

Personal Prologue

THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN FOR SCOTS, by whom I mean anyone in Scotland who will vote in the September referendum to make Scotland a more or less independent nation. This leaves out many who feel thoroughly Scottish but can only vote in England, America or elsewhere. My argument is for changing a government, so I lump these with voteless children and criminals who cannot affect the result of the referendum. My definition cheerfully includes many who think themselves English but work here as hoteliers, farmers, administrators and directors of Scottish institutions; also those who live in Scotland because they have bought a pleasanter place here than they could get for the same money further south. My definition also includes a small but important group of Scots who mainly live and work elsewhere: great landowners like the Duke of ***** and Lady ***** of *****, who have homes and property in other nations but return to their ancestral home here to hold shooting parties and vote; also the seventy-one Scottish members of parliament whose working days are spent almost wholly in London so mostly live there. You may think this definition of a Scot too liberal or too narrow, but it embraces everyone north of the Tweed who has the right to vote, have a say in how Scotland is ruled, and therefore equally belongs to it. It should

not matter how recently he or she arrived. The first folk here to call themselves Scots arrived from Ireland. There will be more about them when I refer to settlers and colonists.

My wife is not my severest critic (I am) but she is often severe. Though wanting an independent Scottish government as much as I do she calls this book a waste of time. Only a few of those who agree with the argument for Scots Home Rule announced on the cover may buy it (says she), none of those who disagree will, and folk without an opinion on the matter don't read books and don't vote. I have told her that before the general elections of 1992 and 1997 Canongate published my pamphlets called *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*, and Scotland has since been presented with its own parliament, though a dependent one. She replies that my writing did not influence that, and may be wrong. The pamphlets were part of a public discussion, and if our debates, agreements and disagreements did not influence how North Britain is governed, then democracy here does not exist.

In 1951 a teacher in my secondary school called my essays on history "too personal", because when mentioning how those commanding armies and lawyers dealt with weaker folk I sometimes called the stronger lot selfish and unfair. The teacher told me that good, impersonal historians showed no preference for any social class in the people they described. But I believe impersons do not exist. All writers have a viewpoint, and only readers who thoroughly share it think it impersonal. Anyone trying to make a political

point should start with an account of themselves, thus alerting readers with different prejudices to facts the debater may suppress or exaggerate. Here goes.

In 1934 I was born in an excellent housing scheme recently built for the kind of folk Victorians called lower middle-class and Marxists *petit bourgeois*. Our neighbours were a postman, nurse, local newsagent and tobacconist, and printer working for one of the national newspapers then published in Glasgow. My dad, born in 1897, was receiving a small government pension for a shrapnel wound received in World War I, for which he wore an abdominal truss. Between the two world wars he had worked a box-cutting machine in a factory. He was a Fabian Socialist of the George Bernard Shaw and Webb sort until the British government's pact with Hitler in 1938, when he joined the Communist Party, leaving it in 1939 when Stalin also signed a pact with Hitler. He and my mother were both literate and musical. My Scottish public schools (state funded, unlike what are called public schools in England) equipped me for a profession as my parents wished, so I had no sense of social inferiority. When writer in residence at Glasgow University I was amused when a lecturer in English from Oxford or Cambridge told me, "It is amazing that someone of your background knows as much about literature as we do." Many Scots friends thought my learning considerable; none thought it strange that I had it. Nor had I a sense of national inferiority. I agreed with my dad in supporting the Labour Party, whose government after 1945 brought social equality nearer to everyone in Britain, by using

everyone's income tax to pay for national healthcare, further education and legal aid for those who could not afford these before. Both the Labour and Tory Parties seemed willing to turn the British Empire's former colonies into self-governing, democratic parts of a global Commonwealth. I imagined history as a story of continual progress to fairer forms of social life, with British Socialist Democracy an example to both the USSR and USA.

This view was so dear to me that on hearing that a Scottish nationalist party existed, I thought that an entertaining joke. I was sixteen at the time and had never read or been told that Irish and Scottish Home Rule had, with social welfare for all, been the declared aims of the Labour Party's founders in 1893. Only one thing inclined me to the SNP. My knowledge of geography was so bad that for years I had thought the populations of Scotland and England were roughly equal, so were equally represented in the London parliament. On hearing that both Scots and their MPs were a tenth of England's, I saw that in any conflict of interest between these lands Scots MPs would be so obviously outvoted that there would be no point in them voting against the majority. This seemed less important than the need to keep the Labour Party strong enough to stop the Tories undoing the degree of social equality it had gained through Westminster. Many readers will know why I stopped believing that.

Like my parents I am still a Socialist of the Robert Owen, William Morris, Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb kind, but love Scottish political independence

more, like Robert Burns, John Maclean and Hugh MacDiarmid. For most of my life I have been in show business, making pictures, novels, verses and dramas, which has perhaps made me too playful. With the help of friends my work has always earned me enough to live comfortably, so I have only an onlooker's experience of unpleasant work and politics. Being Glaswegian, my knowledge of the world outside that city is mostly got from books, films, conversations and shallow experiences of other places any visitor could acquire, but I believe my account of what I see as political corruption in Glasgow will be recognized as typical of other places by patriotic Islanders, Highlanders, Aberdonians and more.

One of my closest and most intelligent friends recently said in public that he would not vote in the coming referendum, because no resulting dominant party will challenge the capitalists ruling us. I still believe the vote can be a tool in choosing a government representing a majority of the electorate, but an almost useless tool in modern Britain and the USA where most of us can only choose between two parties managed by those whose wealth gives them nearly absolute power. That the Westminster parties have stopped representing many of us is shown by how few people in recent years still join them, and why the number of British non-voters has grown since the 1990s when Tony Blair announced that Labour was the party of the businessman. Everyone knew the Tory Party is that, so why vote for Tweedledum instead of Tweedledee? Leaders of both parties commit Britain's armed services to fight beside the USA in

nations whose natural resources are treated as, not the business of natives living there, but our business. In Hollywood movies of the 1930s *Big Business* was sometimes shown to be selfishly greedy. Marxists called it Capitalism. It had caused a worldwide financial depression which both the economics of Keynes and what President Roosevelt called the New Deal planned to cure by spending taxpayers' money on public works. With the help of World War II these plans so succeeded that the USA, backed by Britain and some other states who think themselves democratic, has been fighting wars ever since, secretly or openly. The media told us these were being fought to save democracy. We now know they were fought to force the natural wealth of other continents into the international trading market the USA (with British support) dominated, and now shares with China. We now know this kind of trade and industry is poisoning the air, water and ground human life depends upon.

It will be hard for any nation to withdraw from what President Eisenhower in 1961 warned America against: *the military-industrial complex*. I now think the only resistance to that complex is an alliance of small nations co-operating to oppose the big military ones by pressing them to support the 1997 United Nations agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, to reduce carbon emissions. I hope an alliance of democracies could persuade millionaire politicians to take their weapons and armed forces out of other peoples' lands and waters. I believe the Scots parliament is about to gain more independence from the London one, but fear it

may get it on terms that prevent independent action and use of our natural, national wealth. As Adam Smith made plain in more than one book, the true wealth of a nation is in well-employed people.

This book is not written merely to promote the Scottish National Party. While glad that it now dominates a Scottish parliament and is working to make it more independent, I am appalled by some things it has allowed, especially changes to the Scots legal system made by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice Kenny MacAskill. There will be a chapter about that. I will try to write entertaining criticism of many things, not all of them Scottish. Nor will I waste time by discussing Scottish identity, as vague a ghost as the identity of any other millions of people.

I acknowledge the help of five settlers here: Timothy Neat from Cornwall, Sharon Blackie from England, David Knowles from Wales, Angel Mullane and Fergal Dalton from Ireland. Scots of independent minds also helped, especially my research assistant Mary McCabe. This book will end on a note of restrained Utopian hope. Only the clinically depressed have no hope for the future. Those trying to discourage it under the guise of *realism* are what were once called *predeterminists*. Even Thomas Malthus, that prolific Church of England clergyman, hoped his *Essay on the Principle of Population* would keep Britain in a better state by stopping the wealthy improving the living conditions of their employees. Though writing of many bad states this should not be a gloomy book. Some of it will be gossipy, without offence to anyone's private life.

The coming chapters use passages from my other books, but few readers will have read or remembered them. The only exception is Professor Sidney Workman of Kirkcaldy College of Further Education, a critic who has always been out for my blood. Some chapters may seem like detours, especially the first, but all (I hope entertainingly) circle back to one idea.

You have been warned.



1: Britain from a Waiting Room

HAVING SIGNED A CONTRACT to write this volume for Canongate Books in 2012, I almost at once saw it a duty I postponed tackling. I hate duties, especially those I impose on myself. I therefore avoided keeping up to date with the political state of Scotland and Britain by only reading *The Times Literary Supplement* and magazines in my doctor's waiting room. I had an ailment which kept me visiting it steadily for two or three months.

I am fascinated by waiting-room reading matter. The doctor's surgery of my childhood had bound volumes of *Punch* cartoons, none later than World War I, though there were hints of it coming. A cartoon showed an officers' mess where a colonel asked a junior, "What, Captain so-and-so, do you see as the role of cavalry in modern warfare?" and was told, "I suppose, Sir, it will add tone to what would otherwise be a mere vulgar brawl." In another officers discussed an unnamed foreign country. One said, "Yes, we'll have to fight them sooner or later. I only hope it isn't in the grouse shooting and salmon fishing season." In the aftermath of two world wars these amused and surprised me.

Later my favourite waiting-room reading became the American *National Geographic*, whose articles

and pictures were always factual and entertaining. Yesterday in my doctor's surgery the only magazines with that name were very small, and seemed intended for children with a mental age of five. Other reading was mostly glossy fashion or style magazines, lavishly illustrated but cheap because mainly subsidized by adverts. Their many photographs of glamorous women attracted me more than I liked, because a married man of my age should have outgrown pornography. So I picked up *Focus*, a magazine for those interested in science and technology, and published by the BBC.

Like many who grew up before television I used to think the BBC a friendly institution. As well as the *Radio Times* it published *The Listener*, which printed radio broadcasts on literary, historical and scientific matters. In the 1950s it told me about discoveries of the Big Bang and continental drift. It had hardly any pictures, so in 1964 I was thrilled to see in it a reproduction of my best painting, which illustrated Anthony Burgess's review of a TV documentary about my art. *Focus*, unlike the long defunct *Listener*, has on every page bright photographs, computer visualizations and headlines that reduce the factual text to a series of sound bites. It is obviously for young folk interested in the future, not for specialists or older folk. It explains that **Neuroimmunology reveals how our own body can attack the brain**, and about a **New British project set to renew the search for an alien civilization** then asks **Could rising CO2 levels see Earth returned to the kind of climate not seen since the prehistoric era?** Suddenly a full-page advert caught my eye.

Central was a photograph of an aircraft that technically minded youths would know was one of the Unidentified Flying Objects developed by the USA. Radar could not detect them, so they were used to spy on the USSR when international agreements made that illegal. For decades the American air force fooled some observers into thinking they came from outer space. They are now called Stealth Bombers. Britain has them, for the Ministry of Defence placed this photograph under the slogan **We have the technology**. Beneath it I read: **The UK requires modern, battle-winning forces to defend its interests and to contribute to strengthening international peace and security. These forces increasingly depend on scientific and technological advances to maintain their ability to operate effectively: this means the provision of technologies of tremendous speed, power and capacity to deliver a decisive operational edge.**

We are The Ministry of Defence, Defence Engineering and Science Group.

Organization Description: Government Department. The DESG is the team of thousands of engineers and scientists within the MoD.

DESG offers you many benefits including . . .

Here follows a description of secure, well-paid careers for smart young science graduates.

There was much food for thought in this. These graduates were not being invited to help defend Britain from invasion, but to *defend British interests abroad* – in other words, financial interests. The government of Britain once acquired an empire by doing that, and

since then has not stopped fighting battles on the soil of poorer nations. That BBC advert was announcing that the UK government is still busy with the kind of arms race which led to two world wars. Yet it claims that the Ministry of Defence will **contribute to strengthening international peace and security**. That is how Big Brother now tells smart youngsters: "WAR IS PEACE! JOIN US! THE MONEY IS GOOD." Many will join. Compared with Welfare State students of pre-Thatcher days, the modern ones are a docile lot. Those without wealthy parents are heavily in debt when they graduate, so need well-paid jobs.

I picked up a journal called *All About History* which said on the cover, "Wellington won the war. Did Napoleon win history?" There was a final article about Edison and electrification. The rest were about warfare with the main article headed: **CONQUEST – EMPIRES GAINED BY THE SWORD. Subjugation and acquisition by force have been common since tribal times. We present a guide to conquests both ancient and modern.** The only women shown in it are a phalanx of black-robed Syrian women with their faces exposed and carrying machine guns. Thomas Carlyle had a cruel streak which made him approve of slavery for black people, but I agree with his saying that what is usually called history is interruption of life maintained by the cultivation of food and the other arts of peace. I forget whether this magazine or *Focus* advertised an improvement on war and crime video games such as *Call of Duty*, the game most played by actual soldiers, and only second to

Grand Theft Auto (produced by a Scottish firm). The improvement would allow several friends to enjoy the same visual reality while behaving differently from each other in a combat situation. Good training for the young?

21
BRITAIN
FROM A
WAITING
ROOM

A friend who saw video footage recording US soldiers killing Iraqi civilians from aircraft tells me their conversation about this exciting and perfectly safe business was exactly like people playing combat games. I believe this is partly because such games will be part of the soldiers' training. Since World War I, psychologists investigating British and American troops in battle had found that only eight out of ten deliberately shot to kill. Usually they just fired their weapons in the general direction of the enemy. This means that, despite the greater number of murders in countries where big business stops governments banning the free sale of firearms, the majority of folk have an instinctive distaste for killing others. I am also told that heads of our armed forces are now deliberately training their troops to overcome that distaste. Combat games must be part of that training. No wonder Julian Assange is being driven from one country to another for publicizing facts which our governments do not want us to know. I am glad a Norwegian MP nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize, sorry it has not been awarded to him. I am glad Scottish students chose Edward Snowden as Rector of Glasgow University, though the USA government would like him extradited to one of their jails for questioning, for he too publicized facts

that the bosses of the belligerent Western democracies want to keep secret.

22
BRITAIN
FROM A
WAITING
ROOM

I took refuge in the magazines with pictures of women illustrating adverts and articles about clothes, jewellery, cosmetics and food. They mildly excited me by constantly suggesting women want sexual fun. Under a picture of an excitingly dressed blonde *Style* magazine announced:

NAUGHTY!
THE OUTFITS, THE GLITTER, THE GAMES,
THE BOOZE:
How To Have The Best Time At A Party
WOMEN IN THE KNOW: Let's All Move To Cheshire
BREAK OUT THE GLOWSTICKS:
Christmas Day, Raver Style

Marie Claire's cover says:

HOT MEN, SEXY ACCENTS!
The Europeans Revving Up the UK Dating Scene.
FIT AND FABULOUS!
Busy women's amazing body secrets.
BEACH BODY READY!

New quick fix ways to tan, buff and glow.

These magazines have articles about highly paid, visually alluring women, some emphatically married with children and good houses in pleasant districts. One has advice for those with too little time to properly adjust their make-up between leaving work and arriving at a party or dinner. It says "most of us" have several portable cosmetic cases (here called *palettes*) "because single ones usually lack items we find essential, or have used

up". The solution is to buy an empty palette (available at a given price from a named shop) and fill it with just the cosmetics we need for that party or dinner. Since most readers cannot afford to buy such accessories as Prada handbags "surprisingly cheap at £450", such magazines are mainly invitations to daydream, though they must make poorer readers also feel inadequate.

British GQ is a similar fashion magazine intended for men. It has as many pictures of women, but they wear less, because women desire the clothes and appearance of the models in their magazines, but men desire their bodies. *GQ* articles never refer to marriage and home, and deal more obviously with money and politics. The cover shows a stunning blonde wearing nothing visible but an earring, and announces that inside we'll be told why **ELVIS LIVES!** and why **REAL MEN DON'T WEAR SHORTS**, and **HOW TO STAY SHARP AND COOL THIS SUMMER**, and also **(EXCLUSIVE) WHY GREED IS STILL GOOD** by **Michael Wolff**. In the 1987 film *Wall Street*, the central character yells, "Greed is good!" to a roomful of cheering shareholders. He is a company director who acquires wealth through buying productive companies, removing their saleable assets then closing them. He is cheated by a young protégé with a conscience who brings in a richer asset-stripper. The film's moral is spoken by a minor character who tells the young man to "Get a job where you *make* something" – by which he means essential manufactured goods, not just money.

Michael Wolff's *GQ* article is headed **YOU ARE WHAT YOU MAKE**, by which he means nothing but

money. His sub-heading says: **The Eighties changed the way the rich get richer. Now, despite financial apocalypse, we still have an appetite for incredible wealth – and it has become insatiable.** He does not say widespread appetites for incredible wealth can cause only frustration for a large majority, because he says that for some people it will always be possible. He has a full-page photograph of a well-dressed handsome hunk of a man surrounded by eager reporters, for he is on the way to jail. It is captioned: **Michael Milken made, in a year, as much as \$500 million. This made him much closer to folk hero than criminal.**

Yes, we have always enjoyed stories about highwaymen, pirates and successful train robbers. How many have wanted to become one of them? Do many fantasize about being fraudsters and pension-fund robbers like a former director of the Guinness company and Robert Maxwell? I doubt it, but without admiring them folk in national and local governments emulate them, selling to each other and associates the public properties and organizations decried as the Welfare State. If less than half *GQ's* readers are in these governments, the majority must also use it to foster fantastic daydreams alternating between frustration and disappointment. What a lot of imaginary living headlines invite us to do! On a *Times* supplement cover I read:

THE RISE OF THE £100,000 HOLIDAY

**Yachts, private islands and a plane for your luggage:
inside the wild world of the six-figure getaway.**

One or two millionaires have started a company which now sells the kind of holidays they enjoy to people

equally rich. This may stimulate some to become richer by working harder for promotion in banks or by juggling investments through the Stock Exchange, which Michael Wolff says is the one sure way of doing it. I cannot be the only visitor to NHS surgeries angered by so many magazines enthusiastically boosting incredible wealth. My doctor's waiting room has no information about Glasgow's ruling Labour Party, which is funding a Commonwealth Games event by shutting centres that help disabled people.

My doctor's surgery is too respectable for magazines that advertise the sexual adventures of the rich and famous, nowadays called *celebrities*, and which would be shortened to *slebs* if that did not resemble plebs. Pleb has recently been publicized as a curse word. Since style magazines have also articles about food they certainly promote gluttony, lust, pride, greed, jealousy and (in jealous folk like me) anger, all of which were once thought deadly sins. The only one missing is sloth, unless holidays costing £100,000 are opportunities for that. But the MoD advert for the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence quango disturbs me most, though I know the sale of weapons is the UK's biggest export industry. Many pension funds are invested in that. In 2003 the principal of Glasgow University was a trustee of the British senior academic fund whose monies were mainly invested in the British arms industry.

Monsieur Hulot's Holiday is a French film I enjoyed as a child. It has a gloomy radio broadcast which, according to the subtitle, asks, "Is there, upon the

26
BRITAIN
FROM A
WAITING
ROOM

horizon, one ray of hope?" On my horizon the ray of
hope is a Scottish government as separate from the
United Kingdom war plans as New Zealand,
Holland or Norway.

