and the careers of John Maclean, James Maxton and the Red Clydesiders, 'not one of the radicals of that era is represented among the statues of George Square.' The riot caused the army to scramble its tanks (the only such time on mainland Britain) and to position snipers on the roof of the Post Office. They were expecting a Bolshevik event and had Maclean been Lenin they might have got one. Crawford makes good use of Daniel Frazer's 1885 *The Story of the Making of Buchanan Street* (whose shops the visiting Nathaniel Hawthorne considered to be better than London's) but he could have dug deeper into the lives of the street-sellers, or found the stories of those small Glasgow shopkeepers who held on through eras of both opulence and decay. Glasgow is the city of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, but it is also the city of the bookmaker, the asylum-seeker and the sheriff court, a city of the nightclub, the hotel lobby and the morgue.

But this is a civilising book. Each of the cities has its share of ranters and bigots, but Crawford doesn't spend much time looking for nobility among the thugs, preferring to show his Glasgow and Edinburgh in their Sunday best. This tack is especially winning when it comes to the Gorbals, which – all infamous features kept in check – can be seen for once as a place with its small share of pioneers, inventors and sporting heroes, not just the mob of victims. There was life before the slum. 'In the late 1860s,' he writes,

> Gorbals Main Street was a thoroughfare through a rundown village. The coming of new tenements transformed the area. A photograph of nearby Crown Street in 1900 shows a wide roadway with tram lines at its centre and a prosperous-looking population, the men wearing bowler hats, ties and watch fobs; the girls, too, in hats; the women well dressed. Lasses caught on camera playing in a Gorbals playground in 1910 wear soft hats and neat pinafores; a lad on a swing is clad in a smart sailor suit. All have carefully polished shoes.

E.B. White's *Here Is New York* showed us how a city's virtues and discomforts mirror our own. Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* revealed a 'junkyard of dreams', a Los Angeles where ideas about the future come to die. Henry James writes about the way Venice and Florence are affected by changes in the seasons and the light: 'The mere use of one's eyes in Venice is happiness enough,' he writes, 'and generous observers find it hard to keep an account of their profits in this line. Everything the attention touches holds it, keeps playing with it – thanks to some inscrutable flattery of the atmosphere.' In Edinburgh you might get the flattery but it is more scrutable. In Glasgow you get the atmosphere but it isn't always flattering. It seems only right that a country given to doubleness should want two capitals. My prejudice conceals a tolerant affection. Those of us who come back to

Glasgow from Edinburgh come back poorer and actually a little wiser, but at the same time confident that the other one will never really know what life is about.

Vol. 35 No. 10 · 23 May 2013 » Andrew O'Hagan » Smiles Better
page 37 | 2147 words

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- More from this issue »
- More by this contributor »

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