

# Fool's Gold

## The Story of North Sea Oil

CHRISTOPHER HARVIE

Glück. Was war das?  
Wann kommt es wieder?

Erich Fried



PENGUIN BOOKS

Dr Gordon Wilson, Jim Sillars, Billy Wolfe, Ian Maxwell and Alex Salmond gave much information on the connections between oil and Scottish nationalism. Professor Bernard Crick and Principal Kenneth Morgan, biographer of James Callaghan, were similarly helpful from the Labour party side, as was Dr Iain MacLean of Nuffield College, Oxford. The Scottish political background was illuminated by Douglas MacLeod and John Milne of the BBC. I am particularly grateful to the Hon. Richard Funkhouser, United States Consul General in Edinburgh for his memories of oil affairs and Scottish politics in the mid-1970s. On 'the other side of the hill', Drs Ali Futuri and Ramzi Salman were charming and informative hosts on a visit to OPEC headquarters in Venice. Besides many illuminating comments, Neal Ascherson also contributed the epigraph on the title page - 'Good fortune. What was that? When will it come again?' - from Erich Fried.

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## Introduction

### Discovery

'I think we have something special. You will find it different from what you expect.'

The drilling-rig *Sea Quest* was unusual. Of the fifty or so working in the North Sea in the summer of 1969, she was one of the handful built in Britain, or at least in a Northern Ireland undisturbed in 1967 by bomb and bullet. The Protestant workers who had welded her strange but striking shape - an equilateral triangle of deck, supported by three huge columns resting on submersible pontoons - were the sons of the men who had built the *Titanic*.

*Sea Quest*, owned by British Petroleum, was under charter to the American Oil Company (Amoco), a company with years of gas-drilling behind it, and a couple of billion barrels of reserves, world-wide. Its crew was as secretive in its transmissions as a Lowestoft trawler out after haddock. They used a code in which numbers were represented by the names of American universities - Texas, Notre Dame, Rice - and these numbers were changed each day. In September, *Sea Quest* was drilling in block 22/17, about 150 miles east of Aberdeen, for which Amoco had the exploration rights in partnership with British Gas, Texas Eastern and Amerada. Brendon MacKeown, a geologist, was flying reports by helicopter to Mitch Watt at the exploration headquarters in Great Yarmouth, 400 miles south. One had obviously hit the button:

I suspected from the information that was available on the logs that we would see good oil. The most significant thing was to see if the pressure

and the flow would stabilize over a period of time. As soon as the valves opened we knew we had a winner . . .

None of us were prepared for oil. We thought we might find some gas or at the most watery oil traces, so I didn't have any stainless-steel containers. I had to clean out an empty pickle jar from the mess hall to collect the sample.

It was what we call sweet oil with not a trace of hydrogen sulphide. Mitch then poured it into an ashtray on his desk and set it alight and it burned well. But unfortunately the heat caused the ashtray to crack and the bloody stuff spilled all over the floor.<sup>1</sup>

### Interrogation

Twenty-five years have passed since *Sea Quest* found the Montrose field. After a search of five years, several false leads and a couple of disasters, commercially exploitable oilfields had been detected beneath the North Sea. In 1977, the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, said, 'God has given Britain her best opportunity for one hundred years in the shape of North Sea oil.'<sup>2</sup> In 1994, dissension exists about what actually remains. Annual production, rising to a second peak in the mid-1990s at around 110 million tons (one ton of oil equals 7.5 barrels), will eat into about 1,900 million tons in reserves; this would give around seventeen years' life to the North Sea, with supply dwindling away in the second decade of the new millennium.<sup>3</sup> But the upper projections reach as high as 7,000 million tons, accessible through new technology and a higher price of oil. There could be new fields in the North Atlantic, Celtic Sea, Cardigan Bay and Purbeck; 'second generation' discoveries in the strata of existing fields; more efficient extraction methods lowering overheads. Oil was a bright spot in the 1994 economy, with a 37 per cent increase in output up to June. But the North Sea, after bringing in £100 billion between 1977 and 1985, had done little to solve Britain's balance of payments problem.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as the oil price fell – only £88 billions' worth

was sold between 1986 and 1994 – the oil industry itself retreated mysteriously into the background, overshadowed by the battle of Thatcherism: for and against, even though such economic success as the Conservatives enjoyed largely depended on oil's ability to turn Britain's perennial balance of payments deficit into a glittering surplus. Ministers themselves admitted as much:

The direct contribution of North Sea oil output to the balance of payments, taking into account both the reduction in oil imports and the current level of net oil exports, can be gauged from the total value of continental shelf oil sales, which in 1983 amounted to £17 billion.<sup>5</sup>

The rise and fall of Britain's 'third industrial revolution' has never been adequately dealt with as *history*. This seems incredible when one contrasts it with the other great – and tragic – upheaval which began in 1968, only a year before *Sea Quest*'s discovery. There are scores of books about Northern Ireland, and a like number dealing with the career of Margaret Thatcher, in reverence or execration. Britain in the 1980s may have undergone a renaissance of sorts; friend and foe alike had to admit that Thatcher made a world impact, for good or ill.<sup>6</sup> Yet the pathological, not the exemplary, obsessed writers about the country. Monarchy as 'the glamour of backwardness', national and class conflict, the fossilizing of history into heritage, the retreat from industry: all these preoccupied social critics from right and left – Tom Nairn, Hugh Thomas, Norman Stone, David Cannadine. What had once bound together now seemed to throttle. Yet the huge North Sea achievement (and it was an achievement, whatever the uses to which the wealth was put) somehow failed to figure. Perhaps this was because, with it, commentators had to deal with an issue which in its complexity went beyond the conventional categories of politics, economics and history, and so was difficult to handle; particularly by a society which was no longer speaking a common political language.

Hence the secondary concern of this book. In Chapter 1 I use a quotation from Tennyson as a prologue, for two reasons. First, the Arthurian epic was always a symbol of 'British' rebirth, a

Welsh legend tailored to emphasize the collaborative power of the nationalities of 'the island of the mighty'. Second, because Tennyson, looking out from Somersby in Lincolnshire on the very seas under which the rigs would find enough natural gas to heat and cook for the country for several decades, would have appreciated – if not commended – the sort of science necessary to set up the machinery for extracting oil from one of the world's most difficult terrains.

Much the same qualifications applied to oil as those which informed Merlin's solemn advice to Arthur on Excalibur: choose the right time and then use it decisively. But the oil did not come as a gift. It also consumed up to a quarter of British industrial investment in the 1970s and 1980s. The money had to come from somewhere; and the profit from the venture also depended on external factors. The oil issue was in no way crude, but complex. It required that grasp of the totality of their society and its culture which – despite its headlong transformation – the Victorians possessed. Matthew Arnold called it 'insight'. In the 1860s Tennyson and Gladstone had agonized over the coal question: the economist Stanley Jevons's calculation that Britain's coal reserves might run out. Arnold himself used this *angst* in *Culture and Anarchy* (1868) as a stick with which to beat his 'philistines'.<sup>7</sup> Yet the far greater incident of the oil discoveries inspired no equivalent curiosity or pride among the élite or the masses of 1970s Britain. Why?

North Sea oil meant engineering which rivalled in scale some of the greatest schemes of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries – production platforms the height of the Post Office Tower; ports and oil terminals which dwarfed the Mulberry Harbours of D-Day; gas-turbine generators which could light a city the size of Aberdeen. It also involved considerable risks to those employed in it – something made tragically apparent in the Piper Alpha disaster of July 1988. Yet despite Britain's, and in particular Scotland's, expertise in engineering, the bulk of orders for equipment went overseas, particularly to the United States, Norway, Japan and the Netherlands. Was this because of the speed of development

demanding by government policy in 1973? Or because oil was discovered on the 'wrong side' of Scotland? Had Britain come too late to a technology which was already highly sophisticated? Or had 'de-industrialization' already gone too far?

British offshore technology might be limited, but the finance and organization necessary to fund exploration and production caused vast changes in banking and created new financial networks. The Scots regarded themselves as particularly good at this, and for the first time many became aware of the huge, globally sensitive complex of financial services and fund management centred on Edinburgh's Charlotte Square. But doubts remained. Did this cousinhood of lawyers, accountants and bankers create the sort of international co-operation required (of which the Thompson Organisation's partnership with Armand Hammer's Occidental Petroleum in the Piper field was exemplary), or were the oil operations incidental to a business which was increasingly multinational and heedless of local élites, let alone local social problems? Were the real beneficiaries not the industrialists but the speculators?

The finance and control of the oil business were deeply affected after 1974 by the election of a Labour government with a tiny majority and formidable problems. It created a 'national interest' in the shape of the British National Oil Corporation, and this was defended by the radical Energy minister Tony Benn in a battle with the Common Market, the American majors and, not least, the two 'British-based' multinationals, Shell and BP. In Benn's campaign there could be seen one *étatiste* prescription for the reconstruction of the British economy. Did it have any chance of success?

But the 'oil factor' had its drawbacks, even if the sea yielded its bounty efficiently and the price per barrel kept up. Would a high pound penalize traditional export areas? Was it a better strategy, as some Conservatives argued – and after 1979 put into practice – to reverse much of Labour's industry-sensitive approach, and encourage tax reductions and overseas investment instead? Or would this tend to benefit the other industrial powers, notably

the Federal Republic of Germany, which was both the principal purchaser of the oil and the main recipient of British investment? Indeed, by the mid-1990s was anything left of the oil windfall, in a country characterized by manufacturing decline, a large balance of payments deficit, continuing low productivity, and burgeoning social problems?

How much autonomy, finally, did any British government have? Was the price of oil not decided as much by politics as economics, with the North Sea temporarily important because Middle Eastern affairs had moved it from being a marginal production area to one of tactical significance? Were its creators not the British, or even the majors, but the Arabs who dominated the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), whose 'oil muscle' increased the price of crude sixfold in 1973-4 in the master-stroke of energy politics, and whose grasp of their cartel fatally loosened a decade later, letting oil prices fall again and bringing the windfall to an end?

The Arabs were not the only nationalists around. Exploiting this hazardous sea was difficult enough for British governments distracted by labour unrest, civil war in Ulster and the Rhodesian rebellion, all of which impacted on the energy issue. Was the necessary co-ordination frustrated by the political implications of energy policy in a centralized state made up of mutinous nations - particularly Scotland, where the Scottish National Party, with almost a third of the popular vote in 1974, threatened secession from the United Kingdom? This quickly supplemented an energy crisis with a constitutional one. Did this divert politics from industrial issues? Or even if the devolution exercise was negated by the result of the referendum of 1 March 1979, did it buy time for the British establishment to get its hands on the oil?

During the 1980s Anglo-Scottish relationships continued to change, and with them the political complexion of a country which already enjoyed a substantial degree of administrative devolution. More fundamental nationalist impulses were being released whose impact has yet to be understood, let alone resolved. An energetic and unapologetic international capitalism, rooted in

two less-than-stable regions - Texas and the Middle East - had taken on an ageing centralized state. A Scotland whose political culture was both semi-collectivist (Neal Ascherson thought it closer to Poland than to London) and post-imperial found itself being 'colonized'. What was the upshot of this for the people involved, and their attempt to control their lives? Where did the image of a new Klondyke, on the rigs, platforms and onshore installations, give way to a reality of unpredictable, primitive conditions, exploitation and often desperate isolation? Could there even be any countervailing solidarity in a dispersed work-force which only came together for a fortnight of punishing twelve-hour shifts?

Oil had ramifying cultural and human consequences in a country jolted by the decline of traditional heavy industries. These were filtered by a complicated civil society, by a trade-union movement which shifted from being a labour organization to becoming a 'national forum', by observation of another small country, Norway, coping with the oil challenge, and by a remarkable Scottish cultural renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s. Evident in productions such as John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* and Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero*, and in a more allegorical way in the novels of Alasdair Gray, what did 'oil culture' do to Scottish - and to English - *mentalités*? Did such a transformation lie behind the rapid decline of British loyalties, and the popularity of appeals for 'an independent Scotland in a united Europe' which threatened by the mid-1990s to wipe Conservatism off the Scots political map?

The oil story is not over, but has the time for British economic and industrial reconstruction now passed? Or perhaps, to use the language of the oilfields, this 'weather-window' had never really existed, circumstances being far more complex than many made out? Was the oil even a political and ecological disadvantage? Other countries had after 1974 an enforced and salutary education in energy policy, conservation and transport reforms - insulation, wave power, railway modernization. In Britain these were shelved by a government which was either dogmatic or lazy, while

conventional energy resources were easily available. Is the continuing deterioration of the land and sea environment, as much as Anglo-Scottish relations, a reflection both of the uncertain future of the Union, and of the failure of 'Britain' to function as a political or moral community which treats such questions seriously?

An introduction is not the place for explanations. But the more questions one tackles, the more they seem to multiply; despite the wealth of writing on the subject, it remains oddly disarticulated. Treatments of oil in its various aspects – technology, economics, entrepreneurship, policy-making, social impact – seem to stand by themselves, failing to communicate. How much is this the product of the subdivided nature of modern research, where the specialized treatise has by definition to be self-limiting? Or of the vastness of the topic? Or is it something to do with the nature of the political community which found itself under stress?

Which takes us back to Tennyson. The public morality of his age was important to him, but by the 1960s a dissociation of sensibility seemed to have gripped his successors. Discussion of oil, its use and abuse, seemed to vanish into a morass of specialism and shop-talk. Which fact was the more bizarre: that three lengthy biographies published in 1992 and 1993 of Harold Wilson, Prime Minister when gas from the North Sea revolutionized one part of the country's energy supply, when oil was first discovered, and when the essential interventionist legislation was passed, mentioned the subject not once?<sup>8</sup> Or that, while in the 1980s oil guaranteed the country's income and bankrolled the messianic style of Mrs Thatcher, it vanished almost completely from her version of British history?<sup>9</sup> In its turn the Thatcher 'miracle' became of fateful significance in formulating the 'shock therapy' of new economic policies in a fast-changing Eastern Europe after 1989. The jury is still out on that one.

Oil could have been used by the British establishment as an experiment in 'designing change' and securing industrial modernization through conscious social planning, but by the late 1980s this establishment, what Lord Annan called *Our Age*,<sup>10</sup> seemed

fatally weakened. Did the multinational origins of its successor's wealth – in City speculation, property, tax havens – mould the image of a self-serving plutocracy, calculating only with reference to its own cash outcomes? Had the people who mocked the crassness of the Texan Bunker Hunts and high-rolling oil sheikhs not ended up behaving rather like them? At issue was the competence of the British state. It had been given a mighty opportunity to rebuild itself. What had it done with it? The answer to this lay not just in economic policy but in the facility with which the national culture – the principles inherent in British social arrangements – could make the necessary connections between technology, economics and politics. Was it still capable of doing so? And if it was not, who carries the blame?

#### Our Age?

Finally, I have to interrogate my own motives for writing this: not out of self-advertisement, but because the historian is part of the history he or she writes. Guy Arnold's *Britain's Oil* (1977) was an important source of material in its time; my own book, *Scotland and Nationalism*, figured therein and the picture given in it of the development and the programme of a Scottish national movement which extended beyond the Scottish National Party.<sup>11</sup> In 1977 I was a critic of the SNP. Since 1989 I have been a member. One has to come clean. It is not the business of an historian to project a political interpretation, yet the selection of evidence is inevitably affected by the direction which he or she sees affairs taking. Carlyle wouldn't have written on the French Revolution had he not regarded it as a *Zeitbruch*, after which the nature of history was quite different. The global events of the two decades since 1973 have made the Britain which, in a reformed, federalized form, was worth the struggle in 1977 seem much less of a cause today. It has been overtaken by the need to safeguard communities from an insensate international commerce,

and the need for environmental and economic co-operation. The oil episode seemed to me to demonstrate that the nation-state had had its day, and Europe – and Scotland – were worth the commitment.

Politics apart, I have tried to tell a story and to fit it into a broader historical context. The author's experience matters in so far as it illuminates a particular political and interpretive *milieu*, even if at times one feels like Stendhal's Fabrizio, galloping round the battlefield and trying to find out what is going on at its centre. Yet Scotland was anything but marginal in the 1970s; not just because the oil business was tangibly close, but because it reacted on an argumentative, practical society moulded by technology and ideology. Someone from a Scottish middle-class background, from a family of engineers, attending the High School of Edinburgh, and the university in the 1960s, involved in the Labour Party in Edinburgh, inevitably felt, like J.M. Barrie describing the onset of the factory age in Angus, that 'a giant had entered our native place in the night'; like most of my contemporaries, I tried to make something of it.

In contrast with the political amnesia of the Wilson biographers and Thatcher – and they can be taken as broadly representative of the metropolitan elite, left and right – the Scots in the 1970s, the people who ran the parties, argued in pubs, phoned up about articles or broadcasts, could not avoid the offshore issue. David Steel, Gordon Brown, John Smith and Robin Cook influenced and were influenced by 'oil politics', in its widest sense, on the Liberal and Labour side. Stephen Maxwell and Billy Wolfe in part created the Nationalist policy. Malcolm Rifkind, Lord Mackay and Andrew Neil wriggled their way into the metropolitan establishment with the help that oil gave Scottish career prospects. Bob Tait, Jonathan Wills and George Rosie, Neal Ascherson and Tom Nairn, were among those – whom the Germans would call *Publizists* rather than journalists – who created a climate of opinion about it. More academic interpretations – by John Kay, Iain MacLean, William Miller – of aspects of the oil and nationalism issue, analysing its financial and political impact, emanated from school-friends and contemporaries.

The result has given the British political class in the 1980s and 1990s a marked Scottish element. At the same time it has done little for the Union. Few people seemed to know more about oil, without making money out of it, than the Anglo-Scots. But elite they were not; success is the essential qualification of an elite. And what remains of that centralized and centrist elitism, of the statistics of W.L. Guttsmann,<sup>12</sup> or Noel Annan's mandarin in *Our Age*, with its 'effortless superiority'? Cook, Smith and so on aimed at the commanding heights of British politics. But were the heights commanding enough, particularly after the upheavals of 1989–92?

Was this generation business sheer coincidence? It could be, but Scotland at this juncture was peculiarly sensitive. Ian Jack, in *Before the Oil Ran Out*, has shown, out of his own experience, how 'his age' found itself in a second historical transition: between empire and civic identity. Our parents had experienced the war; we grew up in a community in which heavy industry still dominated, where the kirk or left-wing politics still prescribed – with quasi-utopian goals in mind – most of the activities of the week. Scottish nationalism did not fit easily into this, as a glance at *Scotland and Nationalism* will show; but Scottish ways of thinking did. The sense of deducing social action from an interpretive philosophy, a legacy of the Enlightenment, if not of Calvinism, intervened when one tried to fathom a new and dramatic situation.

The impact of a technology as elaborate and apparently alien as that of oil extraction meant that a lot of learning went on in those two decades. Partly grasping what it meant and where it was likely to go; chiefly, perhaps, realizing that we were no longer, however guiltily, the exploiters, but the exploited. The American sociologist Michael Hechter's 'internal colonization' theory, unhelpful where he placed it – in Scottish history – seemed to fit the Scottish present. Were we just there to spectate knowingly on the barbarians – whether Texan oilmen or City dealers – just as, two hundred years ago, the Brahmins had regarded the Scots soldiers and civilians who took over India? Or could we get

out of this experience some bitter wisdom which would enlighten others, faced with cognate problems?

A lot of mistakes were made, but the Scots knew that 'the oil' had happened, that nothing would be the same again. Did this register on Britain?

I

## Prelude on the Red Clyde

'There likewise I beheld Excalibur  
Before him at his crowning borne, the sword  
That rose from out the bosom of the lake,  
And Arthur row'd across and took it – rich  
With jewels, elfin Urim, on the hilt,  
Bewildering heart and eye – the blade so bright  
That men are blinded by it – on one side,  
Graven in the oldest tongue of all this world,  
"Take me," but turn the blade and ye shall see,  
And written in the speech ye speak yourself,  
"Cast me away!" And sad was Arthur's face  
Taking it, but old Merlin counsell'd him,  
"Take thou and strike! The time to cast away  
Is yet far-off." So this great brand the King  
Took, and by this will beat his foemen down.'

Alfred Tennyson, 'The Coming of Arthur'

Oil Country: 1911, 1962 and 1993

In 1911 Winston Churchill, recently appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, visited the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, at Archerfield, the house which the latter had rented near North Berwick. As the pair walked the links and discussed the naval race with Germany and the looming threat of war, Churchill observed, out in the Firth of Forth, great grey Dreadnoughts steaming past the Bass Rock. He was never one to throw away a scene like this, radiating destiny, and commemorated it in sonorous prose. Three years later, convinced that the Grand Fleet would be able



Robertson of the Scottish Labour Party. By this vote, carried ultimately by a majority of one on 28 March, the SNP virtually wrote itself out of Parliament. 'Turkeys voting for an early Christmas' was the premier's exasperated response, and traditional Labour voters in the north-east and elsewhere swung back to their old allegiance. The SNP vote fell nationally from 30 per cent to 18 per cent; of the eleven MPs only Donald Stewart and Gordon Wilson in Dundee survived, and the Scottish Labour Party was wiped out. Later that year the Conservatives enjoyed a boomlet of support, and even took five out of the eight Scottish seats in the first elections to the European Parliament.

It was Mrs Thatcher's oil, to do with as she thought fit.

9

## Oil Culture

If a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively.

—Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*<sup>1</sup>

Let us lie once more, say 'What we think, we can'

— The old idealist lie —

Louis MacNeice, 'An Eclogue for Christmas'<sup>2</sup>

### The Offshore Islanders

The oil derrick was the most obvious symbol of industry since the factory chimney or the colliery headstock. And yet in the 1980s that seemed to be all most people knew about an industry which was gobbling a quarter of British industrial investment. Offshore oil was discreet, geographically withdrawn from the main population centres. Although its owners were literally household names, presenting themselves at every filling-station, it was shy about projecting itself as a producer. Rigs and support ships and production platforms were Meccano structures innocent of the hand of the industrial designer, let alone the corporate logo people.

Offshore oil communicated in a technobabble which was, even by the standards of shop-talk, inscrutable. Academics returned from the University of Stavanger talking of courses called *Boring* and *Advanced Boring*. Technical journals were throttled by phrases like 'maintenance of downhole umbilicals by intelligent pigs':

grievous bodily harm was done to the grammar and syntax of the English language. All the more so when what was being communicated could be put in decent English and, when explained, was often fascinating. Offshore oil's technology outdid in ingenuity the looms and mules and jennies of the industrial revolution which kids learned about in school. Ironically, thanks to progressive teaching methods – projects and 'hands-on' instruction – and the heritage business, kids knew more about Richard Arkwright and James Watt than they did about what was going on to the east of Hull or Aberdeen.

They were not alone. The impact of the oil on the British metropolitan intelligentsia and its imagination was practically zero. Mervyn Jones of the *New Statesman* wrote a sharp piece of reportage, *The Oil Rush*, in 1976, with grim photos by Fay Godwin; then there was silence. In 1979 a novel called *Offshore* won the Booker Prize. It was a gentle satire by Penelope Fitzgerald about a collection of middle-class eccentrics living on houseboats off Chelsea, rather like Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* forty years earlier, minus Cary's demonic Gully Jimson. Nothing in the way of metaphor was implied – least of all along the lines that the 'real' offshore business meant a collection of highly commercial operators living (and working) off an island inhabited by middle-class eccentrics.

In 1986 Al Alvarez wrote a book, also called *Offshore*, describing a trip to the platforms. Or rather, he republished a long *New Yorker* essay, itself a significant point. Alvarez seemed concerned to emphasize the downbeat quality of the whole experience: the contrast between 'outer space with bad weather', and the banality of what was actually going on. On one hand the battered, dishevelled affluence of Aberdeen, the necklaces of lights out to sea, viewed from the helicopter, the incredible statistics. On the other hand the tedium of day-to-day rig life – 'The atmosphere in the mess hall and coffee shop and recreation rooms is subdued, friendly, undemanding' – the noise, the lack of 'culture', of society and of individual space. Together these suggested not adventure, but something numbing in its normality:

In a way, the Diving Control Room is a model for the whole offshore enterprise. The first time you see the banks of gauges with their flickering needles, the digital read-outs, the levers, the switches, the coloured lights, and, above all, the images on the video screens . . . it seems like the greatest show on earth, a technological miracle, a justification of every boast about man's ingenuity and his ability to organize. But within an hour, you treat it as the people concerned treat it – as just another job, more complicated than most, more difficult than many.<sup>3</sup>

Did this reflect Kit Carson's picture of avoidable injuries caused by 'the political economy of speed': the loss of life in helicopter mishaps and diving accidents, the disruption to older communities and local and regional ecologies? Piper Alpha was yet to come. Others, though not in London, would later demand a 'creative treatment of actuality' which dramatized the hopes of prosperity raised and shattered, the testing and rejecting of local and national political élites. But at a 'British' political level, whose instabilities were provoking repeated and lurid fictionalizations, this refused to arrive.<sup>4</sup> Even the airport fiction of the likes of Jeffrey Archer failed to come up with anything other than *North Sea Hijack*, 'an asinine *Boy's Own Paper* adventure story with the very minimum of thrills and a totally miscast hero'. It did, however, have a tough female prime minister, double scotch in hand, knocking baddies for six from Downing Street. Prescient, for 1979 . . . There was a Bennite political thriller – Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup* (1983), much more successfully filmed – with energy politics as a central theme, but it homed in on nuclear power, and ignored oil.<sup>5</sup>

This non-critique induces first curiosity and then suspicion. How could something that big be so boring? Was the British intelligentsia so parochial and apprehensive that it couldn't comprehend what was happening, or was a canny campaign of obfuscation going on? The first was always more than a possibility. If poetry, as F.R. Leavis said, ought to be at the most conscious point of the race in time, then Philip Larkin, at Hull, pretty well coincided with North Sea oil at its most unavoidable.

And avoided it. Drink, porn and general churlishness apart, the man wasn't blind to his surroundings: eyeing from his compartment the boozy miners on Retford or Doncaster platform, thinking of sad Mr Bleaney from 'the bodies' – the Coventry car body plant. Asked to write a poem for National Environment Year, 1972, he obliged with a pasquinade which, although second-grade Larkin, would have been acceptable to social critics as alert to industrial change as Ruskin or Carlyle over a century before:

Things are tougher than we are, just  
As earth will always respond  
However we mess it about;  
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:  
The tides will be clean beyond.  
– But what do I feel now? Doubt?

\*

On the Business Page, a score  
Of spectacled grins approve  
Some takeover bid that entails  
Five per cent profit (and ten  
Per cent more in the estuaries): move  
Your works to the unspoilt dales  
(Grey area grants)! And when  
You try to get near the sea  
In summer . . .

It seems, just now,  
To be happening so very fast;  
Despite all the land left free  
For the first time I feel somehow  
That it isn't going to be the last,  
That before I snuff it, the whole  
Boiling will be bricked in  
Except for the tourist parts –  
First slum of Europe: a role  
It won't be so hard to win  
With a cast of crooks and tarts.<sup>6</sup>

Lady Dartmouth, for the Tory government, blanched at the 'spectacled grins'. Out they went, though Larkin didn't make a fuss about it. But of the industry which permitted this assault on old England – and gave men and trawlers from Hull, turned off the Icelandic fishing grounds, the chance of work providing safety watch around the rigs? Nothing.

From 1953 to 1961 there had been a smaller oil boom, on and off the coast of Sicily. For a few years the port of Syracuse contributed to a rise in Italian production from 18,000 to 7 million tons. There were tenders, tankers and rigs. It ended. Sicily continued, dogged by crime, *omertà*, the unwillingness to change; as its great writer, Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa, had forecast in the book he laboured for decades to complete, *The Leopard*, which appeared in the middle of this period. Visited by a delegate from the northern capital of Turin, mandated to secure his membership of the Italian senate, Lampedusa's hero, the Prince of Salina, declares that he and his island are too old to change: 'it doesn't matter about doing things well or badly; the sin which we Sicilians never forgive is simply that of "doing" at all.' They will react to the modern world like a senile old man trundled in his wheelchair round the glories of the Crystal Palace in London.<sup>7</sup>

History was too much for Sicily. It bore the island down, numbed its responses. As oil activity rose, similar things were being said about Britain. In 1981, two years into a Conservative government whose 'radical' measures seemed to be intensifying the economic crisis, some relief seemed to come Mrs Thatcher's way from an interpretation of British history, emanating from Texas, which suggested that the slobberer in the wheelchair was already immanent in the grandeur of the Crystal Palace itself. Martin Wiener's *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* argued that the English, even at their zenith, had never really liked commerce and had retreated as soon as possible to country life, political deference, and paternalistic social legislation which had progressively clogged the hard-and-fast dictates of the market economy.<sup>8</sup> Wiener met with academic

opposition, but ministerial applause; Mrs Thatcher was believed to have distributed copies to wavering Cabinet wets. Something of what she believed the country was up against can be seen from the remarks of Armand Hammer of Occidental Petroleum:

Great Britain, sliding politely into post-imperial and post-industrial decline, seemed the least likely candidate on earth for membership among the great oil-producing nations . . . The British government treated the potential bonanza as carelessly and complacently as any untutored sheikh and, in those early days, practically threw it into the hands of the Seven Sisters.<sup>9</sup>

#### Uncommercial Travellers

In terms of responses to something as big as the railway mania of the 1840s, Wiener had a point. In fact, apart from Jones and Alvarez only three writers based 'south of the M62' – the road which ran from Hull to Liverpool – seem in any sense to have reacted to the oil: Jonathan Raban, Paul Theroux and, later on, Linda Christmas. Christmas's book was in the tradition of J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1936). Both the others seem to have been determined to do something conspicuously odd: in 1982 Raban sailed around Britain and Theroux, following on his success in *The Great Railway Bazaar*, made the trip by train. All three were writing in a marginal mode – the home travel journal – albeit one which had had a long history, going back not just to Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* but to Dickens's *Uncommercial Traveller*, and before him to Defoe. However risky the 'self as oracle' was, the results might be illuminating. Were they?

Christmas's *Chopping Down the Cherry Trees* (1990) was the last and slightest. Although projecting herself as an 'absolute floating voter', sorrowfully concerned at the axemen's assault on British society, she remained oddly unanalytical about her own reactions

– although she had been eight years the wife of a Conservative politician, once part of that family that Norman Fowler famously wanted to spend more time with. She found that oil was simply a Shetland experience, just as there was a nuclear menace at Dounreay and a singularly dull and unforthcoming Scottish nationalist, Gordon Wilson, in a shabby office in Dundee. She made no attempt to articulate these issues in terms of the common factor of energy policy, or even to recollect that in 1972–9 Wilson had been the business end of the SNP's oil campaign. Granted Christmas's central metaphor, it didn't seem to occur to her that in terms of the real resources of the country, Mrs Thatcher – here in her 'stern nanny' guise – had been less Chekhov's Lophakin than the spendthrift Madame Ranevsky.<sup>10</sup>

Both Raban and Theroux were more committed, and angrier. Theroux's journey, undertaken in the middle of the Falklands War, contrasted the shabbily low-key decency of railwaymen keeping their branch lines going, and the understated heroics of the 'bracing' British holiday, with the ululations of triumph emanating from Whitehall. Otherwise baffled about nationalism, the American found the crofters and gamekeepers of desolate Sutherland representative of qualities of intelligence and honesty otherwise in short supply, but was appalled by Aberdeen, its mixture of ferocious respectability and empty exploitation. Oil had not improved the place:

We reached the coast. Offshore, a four-legged oil-rig looked like a mechanical sea-monster defecating in shallow water. It was like a symbol of this part of Scotland. Aberdeen was the most prosperous city on the British coast. It had the healthiest finances, the brightest future, the cleanest buildings, the briskest traders. But that was not the whole of it. I came to hate Aberdeen more than any other place I saw. Yes, yes, the streets were clean; but it was an awful city.<sup>11</sup>

Theroux hated the sort of obsessive money-making that Wiener thought propelled economic growth. The cultural void which was Aberdeen, the absence of civilized eating and drinking, were repellent to him, in comparison with the 'British' virtues of

quietness, reflectiveness, savouring the slow passage of time along the threatened railway tracks.

Aberdonians being reading people, they were incensed at Theroux's assault. Jack Webster hurled Aberdeen intellectuals, from Thomas Reid to Annie Lennox, back at Theroux in the *Scottish Daily Express*.<sup>12</sup> This may account for what happened to Jonathan Raban.

Raban's line was that of the furious English left-liberal clerisy, what the Murdoch press would later dismiss as 'the chattering classes'. Encountering at Lyme Regis a copy of the *Sun* blaring about the Falklands, Raban

... saw hatted mass-produced, bigotry put up for sale under the benign eye of the government whose cause the bigotry was designed to serve.<sup>13</sup>

His boyhood haunt of Lymington had been sacked by speculative building; there was £25 million-worth of glittering yachts on the river:

Behind each mean-eyed boat there lay the rich pickings of the property business, the money markets, North Sea oil, silicon chippery or the legerdemain of tax accountancy.<sup>14</sup>

The Tory-voting clergyman father who had once sculled with him had now swung far left; a Rural Dean of Southampton living in the red light district and organizing the unemployed and the nuclear disarmers. In Hull he met Larkin, his old mentor, and found that that monument to political incorrectness indeed never elevated his range above a 200-yard circuit of flat, university library and off-licence. Against this, as his motor-boat chugged north, past angular, semi-alphabetical shapes on the eastern horizon which were rigs and platforms, Raban encountered a persuasive and Webster-friendly mirage:

But to the north there was still a living city whose amazing renaissance was talked of in places as far away even as London. People spoke of its lordly wealth as if it was the imaginary Dallas of the television serial. Its jewelled inhabitants walked ten feet tall. In the decaying industrial fabric of Britain,

the city was a marvel, a promise of the good life to come... an astounding counterworld to Hull and Blyth. There'd be... there'd be... there'd be all-day, all-night saloons, their granite walls drumming with the amplified sound of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash. You'd be able to buy Manhattans and Tequila Sunrises in dollars and cents. The deep, ravine-like streets would be solid with low-slung Cougars and Chevies, their chrome faces cast in the contemptuous grin that goes with big bucks...

The success of Aberdeen was an essential part of my own plot. After touching on so many failures and disappointments, the story needed a crock of gold somewhere.<sup>15</sup>

But Aberdeen gave him the slip, remained an imagined post-industrial Xanadu. Fog, a mass of birds at the sewage outfall, and the threat of being rammed in the mêlée of oil-rig tenders and tugs scared him off.

This seems ominously symptomatic. Oil failed almost totally to surface in the imaginative literature of Anglo-Britain. Where was the novel or the poem of North Sea oil? Or the play – although hadn't Ibsen arguably already written it in *Pillars of Society*? Where was the solemn moral accountancy of Leavis's Great Tradition?

Or was this to expect too much? Industrial change usually took a long time to register on the literary imagination. Jane Austen had the moral conscience of the Evangelical revival, but was indifferent to mules and jennies, if she ever knew what they were. Sir Walter Scott lived through the industrial revolution at its most intense and alarming, when poverty-ridden weavers and former soldiers could have plunged Scotland into insurrection, but only in his last serious work, *The Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827), did he even mention a cotton mill. Dickens got railways into *Dombey and Son* (1844), but as a discouraging symbol of death.

Perhaps the Scottish experience of oil – those basins of onshore activity, as isolated from one another as the rigs themselves – was in its way suggestive. Raban himself had written in an earlier book, *Soft City* (1977), that people's view of their environment

was not so much civic as highly subjective and discontinuous. The trend of modern communications created a compartmentalized life in which, say, the Los Angeles kid's notion of Los Angeles was limited to what he saw from his parents' car when being run to school or the supermarket: a couple of blocks looming into focus out of the motorway city.<sup>16</sup> This supplemented an earlier observation by the American historian of early industrialization, J.U. Nef, in *War and Human Progress* (1940): the increasing specialization of knowledge had itself made it impossible to take the 'synthetical' view necessary for an imaginative capture of economic and social change; even the intellectual was in the position of Kinglake's soldiers in the Crimea. The bigger the change, in fact, the more inadequate the conceptual response.<sup>17</sup>

Earlier, the moral maps had been more comprehensive. In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen could slap down the arriviste and probably Scots-nabob Crawford duo as representing behaviour toxic to the high thinking and plain living of her own sort – the sort of thing which could bring the Jacquerie to the lodge gates. However archaic his convictions, Scott had provided a template for the recovery of national histories throughout Europe. Once Thomas Carlyle had stated the 'Condition of England Question' in *Chartism* (1839), no writer could remain indifferent to the power of Mechanism and the Cash Nexus. Now it seemed that this collective consciousness, alive as late as Orwell, was disintegrating.<sup>18</sup>

Not because of hostility or falsity, but because of the same unmanageability of history of which Lampedusa complained? In Doris Lessing's autobiographical novel *The Golden Notebook*, published as a 'condition of England' work in 1962, Anna Wulf, Lessing's neurotic heroine, plagued by unfulfilled sexuality and disillusioned by communism, has a fling with an American businessman who satisfies her, sensitively and enjoyably. This much truth gave mutual respect and affection. The American's straightforward affection and hedonism – the mark of a younger and more confident society – cut across Anna's own obsessive

history, cramped and bruised. Two people, enjoying one another physically, remain far apart politically but, as Raymond Williams would have put it, the distance is measured. This, however, implied metaphorically that the need to analyse checked the ability to organize: that the future lay with the unreflective but energetic Americans. Even when *The Golden Notebook* enjoyed a revival in the 1970s, it was not because of its reflections on history but because of its feminist connotations – something not wholly acceptable to its author, who saw this appropriation as part of an increasingly divided, depoliticized, sensibility.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1970s, the worlds of learning and of politics seemed almost as remote from one another as Britain and America. In 1977 Tony Benn visited Cambridge, and wrote in his diary of meeting Raymond Williams, 'a quiet middle-aged academic' apparently unknown to him.<sup>20</sup> If this was left speaking to left, what chance was there of a unity of view on the complex issue of the oil? This situation was made even more extreme since some authors were vividly conscious of the implications of the oil, particularly for politics, and nearly all of them were Scots.

#### McGrath's Rising

The rigs and platforms irrupted off a highly literary coastline, from the sagasteads of Shetland and the place of Hugh MacDiarmid's exile, south to the Orkney of St Magnus and Edwin Muir, the Cromarty of Hugh Miller and the fabulous Sir Thomas Urquhart, translator of Rabelais and proponent of a universal language, and the Aberdeenshire of George MacDonald and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. Eric Linklater lived long enough to sell his house at Nigg to Brown and Root for more than he made on most of his novels. Neil Gunn died in 1973, just as the first strikes were being made; MacDiarmid in 1978. The writers of the inter-war 'Scottish Renaissance', theoretically progressive, had looked with suspicion on 'the greater herd and the great machines'. How

would they have reacted – how would their successors react – to the dimensions of this new assault?<sup>21</sup>

A tradition of Scots political fiction existed, but it was always 'extra-parliamentary'; its theatre of politics was both intimate and cosmic, with a satire, irony and obliquity which were turned on the individual's ideological and psychological involvement with the political. In the early nineteenth century John Galt, Walter Scott and James Hogg didn't just comment on but were *part of* Scotland's 'willed' modernization: from near-medieval subsistence to technology in under two generations. This impulse transformed itself into the 'popular print capitalism' of Victorian newspaper novels, like those of William Alexander, alert to the agricultural capitalism of Buchan, the 'muckle fermers' and fish merchants who were the forebears of Maitland Mackie and Ian Wood.<sup>22</sup> If Scottish politics in the 1980s had a slogan, it would come from a novel, Alasdair Gray's injunction to observe civic *virtù*: 'Work as if you were living in the early days of a better nation', from the climax – in every sense of the term – of his *1982 Janine*.<sup>23</sup>

In Scotland the first wave of SNP success, in the 1960s, had already energized a discussion about the country and its future in symposia and broadcasts, and in 1966 the magazine *Scottish International* was set up by a Catholic undergraduate, Bob Tait, with the assistance of Father Anthony Ross, Catholic chaplain to Edinburgh University, the historian Christopher Smout, and the poet and translator Edwin Morgan. *Scottish International's* elaborate 'What Kind of Scotland?' conference, held in Edinburgh at Easter 1973, had two intriguingly distinct impacts. Dr Donald Mackay disclosed the unpreparedness of government departments when confronted with the challenge, and the hasty and incompetent taxation policy which had resulted in huge revenue losses: a *début* which was to give him a high profile for the rest of the decade.<sup>24</sup> And, perhaps more significantly, John McGrath's 7:84 Company's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* – history, political cabaret and *ceilidh* – set out on its remarkable consciousness-raising career in the Highlands.

Commissioned by Bob Tait for the occasion, *The Cheviot's* première was in the George Square Theatre in Edinburgh on 31 March 1973. McGrath had only assembled his troupe on 16 March; he wrote the last act on the night of the 30th. In the next couple of years there were to be 100 shows, seen by 30,000 people, in a 17,000-mile tour.

McGrath, a Liverpool man, was where the 'theatre of anger' met the spirit of 1968. 7:84 was dedicated to the proposition that 7 per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the country's wealth, and fitted into the 'theatre as agitprop' British-style, minibuses doing the part of armoured trains. But McGrath also knew the Scottish bourgeoisie intimately; his wife Elizabeth was the daughter of the magnate Sir Hector MacLennan and sister of the Labour MP Robert MacLennan. She was also a fine actress, and with Alex Norton, Bill Paterson, the Gaelic singer Dolina MacLennan and John Bett, 7:84 set out north by minibus, along with another talented pair: John Byrne, who built the 'pop-up book' which served as a set, and Dave MacLennan, who provided the light show. The story could draw on the talents of a collective authorship spawned by a Narodnik-like movement of student radicals northwards, with the input of Brian Wilson, David Craig, Ray Burnett and James Hunter, several of whom were involved in the launch of the *West Highland Free Press*, edited from Broadford in Skye, within sight of the Howard Doris yard at Loch Kishorn.

The Scottish Committee of the Arts Council didn't believe that Highlanders wanted theatre; they were to be sharply disapproved. In part, *The Cheviot* became that long-awaited Scottish sequel to E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1965); a story whose narrative, as much cultural as economic, could all too easily have become a grim recital of the circumstances of agrarian oppression. The McGrath collective's achievement was to balance this tragic element against the lyricism of the Gaelic tradition and the absurdities of the inept conquerors, sheep-graziers, tourist entrepreneurs, 'sportsmen', and the tartan-festooned dolts – chiefs, politicians, mad ideologues – who

accommodated them. The climax comes when a Texan, Elmer Y. MacAlpine the Fourth, is ushered on stage by politicians and bankers. He sings 'Grannie's Heilan' Hame', drenching the audience in kitsch, then begins calling the company to a square-dance:

Take your oil-rigs by the score,  
Drill a little well just a little off-shore,  
Pipe that oil in from the sea,  
Pipe those profits – home to me.

I'll bring you work that's hard and good  
A little oil costs a lot of blood.

Your union men just cut no ice  
You work for me – I name the price.

So leave your fishing, and leave your soil,  
Come work for me, I want your oil.

The pace increases, the lyrics change, the dancers drift from the sets and watch open-mouthed as the caller goes solo:

One 2 3 4 5 6 7  
All good oil men go to heaven

8 9 10 11 12  
Billions of dollars all to myself

\*

27 28 29 30  
You play dumb and I'll play dirty  
I'll go home when I see fit  
And all I'll leave is a heap of shit.<sup>25</sup>

The first paying performance was at Aberdeen, then Rosemarkie. After the satire, the songs and the history, the evening would end with a *ceilidh* and a dance. Some places were more full-hearted than others. At Inverness Sir Andrew Gilchrist and a suspicious Highlands and Islands Development Board hierarchy turned up, as did the Countess of Sutherland, putting a brave face

on things. At Lochinver the white settlers were out in force, also on Skye. There was 'a strange one at Alness, now oil-struck'. Not for the first time, the Clearances were to become the metaphor for the destruction and dispossession wrought on Scotland:

An ancient, near-blind Gaelic poet, the Bard of Melbost, came up to us after a show in the Outer Hebrides, and said: 'I have heard the story of my people told with truth. If I die tonight, I die a happier man.'<sup>26</sup>

McGrath admitted that the process was for his troupe as much an educational experience *for them* as a didactic exercise. They were seeing the Highlands getting off their knees, breaking out of the 'lament syndrome'. The play ended with the words of Mary MacPherson, a Highland Land Leaguer of the 1880s, which helpfully combined Gaelic, socialism, and the land issue:

*Cuimhnichibh ur cruadal  
Is cumaibh suas ur sroill,  
Gun teid an roth mun cuairt duibh  
Le neart is cruas nan dorn  
Gum bi ur crodh air bhualtean  
'S gach tuathanach air doigh,  
'S na Sas'naich air fuadach  
A Eilean Uain a' Cheo.*

Remember that you are a people and fight for your rights –  
There are riches under the hills where you grew up.  
There is iron and coal there, grey lead and gold there –  
There is richness in the land under your feet.

Remember your hardships and keep up your struggle  
The wheel will turn for you  
By the strength of your hands and the hardness of your fists.  
Your cattle will be on the plains  
Everyone on the land will have a place  
And the exploiter will be driven out.

*The Cheviot* reached Oban in July, where the SNP was holding its conference. Jim Lynch in the *Scots Independent* remarked on its



impact, although christening the McGrath troupe 'the International Young Socialists'. 'How can they put on a play like that and then say they are not nationalists?' he asked Billy Wolfe. 'If we knew the answer to that,' Wolfe replied, 'we would sweep Scotland tomorrow.'<sup>27</sup>

*Nisi Dominus, Frustra Aedificabit*

Was oil to power a new autonomy, or was it simply increasing external control of the country by big money and the American superpower? This quandary provided much meat for discussion on the left, the burden of Gordon Brown's *Red Paper*, in 1975, and tended to emphasize the gulf between 'revolutionaries' and 'home rulers'. The former, rebelling against nationalism's 'false consciousness', found unusual allies among Conservatives, who were shifting away from the decentralization of Sir Alec Douglas-Home's committee, towards a 'Britishness' which was all the stronger for feeling itself in a minority.

Alan Massie, a leading realist and deeply political novelist, inherited a sceptical line from Scottish novelists of the 1950s such as James Kennaway and J.D. Scott. He had a European awareness: the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro in *The Death of Men* (1981), and Vichy France in *A Question of Loyalties* (1988). He also intervened frequently in politics, moving from fringe devolution in the 1970s – as an associate of Robert Underwood and Euan Marwick and their Nevis Institute – to embattled unionism in the 1980s. This transition was reflected in his one fictional encounter with contemporary Scottish politics, *One Night in Winter* (1984).

Despite the Grand Guignol of its theme, the tone of the novel is elegiac and pessimistic. Massie's narrator, Dallas Graham, returns to his family mansion in Kincardineshire and joins the *louche* entourage of a rising SNP politician called Fraser Donnelly. Donnelly, a haulage contractor, represents the enterprise culture

(soap, rope and dope) parasitic on oil. A monster of the permissive age, sexually voracious, he is killed off by his wife while *in flagrante*. As a handy Marxist friend assures Graham, Donnelly is what small nationalism will turn out to be: nasty, brutish and Scots.

The most sympathetic figure in a deeply off-putting *galère* is an old merchant banker, whose view is that

... the world is for the big battalions. Small countries cannot withstand it, especially when they are not protected by the barrier of a different language. Their geographical fate determines their nature... Scotland will grow ever less Scottish and ever less stimulating; we live in a withered culture. Sounds of energy are the energy of a death-rattle. The Union may not have been the end of an auld sang, but it led us into the last verse.<sup>28</sup>

This lecture – which represents Massie's own view – shows the limitations of his 'novel of ideas'. The ideas – rather elderly ones at that – simply crush out V.S. Pritchett's 'determined stupor' out of which great novelists work, something vividly evident in their contrast with the pernick defence of the Union by Bailie Nicoll Jarvie in Scott's *Rob Roy*. Jarvie and his cronies would have taken oil in their stride, with a real energy behind them which would never stay put in Charlotte Square. Ultimately *A Night in Winter* was derivative where it was not melodramatic: Lampedusa, Anthony Powell, John Fowles leave their prints on too many episodes. Only the final section, when Graham, now an antique-dealer in London, tries to make contact with Donnelly's widow/murderess, conveys a sense of individual experience. Massie's point was perhaps that real life could only be lived away from the Scottish phantasmagoria; but delineating the Scottish situation – even if only to reject it – required greater empathy.

Massie did not lose by being the one articulate voice of Scottish intellectual unionism, the inevitable balancing opinion called into play by the national media. But, *The Cheviot* apart, politics rather than literature was dominant in the 1970s. In 1977 Neal Ascherson observed that little cultural efflorescence seemed

to accompany the political activity.<sup>29</sup> Indeed one of the last declarations of Hugh MacDiarmid was that, if spared to vote on 1 March 1979, he would vote against the Scotland Act as betraying 'real' nationalism. This sense of *ennui* was imprinted on James Campbell, whose *Invisible Country* (1984) was an attempt to combine the discursive observation of Theroux with something of Edwin Muir's social criticism in *Scottish Journey* (1935). Campbell chose to leave Edinburgh for *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1982, believing that there was no cultural life worth speaking of in the north.<sup>30</sup> This informs both the tone of his book, and his encounters with the oil – an insensitive executive in one pub, a trip to a rig, a couple of whores in another pub:

It was the Boom. But booms come and go in a country where pessimism is a native faculty. On 12 August 1982, the *Scotsman* published an article by a local journalist which foretold the withering of Aberdeen's oil industry. On 13 August, the same newspaper had a report based on a new Scottish Economic Bulletin, which glowed with 'the sustaining effect of the North Sea oil industry'. The reason for the contradiction, which in a similar form can be found, week in, week out, lies not in the ineptitude of journalists, but in the nature of the economy itself.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that the *Scottish Economic Bulletin* was a government publication, and that the journalist might have been trying to pre-empt what he thought was propaganda, didn't seem to occur to Campbell. His notion of the country's 'invisibility', its ingrained contradiction and pessimism, was predicated on the failure of 1979. Scottish politics, to Campbell, was a bore; but without politics, others felt, a rhetoric of confusion became self-fulfilling.

Campbell shared the conventional wisdom in the South that the Scottish question was exploded; and indeed the resumption both of agitation for home rule and any growth in the fortunes of the Scottish National Party took two parliaments to achieve. Yet as the cultural historian Cairns Craig wrote,

Instead of political defeat leading to quiescence, it led directly into an explosion of cultural creativity, a creativity coming to terms with the

origins of the political defeat and redefining the nation's conception of itself. The eighties have been one of the most significant decades of Scottish cultural self-definition in the past two centuries.<sup>32</sup>

Parallels could be drawn with Ireland after the death of Parnell in 1891 – the foundation of the Gaelic League, the Irish Literary Theatre and, in 1908, Sinn Féin. W.B. Yeats's later image of Parnell visiting Jonathan Swift's dark grove, and there drinking 'bitter wisdom that enriched the blood', seems telling. Of all these cultural developments – in painting, the revival of representational art in a new Glasgow School; in plays, the work of John McGrath, Liz Lochhead and Iain Heggie; in television, John Byrne's *Tutti Frutti*; and the films of Bill Forsyth – perhaps the success of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* in 1982 was the most vivid, not least because Gray stated that the traumas of 1979 had knocked away a writer's block that had afflicted him for years.

In Gray's frontispiece to *Lanark*, the oil rigs twinkle in an inky sea, out of which rises a version of Hobbes' Leviathan – 'Man, greatest among the beasts of the earth for pride'. *Lanark* was a heady mixture of *Bildungsroman*, science-fiction and political allegory, stylistically suspended between James Joyce and Lewis Carroll, and in time between the 1950s and 2000. It has been compared with *Ulysses*, but in fact is both more realistic and fantastic. An artist, Duncan Thaw, attempting and failing to paint a mural of the Creation in a Glasgow church, passes after his suicide into a strange subterranean world in which the wealthy literally live off the poor – who are recycled into food. Reincarnated as Lanark, and projected into a world of international negotiations, severed from the messy, creative reality of working-class Unthank, he ultimately plays a confused part in saving his own community, the doomed industrial town.

*Lanark* is about the struggle of love and what Adam Smith called the 'social affections' against impersonal forces which have changed the institutions of politics into those of destruction. It also reflects the experience of many Scots in the oil years – of being plucked from a country suddenly grown interesting, and

set down in pleasant and privileged places where food, wine and women became magically available: the provincial suddenly subject to the seduction of power. *Lanark* is, and is not, about oil (or, God help us, the Oil Experience). At one level it harks back to Henryson's fable of 'The Toun Mous and the Uponlandis Mous', and a traditional discourse anent affluence and morality. It nearly ends pessimistic, and yet the glimmerings of a small-scale socialist future show through. When the author, rendered as Nastler, appears, he tells *Lanark* that he had originally intended the book to be a socialist epic:

... what the Aeneid had been to the Roman Empire my epic would be to the Scottish Cooperative Wholesale Republic, one of the many hundreds of small peaceful socialist republics which would emerge (I thought) when all the big empires and corporations crumbled.<sup>29</sup>

The socialist city, run by 'makers, movers and menders', what David Marquand would call the 'principled society', is saved: '*Nisi Dominus, Frustra Aedificabit*'. The theme resurfaces in Gray's shorter and more savage 1982 *Janine*, which he claims to be 'a sadomasochistic fetishistic fantasy'. This is the black night of Jock MacLeish, one-time 'lad o' pairts' and electrical lighting wizard, now an alcoholic supervisor of security installations, tied to pornographic fantasies of power over women which are a combination of *Playboy* and *Dallas*. America, that expansive, Whitmanite continent of democracy and opportunity and jazz, the demotic civic justice of the Western and the hard-bitten private eye, had still been around in the early impact of the oil. But now it had, in the Thatcher-Reagan alliance, calcified into modes of exploitation and repression; of barbed-wire installations, corrupt cops, and flesh for sale: a confederacy of the rich and the brutal. MacLeish's calvary is even more agonizing than *Lanark*'s.

Gray's achievement in a way endorsed Massie's criticisms. Scotland, and Scottish nationalism, was no longer an adequate container for the civic. The menaces to the virtuous life were themselves international, and required appropriately complex responses. But they also had to be grounded in a cultural commu-

nity which was directly conscious, not one in which artistic response was mediated through a print-capitalism which had long passed beyond the possibility of individual control. One, authentically Scottish, response was to surrender, to sell oneself to the highest international bidder. The eponymous hero of Gray's *The Fall of Kelvin Walker* (1984) does precisely this, recruiting himself into the media which is, *inter alia*, conspiring to play down the economic benefits which could flow from the oil. Walker had his factual analogues, notably in the career of the charmless but energetic Andrew Neil, who moved from being an advocate of 'oil-powered independence' in the *Economist* in the early 1970s to becoming lieutenant of the ubiquitous Rupert Murdoch in the following decade.

The alternative to the 'cultural supermarket' which Neil peddled in the *Sunday Times* was the engaged culture of the post-industrial city of Glasgow in which Gray's eccentric career was sustained by the richness of painting, jazz and rock groups, drama and broadcasting; not unlike 1920s Berlin, a slightly ominous precedent. Again there was the concern with the response of individuals, the encapsulation of social change in their own histories. Liz Lochhead's monologues were a new type of social criticism, penetrating the cocoon of the *Sunday Times* reader who deadened the uncertainties of fitful affluence with conspicuous consumption. They shifted away from the easy target of the former schoolteacher Verena complaining that, 'When He comes back from the rigs after a fortnight he can think of only one thing. A sheet and duvet set in navy blue is not a good idea', to something much darker and metaphorical.

#### 21 March

Course, I'm used to it now, after all these years, never give it a thought. Well, from the word go, ever since He first went up there on the rigs it's been much better. Definitely. Well, financially speaking anyway, I mean see before, with his other job, before, on shore ... honest to God, the mortgage was a millstone.

We first flitted here, I thought we were going to be clomping about on

the bare floorboards and sitting on orange boxes watching a wee black-and-white portable for ever.

Him away, the diet is a piece of cake. Well, you've no distractions. Although it's much easier now that I'm only on the maintenance anyway. But see when He's home and he gets the munchies and he's up at midnight frying eggs and spattering grease all over my new ceramic hob I could see him far enough – but och well, I just try and tell myself that he's not home for ever, and I bite my tongue.

But you don't tend to bother cooking for yourself, do you? And I am out a lot. Tend to just slurp down a wee cup of slimmasoup while I'm waiting for my carmens to heat up.

Och just round to my mother's basically, just to get out of the house. Although He is that jealous, vernear divorce proceedings he phones up and I'm no in!

Although as I try to tell My Mother and Our Joy, I'm convinced it's with us having the none of a family ourselves I've adjusted so well. Means I'm a free agent. Moira was just asking me when I was round there the other day, she says: Did you never think to *investigate* it, if that's no too cheeky a question . . .

I says, No, I don't mind telling you, I says, it was a *nightmare* Moira, I says, you know nothing about indignity if you've never had your tubes blown.

Doctors! Och it was into the ins-and-outs of everything.

Could find nothing wrong. Nothing wrong with either of the two of us. Not that they could put their finger on. Suggested might simply be missing the moment, what with the two weeks on, two weeks off, mibbe he should think of changing his job, or something?

But och, it's security isn't it . . .

And is a kid compatible with an off-white fitted carpet, that's the question . . . ?<sup>24</sup>

Liz Lochhead, like Gray, went to the School of Art in Glasgow: and went there from the doomed steelworks town of Motherwell. A miniaturist with a knife, she did not constrain herself with realism, as the sub-title implies. The narrator is a thirtysomething former schoolteacher, not in work but well off. Her husband is

on the rigs, her society determined by the positional goods he enables her to own. There is a sexual relationship of sorts, nothing else. Her fecund sister Joy lives in a 'scheme', with five kids and an unemployed husband, but fights her corner in tenants' and anti-poll-tax groups. Verena tries to persuade Joy to act as a surrogate mother and give her her last, unexpected child. But at the birth Joy refuses, and her sister breaks with her and everyone else. The child will be called Felicity. Verena and Joy are not just two Scotlands, but two unequal halves of the world, two incompatible moral codes. Nothing in Scotland was simple; as with Carlyle a century and a half earlier, the didactic point was made with satire and grotesquerie.

#### Resurrection or Brigadoon?

Political disenfranchisement meant an absence in Scotland of the 'politics as theatre' novel, but it encouraged this migration of political and economic themes into the metaphor or the fable; as in George Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe* (1972). To Brown, as to his teacher Edwin Muir, the whale-backed Orkneys were an Eden, and one which, unlike Muir, he never left. But now mechanism was moving in on them, too. *Greenvoe* was written evidently with Occidental's Flotta terminal in mind. The Orkney island of Hellya, whose quiet, co-operative life is celebrated in the early chapters, is taken over to house a project called Black Star. Its people are dispersed, its houses, church and school bulldozed to make way for tanks and piers and 'installations'. Yet at the end, when Black Star is itself evacuated, the islanders come back to act out the ceremony of the death and resurrection of the harvest king:

The Lord of the Harvest took the black cloth from the niche where the horse-shoe had been secreted. The horse-shoe had vanished. In its place was a loaf and a bottle.

The Master Horsemen raised the Harvester to his feet. They put a white cloak over his shoulders. They brought him over to the niche where the whisky and the bread stood.

Slowly the sun heaved itself clear of the sea. The cliff below was alive with the stir and cry of birds. The sea moved and flung glories of light over Quoylay and Hrossey and Hellya, and all the skerries and rocks around. The smell of the earth came to them in the first wind of morning, from the imprisoned fields of the island; and the fence could not keep it back.

The Lord of the Harvest raised his hands. 'We have brought light and blessing to the kingdom of winter,' he said, 'however long it endures, that kingdom, a night or a season or a thousand ages. The word has been found. Now we will eat and drink together and be glad.'

The sun rose. The stones were warm. They broke the bread.

Despite the social changes, the Christian faith – which Mackay Brown shared with Muir – would persist, as indeed would the interpretive sophistication of an intellect which could juggle with economics, ecology, and Frazer's *Golden Bough*.<sup>35</sup>

English novels about the political and economic crisis of the late 1970s – by Melvyn Bragg, Margaret Drabble or Mervyn Jones – were portentous. A nation-shattering crisis appears to be both imminent and unresolvable, with the likes of Drabble's *The Ice Age* (1978) showing Fabian meliorism in full retreat. The Scots, on the other hand, treated the crisis imaginatively and even playfully. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, given the importance of what was happening. But they realized that the oil had triggered a very complex transformation, at once local and international. It was worth treating experimentally, using it as a means of focusing Scottish history. Thus while the thing itself was local, occurring in specific basins of activity, it was incorporated into the national repertoire of metaphors.<sup>36</sup>

Two young Americans are lost in the mist in the Scottish Highlands. The mist clears and they see a village. They also see a limping rabbit on the road, and wrap it up and carry it with them in the car. The village of Ferness has been slumbering for

years, and they are about to waken it with a surprising announcement. The little rabbit appears at dinner, in a casserole. Bill Forsyth's film *Local Hero* (1982) became perhaps the most widely distributed cultural artefact about the oil business. By turns poignant and sharp, it was a playful meditation on Scotland's uneasy love affair with America. For Forsyth this was a particularly Scottish issue, not just in its subject-matter:

The way that I go about making films is a reaction against what you could call the traditional English dramatically structured film, and also, especially, the English form of film acting. I'm doing that because of the relationship that Scotland has had with England. I suppose it's that inferiority that we feel, the Scots people, vis-à-vis England.<sup>37</sup>

The roots of the plot were derived from almost documentary instances: the Drumbuie case in 1972, in which Taylor Woodrow wanted to move in on Loch Carron; the operations of Daniel K. Ludwig at Cromarty and Armand Hammer in Orkney. But Forsyth used these as a structure on which to weave a complex pattern of Scoto-American parallels, divergences and misunderstandings – and he derived the manner of their presentation from sources ranging from Vincent Minelli's tartan-kitsch *Brigadoon* (1950) and Sandy Mackendrick's black comedy *The Maggie* (1955) to Mackay Brown and McGrath.

Most of the Ealing comedies of the 1940s started from a firm conviction of Englishness. 'It's because we're British that we want to be Burgundian,' Margaret Rutherford insists in *Passport to Pimlico* (1949); Mackendrick, however, lacked this confidence. In *The Maggie* his vision of Scotland was altogether darker and more corrupted: the hero, the 'wee boy' who 'saves' the disgraceful Clyde puffer and its crooked captain, will be doomed to see American money poured into similar hopeless enterprises. Forsyth is somewhat more optimistic: the Ferness villagers are quite prepared to trade their easy-going life for oil, with its wealth, pollution and stress. They will even kill for this, if necessary. But they are saved by a literal *deus ex machina*: Happer's fascination with the aurora borealis, which makes him preserve Ferness as an

observatory. (Not utterly implausible: think of the use to which Sir Iain Noble would put his wealth in Skye in the 1980s – the revival of the Gaelic language.) The film's last sequence, when the oil executive dials Ferness from the hectic of Houston, and the phone rings in the telephone box on the empty pier, suggests that the Arcadian fantasy of *Brigadoon* is as dead as the distance that once divided the two continents. To avoid a hideous outcome, for many more places than Ferness, responsibility and imagination would be needed on both sides.

In 1976 Alastair Dunnott observed three very old men walking slowly about the parterres of a great English country house. Sutton Place, near Woking, had accommodated a royal mistress and, in the nineteenth century, the republican and radical Frederic Harrison. Now, as the jets (which he hated) from Heathrow roared overhead, Paul Getty escorted Roy Thomson and Armand Hammer, his partners in the Piper field, round his estate. Within a year Getty would be dead, his profits endowing the Getty Museum in California with an annual income from interest alone that dwarfed that of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Gradually, like some huge vacuum cleaner, this fund would loosen old masters from the walls of English mansions and art galleries, and suck them across the Atlantic to Malibu.<sup>38</sup>

Oil had this sort of protean impact, and North Sea oil was important to the UK economy, but at the same time it marked only one part of the United Kingdom, a remote area in a period when most of the population had edited remote areas, especially troublesome ones, out of their concerns. It was a large-scale construction and extraction project, at a time when the British economy was tilting further towards the service sector. So its impact was, in a cultural sense, patchy. The Scots picked it up and wove it into their own complex national revival, partly because it was unavoidable for them; but their revival was itself intellectual and civic as much as political. They also had traditional links with America, which meant that the oil business was never impossibly alien. Even the great Satan of Texan megalomania shared the good Scots name of Ewing with the figurehead of the

SNP. If the Scots wanted convenient villains, they turned not to the oilmen but to the financiers and speculators of the City of London.

The oil business was American; so too was the sort of enterprise society which Mrs Thatcher wanted to enable. Yet somehow the two didn't coincide. British business society became more multinational, more controlled from America; but at the same time it stressed its southern English credentials; it projected the 'heritage' that could be marketed to a wealthy but insecure and increasingly unenterprising American plutocracy. The discovery made by T. Boone Pickens after his brush with the Beatrice field became common currency: more money could be made through speculating in oil than in getting it out of the ground.

Some years later the British prime minister, John Major, paid his first visit to the new president, Bill Clinton, in Washington. He took with him a first edition of Anthony Trollope's novel of 1876, *The Way We Live Now*. In this a fraudulent speculator, Augustus Melmotte, involves all levels of respectable London society in an overblown American railroad scheme, and the most prestigious scramble over one another in the race for easy money. We have never been told what the president thought of his gift.

## Oil and Mrs Thatcher

At every turn the significance of North Sea oil and gas seemed to compound. Margaret Thatcher went to the EEC summit and took the limelight. She went to Tokyo and played a key role . . . Why? Oil! Not British industry, not British political acumen, but because the UK was the only Western industrial country with oil to burn. No longer the weak sister, no longer the Seven Sisters, but Margaret Thatcher, apparently holding the trumps . . .

Richard Funkhouser, interview, 21 March 1994

Without the oil, the Thatcher experiment would almost certainly have been cut short as early as 1981 or 1982 after the unmitigated disasters of the first year or so of the new dispensation.

Sidney Pollard<sup>1</sup>

### Behind the Miracle

At the end of his election campaign in 1979, driving wearily back to Downing Street in his official car, James Callaghan remarked to Bernard Donoghue:

You know, there are times, perhaps once every thirty years, when there is a sea-change in politics. It then does not matter what you say or what you do. There is a shift in what the public wants and what it approves of. I suspect there is now such a sea-change – and it is for Mrs Thatcher.<sup>2</sup>

Such profundities were unusual, especially for Callaghan, a

thorough political professional. The Labour complaint had usually been that just when they had got the balance of payments sorted out, generally by hammering their own supporters (who then started to desert them) the Tories came in and blew the proceeds on loose financial living. When Labour fell from power in June 1970, it had done so partly because the April balance of payments showed an unexpected current account deficit of £36 million – largely due to British Overseas Airways' purchase of a couple of Boeing jumbo jets; the annual deficits of the Wilson government between 1964 and 1970 had been at their greatest in 1965, and had actually been overcome by 1970, with a surplus in that year of £821 million.<sup>3</sup>

The deficit in 1974, after the Arabs' oil price rise had joined itself to the hangover after the Barber boom, had been a horrendous £3,186 million; this had gradually come down, impeded partly by oil-industry-related imports, until a surplus was recorded in 1978, a year in which oil production, totalling 53 million tons, yielded £2,800 million. The revolutionary Iranians then helped by causing the oil price to double in 1979–80. That this bonanza was now presented to the Conservatives, through the indecision of the Scots and the bloody-mindedness of the unions, might have accounted for Callaghan's gloom. But even he could not foresee the fact that this surplus could be turned into a deficit of £4,482 million in 1987, of £6,321 million in 1991, and that the Conservatives could still win an election at the pit of a depression in 1992.<sup>4</sup>

Much remains obscure about the Conservative governments of the 1980s, even after their ceaseless drive for publicity. Which of their measures were calculated? Which were gambles, barely thought through, succeeding – or having their failures masked – through sheer chance? Which of these gambles worked because the political structures which might have facilitated a critique were too far gone in decay?

And not the least mysterious was Mrs Thatcher's relationship to the oil wealth which had come into her hands.