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Civic Memory: Making Scotlands of the Mind

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‘Yet why not say what happened?’ wrote the poet Robert Lowell. Why not indeed? For each of us, there is always the unending pull of what happened. What happened to the country we used to know? What happened to that wee gents clothing shop in the Gallowgate? What happened to my Auntie Famie and our Scots terrier, Lucky? What happened to that pub that used to sell boxes of chocolates at the bar in Rose Street? And what happened to the men who took them home with their broken pay packets to the wife? What happened to that dancehall were the stage was all glitter in Dundee? What happened to Chic Murray? The mussel factory that used to be at the corner of Saltcoats beach, what happened to that? What happened to the Ambrose Hotel, where Walter Scott’s friends and tormentors used to meet up? What happened to the Isle of Skye and the old clans? And what happened to Duke Street Prison in Glasgow, the children of the inmates born in there, who were given a farthing a day for their mother’s trouble? What happened to Curry-flavoured crisps? What happened to Peter Pan in the end, the very end, if the end ever comes in fiction? What happened to Miss Jean Brodie? Her ambition. Her secrets. And him off the telly that used to present the news on Scotland Today? John Toye. What happened to him? That girl in my class in primary two. Elizabeth Watt. What happened to her? Is she happy somewhere? What happened to them? Come to that, what happened to me?

I grew up thinking the great mottos of Scottish culture happened to be written on whisky bottles. They seemed to speak directly to our experience of what it was like to be born and live in Scotland. The best was the one for Bell’s Whisky: it said, very simply, almost Zen-like: ‘Afore ye go’. Afore ye go where exactly? I thought it was worthy of Samuel Beckett. Afore you go out for the night? Afore you go to bed? Afore ye go into a meeting? Afore ye take your last breath? Take this drink, afore you go to the place you always meant to go, a place you never knew the name of but you knew it was there. There used to be a neon sign for Bell’s Whisky above Glasgow Central Station – right next to the one for ‘yer other national drink’, Irn Bru – and in the dark nights of the 1970s, when I was just a boy, the legend appeared to burn through the dark as we came down Renfield Street. ‘Afore ye go.’ It didn’t just seem like an advertisement, it seemed like an invocation to something all of us knew already. It appealed to an idea that is more common to Scotland than to most places, I believe – a part of our nature I’m going to call Civic Memory.

Jokes in Scotland always work best when they are jokes than only Scots can understand. And that is because we are addicted, rather beautifully I think, to the notion that the mark of our nationhood is not legislative, not really historical, not constitutional or sealed by a king, but our nationhood is a measure of the degree to which we recognise the nature and the meaning of our togetherness. In the main, it is a humanist notion of what makes a people a people. It is, if you like, the communal answer, the sum total, of what we say when we ask the question, ‘What happened to us?’ In the mentality of our culture the central question is not ‘How do we vote?’ or ‘What is to be done?’; the question is ‘Wha’s Like Us?’ The entire culture of Scotland is a repository of beautiful answers to that complicated question, and we derive our deepest sense of alliance from not being like other people, from having no difficulty, indeed, in picturing who we are. It is civic memory that binds us. There is no nation in the abstract, merely the overwhelming, powerful, emotional and creative knowledge that we went through things together, and that the journey we took summons our meaning. I count it lucky, in the world as it today, that Scottish national identity is a figment of the imagination. That is the best thing it can be: a figment, a boon to life and art.

We did this. We invented that. We built those ships. We fought that battle. We took that stand. We won that medal. We formed that company. We survived. At the deepest corners of civic memory is the truth that you can't kid a kidder. We didn't always get it right, we may be enslaved by a sense of our own victimhood at times, but we are in charge of ourselves at a level more personal than party politics. As a writer, I have to tell you I've never believed in politics the way I believe in dreams: we have a responsibility to political things, but also an odd superiority over them, and I believe this is not merely a feeling writers have but one that Scottish people have. It is arguable that, in Scotland, politics has always struggled to move the people as much as the people can move each other, which is why trades unions commanded the respect they did. Put differently, you might say that the people were less taken up with what their country said about them than with what the people in the next street said about them. Some people would call this parochial, but it might be time – for me, anyway – to make a new argument about the blessings of parochial instinct. We might require a new way of thinking about the virtues of the parochial in the world now, for, to my mind, the parochial relates to the global in the way the [particular relates to the universal. It is a marriage much to be admired. If Scotland is parochial, then it's a parochialism that has changed the world. We have gone out there with a strong and protective sense of ourselves, but civic memory will always bring us home again, if not to the hearth then to the argument, and just as swallows know where to go in winter, so does art find its bearing in civic memory. Our best plays, our great novels, they whisper the secret history of our time and our place, and find voices, and find sentences, that illuminate with tact our human witnessing. It is civic memory that keeps alive our politics, for it feeds it with dreams drawn from the past and bending for home. It is civic memory that bears the load of language and truth, of experience and heartbreak, of idealism and jokes and song and laughter, and bears that load from generation to generation, making Scotland a living workshop of the imagination. The painters know it, the playwrights and the singers and the film-makers, too: out of single imaginations a body of faith is born. And Scotland is more ready today than at any time, perhaps, to listen to the pulse of its own civic memory and to find it international. The country has not merely travelled into the world – it always did that – but it is allowing, with any luck, the world to walk through its portals and be at home here. Scotland's vision of civic memory has begun to change the world of art: people everywhere are asking how it was that this small nation, which has punched above its weight in literary terms for over 400 years, is again training the world in how to glean the universal from the particular. Showing more powerful nations how to find a source of human truth in the smallest grain of local reality. It is our native strength, lest we forget. It is our nature, 'afore we go'.

That journey away from piety, away from political chicanery, away from moneyed arrogance, towards the open blessings of fellowship and the free play of the human spirit, is a journey mapped by Robert Burns, which is why I love him so much. His song is everlasting because it knows something deep about our connection to community. Civic memory is the backing on the mirror, allowing him to see nature, allowing us to see beauty and truth, and all of us to see ourselves. When it comes the particular, Burns is a kind of necessary angel. He saw particularity in a mouse whose nest he turned up one day with his plough. ‘The best-laid schemes o’ mice and man gang aft agley.’ Walter Scott saw it in the dimensions of historical narrative. The painter David Wilkie saw in warm Scottish interiors full of human spirit. James Boswell saw it very Scottishly in the details of one non-Scots man’s life. Joe Corrie saw it in a miner’s row, and wrote plays that spoke to every person who ever conceived of themselves as living with others. Ena Lamont Stewart saw it in a Glasgow tenement. Hugh MacDiarmid saw it in a drunk man looking at the thistle and Norman MacCaig in the surreal workings of a summer farm. Muriel Spark saw it in a classroom of girls, ‘the crème de la crème’, and Frank Fraser Darling saw it in the behaviour of birds on the Summer Isles. Today, there are hundreds seeing it, and the world responds to what they see. I give you the boys from Black Watch, raising an international consciousness of war from the imagined pool room of a bar in Fife. The audience took to its feet every night at St Anne’s Warehouse in New York as civic memory exhaled like Scots mist over the East River. James MacMillan adds the skirl of his own social and spiritual Scotland to the pulse of orchestral music at the world’s ends. Callum Innes brings new light into his pictures, and for my money it is a light that carries a tint of common experience, a nation, a weather, a philosophical bend, a tone of being, and always and everywhere the grain of civic memory.

My father wasn’t usually around to take me to school. Things were different in those days, and people didn’t take people to school: you walked with your pals and got into as much trouble along the way as possible. But for some reason I remember my dad taking me to school this one day in the early 1970s and taking our a shiny ten pence piece. The coins were still new at the time, from decimalisation. ‘You’re as modern as this two bob bit,’ he said. He told me stories of when he worked in the meat market in Glasgow and the pubs they drank in on Duke Street. There was a strong sense that he came from a world where people had the same values and the same fine sense – solidified in language – of how to live and what to say. When he spoke of his country, it was of a place always trying for betterness. He took it for granted we all wanted to improve. Struggle was at the heart of it, but my father was no existentialist: he demanded that we all made our struggle together, that the experience of life, at least in this part of the world, was common. He could make people laugh just by conjuring local reality, just as Billy Connolly does, but in my father’s case there was also a mastery of invective: he could eviscerate a lazy priest at 200 yards, and mockery, he believed, was part of our heritage. Before sending me through the school gate, he bent down and whispered this song in my ear:

Oor wee school’s the best wee school
The best wee school in Glesga
The only thing that’s wrang wi it
Is the baldy-heided maister.
He goes tae the pub on a Saturday night
He goes tae church on Sunday
And prays for God tae gie him strength
Tae belt the weans on Monday.

Three years later, the second time my father walked me to school, he waved me off with the words, ‘Remember, the English are coming! They’ll be here in a month’s time.’ This wasn’t just a sneer in the general direction of our beloved neighbours. It was a warning shot about something big that was about to happen in our house: an event that would challenge my notion of international relations. The English came to stay. Ours wasn't the kind of house where people came to stay: by then, it was a council house 25 miles from Glasgow full to the brim with noisy boys, unhappy dogs, unmatched parents, slippers, and football gloves. But my father had met this man on a building site in Coventry and rashly – or, one might say, merrily – asked him and his family to come and stay in what he liked to call Bonnie Scotland.

The discussions and tears before the visit went on for weeks: my mother immediately christened them "The English" and threatened to go on strike. I remember her saying she hadn't a clue what to feed the English and where would the English sleep? Did they have cornflakes or porridge in the morning, the English, or did they want kippers or expect a banquet from Harrods? Did they go to chapel on Sundays, the English, or was it Church or some kind of voodoo ritual where they gathered in black hoods out in the fields and prayed to the Sassenach Beelzebub? And how would they cope with the heat, the English, or the extreme lack of it? And the cold: was there some kind of government booklet we could read about The English and the Cold? Would we have to bring in blankets, or, God save us, duvets, and get the man from Esso Blue to deliver extra paraffin for the heaters because the English were coming and the English lived in some kind of horrible Benidorm of the mind where they needed heat and would hate their time and Oh, my God, I can't believe you did this to us, these people are not used to our way of life and will come up here laughing with their five pound notes and their demands for lunch. We didn't do lunch.

I'd like to be able to tell you that when the English turned up – all five of them, tumbling out of a hippy caravanette – everything went well and peace and understanding broke out in the land of Robert Burns. But it didn't. The English colonised the house exactly as my mother predicted. The kids jumped on the beds and laughed at the paraffin fire. The English daddy never stopped talking in his big English accent and the mammy went straight upstairs for a bath and started smoking in the bathroom. I mean: Smoking. In the bathroom. I knew the English were different because the children were doing handstands in the hall up against my mother's woodchip. My three brothers and I sat silent on a green sofa. My father read the Daily Record. My mother was in the kitchen with smelling salts, and one of the English children sang a rude song that included the word "bastard".

"Are they Protestants?" I asked my mother.

"Aye, they are," said my mother. "And worse!"

Long after the English had gone south, for years actually, my family discussed the horror of that summer invasion, but I found myself wondering about them. Who were these exotic beasts, the English? They seemed to be individualists – at any rate, they weren't a family in the same way we were. They appeared to make life up as they went along. Maybe I was secretly quite pleased that the English had muddied my mother's Anaglypta. Maybe I just reckoned they were freer than us. I hadn't heart of Little England yet, so didn't realise they were no less parochial than we were, but I've come to feel there was a difference. They assumed the world was listening to them, and we assumed, by then, that we were only really listening to each other. Our imperial glory had been subsumed by common sense, and felled by history, whereas theirs had not: they still wanted the pink bits on the map and the polished gold buttons in Horse Guard's Parade and the Queen. We didn't want that. Or, at least, nobody knew in Little Scotland wanted that. We were taken to the side of a bypass in Jubilee Year to wave flags at the Queen's car as it rolled past on its way around the country. The car slowed down and we waved these odd little tartan flags called Union Jacks. I saw her and she appeared like an explosion of lavender on its way to a tea dance.

It would take a few more years for me to discover the summer horror had much more to do with us than the English. The English had actually brought something fresh and interesting into the culture of our house, but we were too frightened and too defensive to see it. The English helped us see us as we couldn't see ourselves, and, anyhow, as with many recent cases, these people came with working class places with struggles and traditions just like ours. The summer invasion was really a story about our own prejudice.

My family couldn't have been more Glasgow, and their immersion in civic memory continued to be total. My granny Docherty, at the age of nearly 80, was still parcelling out her sense of the world's meaning with reference to the particularities of life around a square mile starting at St Enoch's Square. 'I like you,' she said. 'You've no' got a new erse and forgot your auld one.' That seemed to her kind the greatest virtue: you may have changed your address, and that's a free person's prerogative, but you've not forgotten where you come from. Her comment taps into – and overcomes – the greatest anxiety in Scottish culture, the notion that the great life is elsewhere, or that Scotland is a place to leave behind. But to my mind, and my writing, Scotland is a moveable feast, and Robert Louis Stevenson was never more Scottish than when sitting at his desk in a room above a swamp of Samoa. It was Civic Memory that made Stevenson care for the magic of the old country, wishing to capture its essence in stories that sometimes paid tribute to the more harrowing aspects of Scottishness – *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – as well as the simple beauties that underpinned affection for what we should call our first landscape, captured by him in A Children's Garden of Verse and in the unfinished Weir of Hermiston.

We all have a first landscape, and we haunt it as much as it haunts us. It has nothing to do with passports and origins and identity and taxes. It has little to do with nationalism, either. But it has much to do with a sense of belonging: in Scotland, the culture has always been called upon to reflect what people mean when they say they belong to a place. 'I Belong to Glasgow' was the great song of my parents' festive nights, and hearing it in childhood, I imagined it outlined not only a philosophy about living but a topography of remembering. What they were singing about was the idea that they belonged to a group of streets, but also to a group of people who also knew those streets. They felt they were owned by that place, by those buildings, and they saw their movement through the world as a series of departures and returns to the places that possessed them. In the end, it was a coveted vision of togetherness: they weren't alone in the world, so long as there was Argyll Street and George Square, and a culture that thrived on belonging. And when they laughed at a joke, they laughed loudest when the joke appeared to conjure the acquired wisdom of their locality. Think of Chic Murray, lying on the pavement and being upbraided by a policeman. 'Yer drunk!' says the officer.

'Naw I'm no',' says Murray. 'I'm trying to break a bar of chocolate in my back pocket.'

The famous Annan photographs of Glasgow's Calton district and Edinburgh's Haymarket caused a sensation when they were first published in the 1880s. They showed poverty and destitution at its worst, and launched a near-religion of slum clearance and sanitisation of Scotland's poor dwellings that has lasted to this day. Some of the pictures were taken at 69 Saltmarket, in tenement closes ravaged with disease and overcrowding, and in those pictures we see hosts of blurred children running in bare feet. Some of my ancestors lived at number 69, and it is their faces we see appearing like historical smears on these early photographs. This is the only trace of them left in the world. The buildings have gone and so have they, long since, and so have the Annans, too, and the Glasgow medical officers who were shocked by them and who instituted a rash of improvement. Yet I see them and want to lodge them in the national memory. I want not only to discover their ‘conditions’, as Engels would’ve called them, but their hearts and their minds. I want to find again their dreams and give them back to their children’s children’s children, so that we can know how our experience of living is a living form of participation in their existence. Culture is no slave to nostalgia, but neither can it be enslaved to the superego of the present, imagining that nothing can compete with the interestingness of oneself. There is drama in what exists offstage, in what is unseen, and in that sense, too, our journey is an attempt to stage the nation.

The matter of civic memory sits like a silver cloud over the streets of Glasgow. Soldiers in the trenches would write back saying their only hope was to see Buchanan Street again. My great aunt Nelly sold flowers at the bottom of that street, where it meets Argyle Street, and her whole life was a wee symphony of civic memory. With her brother, Willie Andrew, she had been a dancer once upon a time at the Britannia Theatre in the Trongate. They had appeared there at the same time as Stan Laurel, before he went to California and become half of Laurel & Hardy. He always said that Scottish audiences were unlike those anywhere else: they came to the theatre, he said, as if their lives depended on it, as if gave them a vision of how to live. Another comedian, Ken Dodd, put it another way: he said the Glasgow Empire was the most frightening room on earth, with people in the seats hungry for credulity, desperate for laughs and tonic and invention and their money’s worth.

Nelly was a character, and she sold herself as effectively as she sold the flowers at her pitch. She also harboured her own set of ideals. Many of her relatives had fought for Sinn Fein in Scotland in the 20s, had campaigned for Celtic Football Club, and her brothers had run into trouble with the police or appealed to the parish for relief. Looking backwards from Nelly, I began to find pockets of common experience that had sunk into the bones, my bones as much as those of the country itself. There were iron works and shipyards and unions; there were churches and war deaths and loan sharks and songs. Her uncle had murdered his wife in the Trongate and her father had sold canaries at the bird market before he died. They were all stories, and everybody had stories, though they were not the sort to write them down. Civic Memory conveys the lives of the under-educated and the ‘night people’ as Virginia Woolf called them. There were no journals and letters home, no memoirs, no plays written for the Home Service. These were people who lived by a code of memory that seemed to saturate the country they lived in and animate their days. They didn’t have book contracts or equity cards – so where did their culture live, and how did it become our inheritance, and how do we preserve that culture of ours?

It has been a signature feeling in the art of Scotland. For a country so associated with larger-than-life heroes – with Wallace and Bruce and Mary, Queen of Scots – the real story of the nation has actually been unwritten. It has been sung or told over bar tables and in tea rooms by a people devoted to the notion of verbal life. I am 43, and have scarcely ever received a postcard from the branches of my family, and I inherited not a jotting from my forebears. Yet I see the places and stories of their lives as they have been passed down in serial tableaux of civic memory. It is no surprise to me that the theatrical life of this country can be made vivid, with a little belief and a lot of creative power. It is a nation that has been living by miniature theatricals all its existence, with a population that dramatises its reality for a living. Every working class home in Scotland is a theatre, and, on this 5th birthday of the NTS, we might finally understand why it has entered the culture as it has. It is because it found the places of Scottish theatre not in a single building, but in the people themselves, locating itself at the inner-most point of existence for Scots: their imaginations.

To my mind, that is where the beauty of Scotland really exists: not in birth certificates or position papers, but in the minds and on the tongues of the people who have an interest in what the country is made of. Modern Scottish drama is once again engaging the people at the level of their own living experience –as opposed to some heritage notion of what is good for them – and in place of academic posturing or nationalist comforts we increasingly have a theatre which challenges the culture of Scotland to take a look at itself and unseal the envelope that holds its secrets. Some of the nastier hacks will be quick, of course, to suggest my affection for the National Theatre is biased by my experience of working on a play with them. Well, those same hacks in Scotland will always wish people to stoop to the level of their own cynicism, and they have no fruitful part to play in the happy struggle for excellence that has long since taken hold in Scottish culture. Obviously, when I get a minute, I'll write a play about those hacks called *A Satire of the Fourth Estate*. But I live in fear that that it might never be put on.

Here in Scotland, there is a recognition, I feel, that the civic memory of the people – the stuff that underpins our commonality, our parentage, our geography, our sense of the wonders and the woes of life – are finding expression at the highest levels of art. That doesn't mean to say that every production is terrific, that every novel is brilliant, or that every painting is a masterpiece, but simply to say that a fair wind blows in the direction of innovation. In my youth, 7:84 theatre company and the Citz and Borderline, among others, came along to teach us that civic memory was the great currency in Scottish cultural life. That we were a polemical people if not a political one, and that our talk, our arguments, the story of our compromises and our oppressions, could now be voiced in the amphitheatre of the open mind. It is that tradition that brought us to where we are today, a place where we can deploy the habits of art to find parts of Scotland's existence that only survive on the tongue. So much of what we were, so much of what must abide, can only be located in the civic memory and in the songs: it is our job to rescue the story of our disappeared generations, our unrecorded precursors, who lived and died in obscurity. If we have lights and instruments and talent, we ought to seek intelligence on those whose lives made the country what it is. Only then can we know ourselves and thrive in the knowledge.

What happened to the little boy Sandy Davidson who lived near the town where I grew up and who disappeared into thin air one day in 1973? I asked the question in my first book THE MISSING, and it led to other questions, deeper excavations, that are never complete. I was 25 when I wrote that book, and I wanted to signal a new way of thinking in prose about place and loss. We all knew what it meant to lose things and even to lose people, but what – and this was a political question – if our whole society had fallen in, during the Thatcher years, with a sense of social anomie, a sense of there being no such thing as society, of not quite caring or not quite noticing what happened to people? THE MISSING, whether I knew it or not, was a study in the mapping of civic memory. I wrote it to find the sources of personal belonging and to uncover the meaning of loss in my own country. And it grows, like everything I've been saying, from a belief that it might always be legitimate to ask, 'What happened?'

In my books I have appealed to a belief in an experience of life that is felt to be intensely local, yet one that is bound to the transformative power of values we hold in consort with one another. Whatever their faults, they are books held in place by a conviction of our common dreaming, by a belief in the alchemy of civic memory, which makes our world more real to us and draws on the justice of art. I didn't write them for the public good, but just to get the words right, yet I know I set about them with the hunch that these little histories were compelled by a moral imperative. One doesn't need to be Henry James to feel that compulsion; Scottish writers have often been ready to feel it, and never, perhaps, more Scottish than when following that feeling through.

I'm sorry to use these names, but only the best will do as we set out to make our case. When talking about civic memory, I'm often talking not only about a common experience we have relied on here in Scotland to summon our feelings about a place, but also, in a broader sense, to capture our notion of the relationship – a very brilliant relationship – between what is past and what is to come. Proust understood that very well, and so did Robert Louis Stevenson. As readers, as writers, and as everyday existers, we live on the cusp of past and presence, of memory and the unknown, of reality and the imagination. In The Cure at Troy, Seamus Heaney's free translation of Sophocles' play about Philoctetes, there is a closing passage which gives a clue, a very Heaneyesque clue, about what we might expect from art. For me it chimes with the deepest ambitions that reside in the civic memory, a hope of safe passage to a better future:

> History says, *Don't hope*
> *On this side of the grave*.
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.

Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's Ulysses, says that 'history is a nightmare from which' he is trying to awake. When first I read that, and thought of my Irish ancestors and their escape to the Broomielaw, I fancied that perhaps Scotland was the clear morning after the nightmare, the cold drink after a fever, a country where history could be dealt with as common cause. I have an Irish surname but my first landscape is Scotland – I was born here and it is the place that exists in my dreams, albeit a borderless country in my dreams and a place where the glens are filed with giraffes and the Isle of Arran is a tropical savannah topped with a snow-capped Kilimanjaro masquerading as Goat's Fell. I've always like the imagination at its most excessive, and Scotland is my home, not least because I grew up here and also, not least, because it is, for me anyway, the world centre of fictionality. One of the hallmarks of the nation – one of the reasons why the civic memory is so replete and so vivid here – is because we have the same respect here for fictional characters as we do for historic figures. Indeed, half of our historic figures are fictional. As a people, we are bathed in figments, awash in the made-up, the fabular, the kiddy-on, and the confected. People here can speak of William Wallace with less certainty than they can speak of the aforementioned Jean Brodie. It could be argued that Renton, the hero of Trainspotting, has as much to do with the reality of our lives than David Livingstone.

They are all made up, to some degree. And so are we. The Glasgow sense of this is carried by the notion of this or that wee worthy being 'a character'. The world I grew up in was full of 'characters', fully fleshed and for the most part breathing, but nevertheless self-invented, and sustained in their self-invention by the wealth of civic memory that surrounded them. I sometimes meet students who claim they are stuck for a subject: it wouldn't do them any good, but I instantly feel they should be sent to Scotland, where every few yards, on a good day, you will meet a character with enough combustion and spirit to fuel a trilogy. It's only one way of thinking about character, or course, but for me the fictional energy in Scotland is pronounced. There's a sort of magical realism in the everyday scene, and part of my interest has always been in catching that, in grasping the uncanny in the very normalcy of its surroundings. As I've said, people here are captivated by that, afore they go, but it has been the job of people like me to try to light the candles as quickly as nature and time is apt to blow them out.

A thankless task, you might say. But not if you believe that a culture is only as good as what it preserves. I'm not a history boffin, but I am a humanity boffin, and I happened to be born with a zeal for grasping the moment in the event of its passing. It's a kind of sickness, actually, but I'm stuck with it. I was born into the kind of family in which too many things slid out of view, too many people, too many streets and buildings and too many lives, with nothing written down and no photographs taken and only the burning light of civic memory to keep alive the constituent parts of who we were and how we came to be here. I remember in Primary 3 at St Luke's Primary School my teacher, Mrs Docherty, saying I seemed to be taking a rather intense attitude towards my daily News book. It was the habit then, and might still be, to encourage children learning to write to keep a News book, with drawings if possible. Most children wrote about their toys or their visits to the zoo. But I wrote full, headachy works of reportage, based on close observation and *notes*, for Christ's sake, and unrestricted dialogue, detailing the breakdown of my parents' marriage and our next-door neighbours' devotion to the drink and to sectarian ranting. I tried to tell a story my auntie had told at the counter of a chip shop in Shettleston. It was about the war, about an old couple in the Gallowgate who suffered a bomb blast that blew both of them out of their living room into the street below. They survived. 'It was awright,' said the man to a reporter later, 'it's the first time we've been oot thegither for 40 year.'

Our sickness can become our splendour, if we have the confidence to make things from it. It is the living power of the imagination that lies behind Civic Memory: the imagination that insists on connection, insists on saying 'we are not merely individuals, consuming and exploiting our way towards death'. No – the imagination insists on a story of how we made values and entertainments together, and built philosophies, and created castles in the air. We did ordinary and extraordinary things, and made life stand tall upon our memory of all that. What I'm calling civic memory relies on the constant rebuilding of the past – a persistent creative national remembering that has nothing to do with nostalgia, really, and everything to do with a full realisation of life. Was it not there already, a wealth of civic energy, in the building of the Stevenson lighthouses? Was it not there in the wards of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, as Dr Lister went about with his antiseptics? Was it not there again, as Ena Lamont Stewart imagined the human heart's complications as they flowered in the dark of a tenement room and kitchen? We hold to the notion that art can change our minds, that the pure light of philosophy can land on every retina. In civic memory we all feel something at the same time and don't quite know why. And art taps into that, underscoring the effect one man or woman can have on bringing others to see what they already know.

And here we are in Charlotte Square, celebrating the power of literature to transform and invent us. And here we are on the 5th birthday of the National Theatre of Scotland, ready again to send forth our imagination to meet an engagement with our many selves, our multitude of possibilities, our better judgements, our international place. There is truly no nation but the imagination: it is not the limited, inward-looking pride of a people that makes it great, but the outward, inclusive, confident asking of bold questions in life and art. Civic memory offers a daily uprising in our consciousness, a bid for freedom an improvement, amidst the recognition that we are citizens of the world before we are patriots of any single nation. The great imagination, in my understanding, seeks not to secure borders but to dissolve them, and we must take what wisdom we can to bring us singing into the future. I have liked border-crossers all my life, and I swear no more by Scottish genius than by any other: proud, in fact, to know that I come from a country that, on a good day, will welcome grand creative spirits from anywhere in the world, from England to Angola, to join the effort under our sheltering sky.

During the winter, I spend many long nights in a certain house in Norfolk with the snow outside. At one point, the people in the room were fighting on their computers with the intelligence forces of a corrupt foreign government. Encryption codes were passed from hand to hand in this country kitchen: truly a new scene in modern history. In Tahrir Square in Cairo the uprising was organised by social network, and the government had closed down the internet. The people in the kitchen used their skill, and an abundant imagining of freedom, to beat Mubarak's agents and reinstate the Internet. In that kitchen, there were people working without sleep from South America and Australia, from Germany, from England, and I stood by them, from Scotland. I was proud to believe in the internationalism of the event, and to believe, also, that an Enlightenment achieved not far from where I was born had contributed, down the line, to that day's events. The human imagination was at war with oppression, once again, and in the end it was the rights of man that pushed the arm of tyranny down on the table. It's happening as we speak in Tripoli this afternoon and already the force of civic memory has pressed, almost supernaturally, for Green Square to resume the name it had before Gaddafi's regime: Martyrs' Square. They are supported by a generation around the world who never drank a fluid ounce of Libyan milk or saw the sunset there, but who feel joined to them. Right now, sat at their computers or on the bus with their smart phones, these people are imagining a community that covers the globe, a country of the mind, where people are bound together by the technology they use and the wealth of their communication, in opposition to blind power. These people are building their own civic memory: it might not be a lost swimming baths or a café in Hyndland, but it is the same effort: a website or a piece of kit or a line of code that provides the metaphor of their togetherness and the hallmark of their civic pride.

Civic memory will hold the facts of our lives up to the light, the fact of who we have been and where we might go. And always and everywhere it will lead us back to our best substance, which is the imagination; this substance that is sometimes ill-apparent to us as a nation, and to each of us on our own; our substance, that is sometimes missing and sometimes lost in the distractions of modern life; our substance, which might be as dust, whirling through the void of time, where it not for the glories of what our minds are able to achieve here together. Will it not be possible to imagine a future for this country, for all countries, when our hospitals are like glittering palaces poised on the hill, and our housing communities great places of beauty and care and restoration? Will our schools not exist one day like art galleries with surrounding meadows, and each classroom be a heaven of provision and music and human warmth, where perfect food is served at marble tables before the children return to their golden lessons? Inequality will seem a poison in that world, and banker's bonuses, a horrid contagion as mythological and anachronistic as the Black Death. In civic life, the story of a society in which one person could earn 300 times more than the average worker would be as a bad dream, for we are the sum of our idealisms, in politics no less than in art. Will we not look beyond the avarice of our single destinies, to see what we knew all along: that the best or us is yet to come, and only our common governance of virtue, our civic memory, will make the future, not the past, another country, one that was made from our intelligence and out of proper respect for decent economics, as well as a passion for the beautiful relationship between art and life.

John Donne tells us, 'No man is an island.' But let me proclaim a mystery of faith: 'Every man is an island. Not merely that. But a country: every man and woman is country in themselves.' We are each responsible for our borders and our laws, and, at the close of day, we can only be judged on how beautifully we arranged our state. I grew up believing I lived in an infinity of countries, bound initially by the lovely word Scotland, and beyond that by a great word, the Globe: but in all of this it was Civic Memory that brought our lives into coalition. And art would be the passport from one state to another, and memory would be our currency, as we passed from one to another. From time past to time present, from here to there: from me to you.

Every day we might seek to open new ground with one another. The world is monstrous, but love is divine, and we can make the world can we not, after our own image? We can each reach out from our country of one and make a great confederation of the imagination, a final reunion of the living, the dead, and the missing.

Finally, I'll leave you with a short poem. It is by W.B. Yeats, a veteran of the wars between nation and selfhood. He brings it all back home and helps us see our responsibility to one another amid the great upheavals of time and memory:

When You are Old
When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;
How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim Soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.