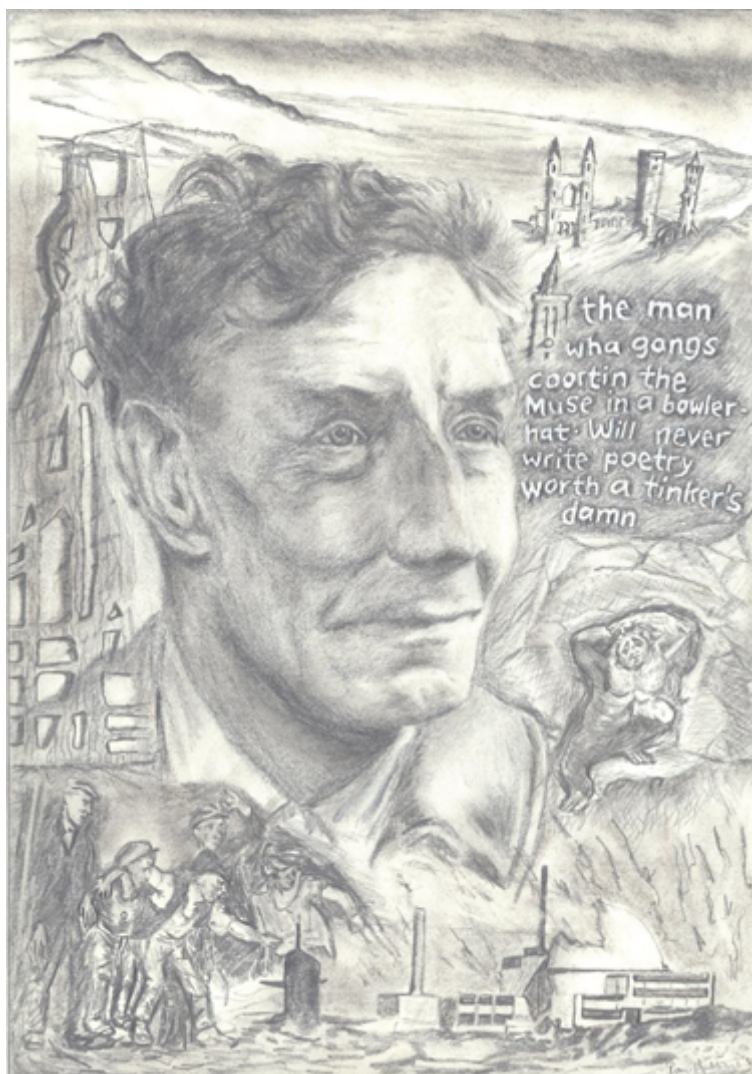

From Montsou to Bowhill: Joe Corrie's Antecedents

By Tom Hubbard



A portrait of Joe Corrie, by Tom Hubbard.

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Around 1994/5 my wife and I went to the Adam Smith Theatre in Kirkcaldy to see a screening of Claude Berri's movie *Germinal*, based on Emile Zola's novel of that name, and set in the coalfields of northern France. In the queue as we waited to be admitted were a number of guys who had worked down the Fife pits.

Joe Corrie has often been likened to the Zola of *Germinal*, not least by my good friend Willie Hershaw, and also to D.H. Lawrence, whose dad had been a Nottinghamshire miner. In the course of this talk, I want to say something about how Corrie actually differs from Zola and Lawrence. Hopefully a comparative approach may help to illuminate anew certain of Corrie's qualities.

Zola's *Germinal* was published in 1885, though the action of the novel takes place some two decades earlier, during the Second French Empire regime of Napoléon III, a vulgar and meretricious period during which the rich got ostentatiously richer and the poor got less ostentatiously poorer, though things were hardly better in 1885 during the Third Republic. Zola himself was, as they say, humbly born, and could empathise naturally with the miners whom he was writing about while not being a miner himself. When he visited the northern French coalfields to research the novel, he took copious notes – copious note-taking was integral to his literary method, as he espoused the doctrine of Naturalism, a more intense form of Realism based very self-consciously on purportedly scientific enquiry. Zola was aiming to write what he called 'experimental' novels, as if he were in a laboratory observing how his fictional characters interacted with each other, as if they were test-tube specimens. This creed stressed the influence of heredity and environment on human behaviour, and this tended to be naïvely deterministic – there's an inexorability about the course of his characters' lives. This must be distinguished from the not dissimilar sense we get from reading Thomas Hardy's novels; his characters are subject rather to portentously mystical forces – summed up as 'the President of the Immortals' – a late Victorian hangover, if you like, of the modes of Greek tragedy, and quite other than the non-theistic, philosophically materialist pretensions of Zola's method. All, all of this is a long way from the dynamics of Joe Corrie's plays and poems.

The character in *Germinal* through whom we witness most of the action in Zola's novel – the book's 'vessel of consciousness' to borrow a term of Henry James's – is Etienne Lantier. Like Zola himself, he's an outsider, who has headed north to work in the pits. Lantier arrives in the mining village of Montsou where the main pit is called Le Voreu. The Welsh writer Merryn Williams, in her study of *Germinal*, tells us that the name 'Le Voreu' suggests to her 'voracious', and indeed Zola evokes the pit with a grim poetry, as a monster which devours people. Indeed Zola has a powerfully poetic imagination which thankfully transcends his pseudo-scientific intentions.

Etienne Lantier the outsider struggles to communicate with his workmates – in Fife we'd call them 'neighbours' [neighbours] – in the sense that he tries to imbue them with political consciousness. Their concerns, though, are so basic and immediate that his efforts don't work out. However, Lantier's own political consciousness is not quite adequate: he's read his Marx and his Darwin, but the ideas he has derived from them are half-baked – and half-baked intellectual food tends to be indigestible.

Moreover – and this applies to Zola himself as much as to Lantier – Darwin rather cancels out Marx. Zola's theories of literary Naturalism, with their stress on heredity and environment as determining human behaviour, are heavily influenced by Darwin. Humans are animals and the evolution of animal life proceeds by forces beyond the control of animals as a species or as individual specimens. Etienne Lantier, we learn, comes from a family with drink problems; his hereditary alcoholism, should he take a single drop, leads him to become violent. Environment is changeable; heredity you're stuck with. Darwinesque Naturalism is in effect a kind of secular Calvinism. You're predestined, you have no free will. True, interpretations of Marx have all too often ended up with *economic* determinism, but Marx is supposed to be about political action, and that implies free will. Actually, of all philosophers, Marx perhaps came closest to resolving the free will versus determinism debate when he wrote that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly

encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.’ OK, that still sounds like a tilt towards the determinism side, but, even so, the opening phrase holds: ‘Men make their own history.’

Come to Joe Corrie’s work, and Zolaism appears to be so much French theoretical baggage beside Scottish practical good sense, Fife practical good sense. Corrie was a committed socialist, and socialist values, socialist ethics, pervade his plays and his poetry; there is bitter indictment of the ruling class, the bosses; there are strikes. In the play *Hewers of Coal*, and in the poem ‘Women Are Waiting Tonight’, there’s a pit disaster, with the subsequent crocodile tears of the bourgeoisie flowing as copiously as they do in *Germinal*; even so, in Corrie we have the sense of a community that describes and conducts itself on its own terms, as far as it can under what Marx would call the given circumstances.

Corrie refuses to ascribe such circumstances to any kind of determinism, mystical or otherwise. To the politically committed, there is no inevitability about the possibly dire outcomes of economic and social flux. Corrie would have scorned the Tories’ 1980s mantra of ‘there is no alternative’ to monetarism. His sonnet ‘Oor Jean’, about the victimisation of a strike leader, has these closing lines:

Some ca’ this Fate that comes by God’s decree;
Then God must be the Fife Coal Company.

The Marxist critic György Lukács called Zola a ‘naïve liberal’ and accused him of turning the ‘socially pathological’ into the ‘psychopathological’, while at the same time praising his courage in defending the scapegoated Jewish army captain at the centre of the Dreyfus Affair – the occasion for Zola’s famously bold public letter ‘J’accuse’ levelled at the French Establishment and its anti-semitism, which would return even more horrifically fifty years later, as instigated by Marshal Pétain’s far-right collaborationist Vichy régime.

Beside all this, the experience of the Fife pits might seem tame, as if Victor Hugo was correct when he remarked that the French want a full-scale revolution, while the English – and by extension the Scots? – opt rather for a well-behaved earthquake. But life in the Fife coalfields was more than

grim enough, especially during the 1920s with the General Strike and the lock-out, during which my forebears among so many others suffered real deprivation. And the 'earthquakes' – the pit disasters – continued well into living memory, particularly in 1957 and 1967, respectively at the Lindsay and Michael pits. In Scottish poetry such tragedies have been recorded by T.S. Law in his *Licht Attoore the Face* and in Willie Hershaw's 'High Valleyfield'. I fell into the trap there of using such words as 'disasters' and 'tragedies', words which would reinforce the notion of the fault being in our stars, or in Greek-style Fate, such cop-outs as are challenged by Joe Corrie.

What is so striking about Joe Corrie when compared with his antecedents is his depiction of the lively folk culture of the Fife miners and their families. In *Germinal* the people of Monstsou enjoy a certain respite when it's the time of the fair – the *ducasse*: Zola uses a northern French dialect word, roughly equivalent to the 'kermesse' of neighbouring Flanders. But it's not a verbal culture. Their Fife counterparts cherish and perform their Scottish folk songs and folk poetry, and – crucially – their Robert Burns: this indigenous culture features strongly in Corrie's plays. Traditionally the Scottish working class has been highly literate, with its culture of miners' and mechanics' institutes, evening classes, its working-folk's libraries and lectures, its collective self-education, and the more recent offshoots such as the WEA, the Workers' Educational Association. It was a Cowdenbeath miner's daughter, Jennie Lee, who founded the Open University.

An aside: there was a Scottish mining novel published in 1887, just a couple of years after *Germinal*. It's called *Blawearie*, subtitled 'Mining Life in the Lothians', and is by Peter McNeill. It has no great literary value, but it has interest as a social-historical document. At one point, the miners are talking about one of their new overseers, who has crossed the Firth of Forth to work in the Lothian pits. One of the guys remarks, 'he'll be awful cunning, for a' the Fifers are burstin' fu' o' that commodity.' Who am I to contradict that? Fly Fifers indeed.

OK, a miner's daughter, as I said, was founder of the OU, as Minister of the Arts in Harold Wilson's government, and a fly Fifer into the bargain. The miner's son D.H. Lawrence was a contemporary of Joe Corrie. In 1930 his

essay 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside' was published; there he wrote as follows:

The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness [...] The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread.

This takes us to one advantage that Corrie's miners had over those who feature in Zola's and Lawrence's writings. The coalfields of France and Nottinghamshire were drab, even if the latter had its pockets of gentle rural relief, as in *Sons and Lovers*, with its bluebell wood, sunset on hills, a blue lake. In Corrie's work, however, there's a much greater celebration of more dramatic vistas, of the expansive natural beauty just north of the central Fife pits – the great hills of Benarty and the Lomonds. The means of escape were within sight of Bowhill, Lochgelly, and the neighbouring pit towns.

Moreover, that indigenous culture which I spoke of was not so present in Nottinghamshire, if Lawrence is anything to go by. In the early chapters of *Sons and Lovers* there's the odd snatch of a folk poem about Adam and Eve; the miners 'rolling dismally home' from the pub, pissed and sentimental, singing the hymn 'Lead, kindly Light'.

Himself a playwright, Lawrence is in that sense the predecessor of Corrie in representing miners' families on the stage. However, any literary culture of any substance comes from the outside, it's imported, and that awkwardly. Take Lawrence's best-known play, *A Collier's Friday Night*, dating from around 1909, and which, like the movie *Germinal*, we went to see in the Adam Smith Theatre in Kirkcaldy, back in 1979. Again, the Lawrence piece would have appealed to us in what was then still a mining town – though Thatcherisation wasn't a long way off in the future. In his book *D.H. Lawrence: Life into Art*, Keith Sagar informs us that the title of Lawrence's play, *A Collier's Friday Night* is an 'ironic allusion to Burns's sentimental *The Cotter's Saturday Night*.' It's telling that Corrie wrote a play called *The Miner's Saturday Night*.

Yet without a Burns, what do the Lambert family in Lawrence's play rely on for a literary culture? Well, as I said, on an external literary culture. The college-educated lad Ernest is sitting near his dour old man, who's relaxing after his shift down t'pit. Young Ernest, who has acquired a certain affected way of speech, says to his dad: 'Give me a bit of my paper, Father. You know the leaf I want: that with the reviews of books on.' His old man replies: 'Nay, I know nowt about reviews o' books. Here, t'art. Ta'e it.' Ernest's head is full of Swinburne and Baudelaire. I couldn't help but think of the Monty Python parody of this kind of scenario – where the rough old dad is a successful playwright, but the effete son prefers to be a miner. The old man, played by Graham Chapman, challenges the young one, played by Eric Idle: 'Oooo, ye want to go down t'pit, lad, eh? Being a West-End playwright isn't good enough for *thee* ... oooo!'

Lawrence himself detested la-di-da Oxfordy literary pretentiousness, and he has some hilarious poems which satirise just that. In one of them, a smugly over-refined young man winds up a 'woman rather older than himself' to the point where she's had enough and she threatens to pull off her knickers in public. Actually, Joe Corrie takes great delight in mocking what he regards as those 'airy-fairy' poets who over-intellectualise. Their productions will be 'anaemic, flabby things, / Like pampered children from a wealthy home'. The speaker in one of his sonnets has regretted studying too much; he had decided to 'throw [his] bulky books away' and instead 'singing, went among my fellow-men'. Corrie denounced what he called 'The Modern Scots Poets' who ignored working-class folk: 'Poets in plenty, fu' o' self-esteem / Wi' odes as trifling as a tinker's fart.'

I think Corrie has a valid point, to put it mildly. His own poetry is simple and direct, and possesses the qualities of folk poetry, such as in those lines of his that impress themselves on the memory, and there's the sense you get in many of his poems that they seem to have composed themselves. He's a true heir of Burns. I remember the composer Ronald Stevenson remarking that the best poems to set to music are uncomplicated lyrics: abstruse poetry is unsuitable for such treatment. I'd say that there are exceptions – such an intricately cryptic poet like Rilke has been set successfully to music by the likes of Hindemith – but in evidence of the general point I'd draw

your attention to the CD *The Joe Corrie Project* recorded by the present-day Bowhill Players, that's to say Willie Hershaw and his fellow musicians, where you can hear Corrie's poems fitted naturally to powerful tunes.

Donald Campbell has written that 'Joe Corrie did not write for an audience that attended first nights in evening dress – as many did in those days – nor did he expect his plays to be the subject of university seminars.' Well, here we are. Of course, the denunciation of 'difficult' poetry can go too far, and risk inadvertently pandering to the populist Unenlightenment of our own times. I'm thinking way back, too, to Tolstoy's dogmatic insistence that the only valid art was that which could be immediately apprehended by Russian peasants, so that meant for Tolstoy, Shakespeare was crap. George Orwell counter-denounced Tolstoy's attitude as aiming 'to narrow the range of human consciousness' – in today's parlance, dumbing-down, the patronising assumption that working folk aren't up to the more probing works of literature and the other arts. But I would put it to you that while Corrie's work might not be 'intellectual', it has keen intellect behind it, and while it may not be the most obvious carrion for academics to pick over, it illuminates no less than say Zola or Lawrence certain corners of experience that the literary world has on the whole been content to leave in the subterranean dark.