University of the West of Scotland

David McVey

The Tipsy Journalist and the Playful Novelist

Abstract

This paper describes a curious meeting in Glasgow between Joseph Conrad and the Scottish writer and journalist Neil Munro in the year 1898. Conrad was visiting Glasgow with the aim of giving up literature and finding a captaincy in order to return to the sea. He met Munro partly because he admired Munro's works, partly because Munro had reviewed his published work favourably.

They had a bibulous dinner at the home of X-ray pioneer Dr John McIntyre, and then a night-time stroll through the city which culminated in an uproarious outbreak of schoolboy japery.

This article describes the meeting and outlines its significance in Conrad's life and career, while also introducing Munro and his work in order to explain why Conrad felt the need to meet up with him. The meeting is discussed in terms of how it represents a perhaps surprising connection between 'creative' writing and commercial journalism.

Keywords: journalism, creative writing, Conrad

The Meeting

In the early 1900s, Joseph Conrad, the Polish seaman who had settled in England and become a writer, produced major works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Nostromo*. Yet as recently as 1898, he was considering returning to the sea. Early works such as *An Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer's Folly* had been critically praised but sales were poor (Munro 1933: 197); Conrad '... could not find his books on sale anywhere' (Munro 1933: 298). So in September 1898 Conrad headed north to Glasgow in the hope of finding a captaincy.

It is not clear how serious Conrad was in this mission; one recent biographer (Meyer 1991) makes no mention of the trip. While in Glasgow he met up with Glasgow-based writer and journalist, Neil Munro, whose recent collection of short stories (Munro 1896) he had admired. Munro was also keen on Conrad's writing; just a few weeks before meeting Conrad he had written, in a newspaper column 'A generation hence ... we shall waken up to find that Joseph Conrad has been the most wonderful writer of the sea English literature has produced' (quoted in Osborne 2000: 21).

Munro and Conrad dined in the Bath Street home of Dr John McIntyre, a pioneer of X-ray photography. It was a high-tech evening, partly spent listening to Conrad's compatriot Paderewski on a phonograph, and then 'we had our hands X-rayed and before we left for a stroll through the sleeping city which lasted till three AM we got the photograph prints of them' (Munro 1931: 133).

It is during this late walk through Glasgow that the episode that concerns us probably took place, though Osborne (2000: 22) suggests that it was during Conrad's 1923 visit to Glasgow. The fullest description is given by Lendrum (2004: 84-85). The two men came to Glasgow's George Square, to the north-eastern corner and the statue of James Oswald. Oswald had been a local supporter of the 1832 Reform Bill and he later served as an MP. His statue still stands where Conrad and Munro encountered it, his top hat held in his outstretched left hand. Birds have been known to nest in the hat, and small boys have often tried to land thrown stones in its depths. Munro, who '... was quite capable of inventing ancient Glasgow superstitions at a moment's notice' (House 1965: 152), informed Conrad that he would be an honorary Glaswegian if he managed to land a stone in the hat. After several tries, he managed to do so. It's worth stressing that they had drunk a good deal; Conrad later wrote to Edward Garnett about the evening and in so doing coined a fine euphemism, 'We foregathered very much indeed' (Karl 1986: 95). After seeing Conrad safely into the St Enoch Hotel, Munro had to walk several miles to his southside home, having missed the last train. He didn't arrive until 5am.

The two men kept in touch afterwards, but in its primary purpose Conrad's visit to Glasgow was a failure. He told Edward Garnett, 'Nothing decisive happened in Glasgow' (Karl 1986: 94-95). Conrad must have been better known as a writer than he feared, for he later blamed his literary reputation for his failure to gain a ship; 'This confounded literature has ruined me entirely' he wrote to RB Cunninghame Graham that November (Karl 1986: 116).

For English letters it's as well that Conrad didn't return to the sea. He remains a towering literary figure, but outside Scotland Munro is less well known. It is worth briefly focusing on him.

Munro

Lendrum (2003, 2004) is the best source for biographical information about Munro; much of the following is drawn from her work. Neil Munro was born, the illegitimate son of a kitchen maid, in Inveraray, Argyll, in 1863. He grew up bilingual in English and Gaelic, and moved to Glasgow when he was 18; he drifted into journalism and began submitting poems and short stories to the press. *Blackwood's Magazine* became excited about some of his short stories and some of these were included in *The Lost Pibroch and Other Sheiling Stories* (Munro 1996).

In these stories, Munro tackled Gaelic culture and history, and attempted to reflect Gaelic speech rhythms in English ('Its story was the story that's ill to tell – something of the heart's longing and the curious chances of life'), but his fiction is earthy and often tragic. The stories show little of the wistful Celtic Twilight and perhaps a more apt comparison is with Hardy's Wessex short stories. *The Lost Pibroch* sold well in England as well as in Scotland.

Munro's first novel was *John Splendid* (Munro 1994a), a historical tale set during Montrose's campaigns - 'And splendid indeed it is,' wrote Conrad to Munro in November 1898 (Karl 1986: 117). His final completed novel, *The New Road* (Munro 1994b), was another historical piece, this time set before the 1745 Jacobite rising; it's usually regarded as his best and was adapted for BBC television in the United Kingdom as recently as 1974. Superficially another exciting Highland novel after *Kidnapped*, *The New Road* is a searching, thoughtful exploration of how ancient, martial societies decline and break up. The rebellious Highlanders will be tamed not just by force of arms, but by trade

and goods, by a money economy and cultural dilution.

Munro published eight novels between 1898 and 1914, but remained a full-time journalist. He was married with, eventually, six children surviving to adulthood and he juggled journalism – including the editorship of the *Glasgow Evening News* – and other writing, mindful of the number of mouths his pen had to feed. Hugh Macdiarmid, in his uncompromising series of Contemporary Scottish Studies, commented of Munro ‘He has consistently served two Gods – and has not succeeded in avoiding the consequences of a divided allegiance’ (Macdiarmid 1976: 5-6). This is one of Macdiarmid’s kinder comments in the series.

In Munro’s regular newspaper columns he would often use recurring fictional characters to populate short humorous sketches. Three of these cycles of sketches eventually were collected in books of their own. *Earchie, My Droll Friend* was a comic Glaswegian worthy, while *Jimmy Swan* was a commercial traveller. However, his tales of the comical adventures of the crew of the Clyde coastal puffer *The Vital Spark*, collected in *The Vital Spark* (Munro 1906), *In Highland Harbours with Para Handy* (Munro 1911) and *Hurricane Jack of the Vital Spark* (Munro 1923) were destined to be his most successful works of all. A complete collection of the three volumes together with previously unpublished sketches was published, edited by Osborne and Armstrong, in 2002.

These comic sketches – always journalism, never ‘short stories’ as such – were published under the pseudonym ‘Hugh Foulis’, though everyone was in on the secret. The runaway success of the *Vital Spark* stories became an embarrassment, like the popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories to Conan Doyle. However, he had tapped into something real and enduring, particularly in the vainglorious but loveable figure of the boat’s skipper, Para Handy. These days, if English readers have been exposed to Munro at all, it’s through the three generations of the BBC sitcom based on Munro’s characters, with, successively, Duncan MacRae, Roddy MacMillan and Gregor Fisher as Para Handy. Also, while the credits of the 1954 Ealing comedy *The Maggie* make no mention of Munro or *The Vital Spark*, no-one who has read the stories can doubt where the idea came from.

Neil Munro died in 1930. He had had a happy and contented marriage and family life, difficult conditions for ensuring prolonged fame. His work remained popular in Scotland, though, and the Para Handy stories have never been out of print. In more recent times, Munro has started to attract critical attention – curiously, there is a lengthy tradition of academic study of his works in Germany – see Wernitz (1937) and Volkel (1996). His major novels and short story collections are back in print. His granddaughter, Lesley Lendrum, published a readable biography – the first – in 2004.

Some in England are unaware of this critical shift. One Conrad scholar was clearly puzzled by Conrad’s meetings with Munro, whom he describes as ‘A now forgotten journalist and a writer of Scottish fiction [who] had the popular touch and reached a wide audience’ while *John Splendid* is ‘unreadable now’ (Stape 2007: 110).

Journalism and Creativity

The story of Munro and Conrad in George Square is difficult to source; both Conrad and Munro wrote about other aspects of the meeting, but never about

the stone-throwing; the source of that seems to have been George Blake, Clydeside novelist and journalist colleague of Munro (cited by both House and Lendrum). Neil Munro's diary (held in the National Library of Scotland, MS 26295) is a sketchy record of meetings and travels from the 1880s to 1916, but the encounter with Conrad is not mentioned, though the week before he made a humdrum entry remarking 'Sold Lipton shares at 24/- premium'. The stone-throwing has become 'Munro folklore' (Lesley Lendrum in a personal communication to the author, May 2009) but there is no good reason to doubt that it occurred; Blake was a good friend of Munro's and would have often heard the story of the 1898 foregathering. Taking the incident as a real one, I'd suggest it surprises us not only because we see Conrad, a rather sombre figure, indulging in drunken juvenile japery, but also because we see him spending time with a journalist and minor novelist.

It's the second surprise that concerns us here. On the one hand, I think, as I have suggested already, that Munro deserves some respect as novelist and, especially, as a writer of short fiction and that his critical reputation is rising. However, there is, perhaps, a shock in seeing a major creative artist mixing on friendly and mutually-admiring terms with a jobbing journalist. Perhaps we can see this as a meeting, not just of two literary figures of contrasting reputations, but of two approaches to writing, one termed 'creative', and one less so.

Conrad wrote fluidly with little need to revise or edit his work, but by contrast '[a]t no time did Munro find the business of creation, as distinct from journalism, an easy one for all that his prose has above all the illusion of flow ... his English in journalism was of a uniquely easy and crisp variety ...' (Blake 1931: 4-5). Must 'creative' literature, as Blake suggests, have a difficult birth, while journalism, perhaps the lesser art, is produced more easily? Certainly, the deadlines journalists face ensure that *something* has to flow, and flow quickly.

I remain sceptical about the supposed divide between 'creative' and other literature. I have written before (McVey 2003) about how I found the technique and practice of writing distance learning materials as testing and draining as composing deeply-felt short stories and I have also argued that *all* writing has a 'creative' element (McVey 2008). One could make a case that journalism should be more like hard work; writing to a brief, to a word-count, to a house-style – writing at work. So-called 'creative' literature might, by contrast, be seen as a joy, a freedom, writing at play, writing that isn't *for* anything – writing at leisure. Of course, as writers know, it doesn't always work out like that. It is also worth pointing out, with Cecil, that 'every writer has, inevitably, a limited creative range. The reader should always be on the look-out to note the scope of this range. Nor should he blame the writer for remaining within it' (Cecil 2001: 16). Perhaps it is not that some genres are creative and some are not; but rather how we develop and exercise our creative range in whatever literary fields we choose to operate.

Journalism is a particularly interesting non-fiction genre, however, and Munro was an exceptional and hard-working exponent of it. We have perhaps forgotten how influential print journalists could once be, and the freedom with which they could approach their trade. Today's broadsheet newspapers are often full of vacuous columnists with little to say and no compelling way of saying it, but the columnist of the past had a much wider remit. Munro wrote all kinds of journalism including columns, some with a byline, some without, some with a pseudonym. His Jimmy Swan, Erchie and Para Handy 'stories' were journalism, but they were journalism with creative imagination applied. Other, better known writers who approached columns in this way might include

SJ Perelman in the USA and, more recently in the UK, Alan Coren and Armando Iannucci. Most of Munro's pieces were written to address issues in the local or national news but the characters, situation or dialogue are sufficient to ensure that all three – but especially Para Handy – can still be read with enjoyment today; indeed, all three are still in print. So, too, is Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, for example; yet at its publication one critic told him 'You've turned what might have been a good book into journalism' (Orwell 1946).

The Grand Old Man Comes Down, first published in the *Glasgow Evening News* on 19 March 1923 (reproduced in Osborne & Armstrong 1993: 305-308), is an Erchie story that tackles the issue of public statues. Erchie tells us that (and here I have rendered the dialogue from Glaswegian into standard English; I hope Munro's shade, and my own conscience, will forgive me): 'Statues nowadays are like comic songs; they go out of fashion awfully quickly. Nobody looks at them after they're more than a year in position'.

Erchie, or, rather, Munro, goes on to suggest, perhaps remembering the 1898 foregathering and looking forward to Conrad's second visit to Glasgow, 'The only one in George Square that attracts attention now is Mr Oswald with the top hat. It's never occurred to anybody to put a lid on the hat to keep the boys from popping stones in it.'

Erchie describes a future where statues will be cast on wheels so that they can be moved about to different locations in the city, thereby never losing their novelty. An idea worthy of Alan Coren.

Mills (2006: 1) writes 'from among the features by which we identify writing as an art form... I have selected four that produce a consistently powerful impact for writers and readers. These are voice, world, image and story'. Munro's *Vital Spark* type journalism is written with a distinctive voice, brings a particular kind of world into being, is full of enduring images and always contains an element of story. Surely, then, it's creative? Yet it's still journalism. Indeed, Mills uses a journalistic source later in his chapter to illustrate 'story'.

It's perhaps almost a cliché that some writers of fiction hone their writing skills as journalists before moving on to the real thing; Kipling, for example, took this route. Journalistic training teaches one to hit word counts, deliver copy on time and to make every word earn its place in the finished piece; like poetry, it teaches the art of leaving out. Nobody stresses the universal application of editing as well as Robert Louis Stevenson in an 1883 letter to his cousin Bob; '... there is but one art: to omit! O, if I knew how to omit, I would ask no other knowledge. A man who knew how to omit would make an *Iliad* out of a daily newspaper' (in Mehew 1997). Arguably, some do.

Omitting, pruning, judicious editing, murdering your darlings, call it what you will, this is a skill, as Stevenson realises, that applies to fiction, journalism, non-fiction, poetry, any field of writing. Addressing issues in students' academic writing skills, McMahon identified 24 writing-related skills that university students needed and suggested that 'most of these skills apply to all kinds of writing ... the experience of writing in all disciplines and genres is similar' (McMahon 2004: 6).

Not every writer with a journalistic background, it must be admitted, is positive about its influence on their 'creative' work. Angus Peter Campbell writes poetry and fiction in both English and Gaelic. Asked rather leadingly in a recent interview 'Poetry and journalism seem almost polar opposites ... was

there anything in [journalism] that prepared the way for your poetry and your fiction?’ he responded that, while journalism had taught him ‘precision, rapidity and alertness’, working in a newsroom ‘was a great preparation for fiction; it’s all constructed’ (Campbell 2009). There are, of course, different kinds of journalism; the freedom accorded to the likes of Neil Munro, James Cameron, Dorothy Parker and columnists, critics and commentators of the past are, perhaps, not available to those working in everyday newsrooms. And where there is less freedom, the work produced is less creative.

‘Creative’ writing brings challenges; Mills raises the issue of whether its students should ‘... continue to be encouraged to focus on personal experience ... and so risk neglecting themes such as war, poverty, terrorism, global warming, human rights, racism, marginality? [...] Is the “expressive self” indeed a prison?’ (Mills 2006: 14). Journalism can provide the experiences that help writers to escape from – or perhaps to broaden – their expressive self. Munro’s diary records how, as a young journalist, he had to go to race meetings, rugby and football matches, public meetings, sermons and murder trials. Later in life, he reported from the Western Front during the First World War. Valuable background, surely, for any ‘creative’ writer.

Conclusion

I would maintain that non-fiction – whether newspaper or magazine journalism, blogging, educational writing or non-fiction books – is an act of creation and that calls on the same challenges of voice and imagination and language use that poetry and fiction and drama do. We may be surprised to see Conrad, the consummate literary artist consorting and playing and jesting with Munro, whose ‘... instinct and his talent were for journalism’ (Blake 1931: 8) but the two approaches to writing happily can co-exist even in the same individual.

I certainly will continue, metaphorically at least, to pitch stones at august Victorian statues in both my so-called ‘creative’ persona, and in also my non-fiction work.

Works cited

Blake, G 1931 Introduction to N Munro, *The Brave Days*, Edinburgh: Porpoise Press return to text

Blake, G 1933 Introduction to N Munro, *The Looker-on*, Edinburgh: Porpoise Press

Campbell, AP 2009 Interview with Angus Peter Campbell, *Scottish Review of Books* 5, 1 http://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32:angus-peter-campbell-the-srb-interview-&catid=8:volume-5-issue-1-2009&Itemid=46 return to text

Cecil, D 2001 *The Fine Art of Reading* [1949], London: Souvenir Press return to text

House, J 1965 *The Heart of Glasgow*, London: Hutchinson return to text

Karl, FR (ed) 1986 *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press return to text

Lendrum, L 2004 *Neil Munro the Biography*, Colonsay: House of Lochar return to text

Lendrum, L 2003 ‘Neil Munro: Biography’ in RW Renton & B Osborne (eds) *Exploring New Roads; Essays on Neil Munro*, Colonsay: House of Lochar, pp1-11 return to text

- Macdiarmid, H 1976 'Neil Munro' [1925] in H Macdiarmid *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, Edinburgh: Scottish Educational Journal, pp5-6 return to text
- McMahon, K 2004 *What's Going on with Student Writing?* London: Royal Literary Fund return to text
- McVey, D 2003 'Into distance learning: a creative writing experience' *Writing in Education* 29: 35-37 return to text
- McVey, D 2008 'Why all writing is creative writing' *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 45, 3: 289-294 return to text
- Mehew, E 1997 *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press return to text
- Meyers, J 1991 *Joseph Conrad; a Biography*, London: John Murray
- Mills, P 2006 *The Routledge Creative Writing Coursebook*, Abingdon: Routledge return to text
- Munro, N 1996 *The Lost Pibroch and Other Sheiling Stories* [1896], Colonsay: House of Lochar return to text
- Munro, N 1994a *John Splendid* [1898], Edinburgh: B&W return to text
- Munro, N 1994b *The New Road* [1914], Edinburgh: B&W return to text
- Munro, N 1906 *The Vital Spark*, Edinburgh: Blackwood return to text
- Munro, N 1911 *In Highland Harbours with Para Handy*, Edinburgh: Blackwood return to text
- Munro, N 1923 *Hurricane Jack of the Vital Spark*, Edinburgh: Blackwood return to text
- Munro, N 1931 *The Brave Days*, Edinburgh: Porpoise Press return to text
- Munro, N 1933 *The Looker-on*, Edinburgh: Porpoise Press return to text
- Orwell, G 2004 'Why I Write' [1946] in *Why I Write*, London: Penguin Great Ideas return to text
- Osborne, B 2000 'Munro and Conrad' *ParaGraphs* 7: 21-22 return to text
- Osborne, B & R Armstrong 1993 *Erichie and Jimmy Swan*, Edinburgh: Birlinn return to text
- Osborne B & R Armstrong R (eds) 2002 *The Complete Para Handy*, Edinburgh: Birlinn return to text
- Stape, JH 2007 *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, London: Heinemann return to text
- Volkel, H 1996 *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang return to text
- Wernitz, H 1937 *Neil Munro und die Nationale Kulturbewegung im Modernen Schottland*, Berlin: Junker und Dunnhaupt return to text

David McVey was for many years a lecturer in the Centre for Academic and Professional Development at the University of the West of Scotland. He has taught Creative Writing for the UK's Open University and has published around 100 literary short stories.

Vol 15 No 1 April 2011

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy

Text@griffith.edu.au