



Bunnets n Bowlers: A Clydeside Odyssey

Brian Whittingham

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This stellar collection of poems is a lament for times gone by that never sways into distanced nostalgia. Life as a teenager among thousands of Glasgow men toiling to build the QE2 in the 1960s was unfeasibly hard; that

Whittingham does not hide this makes *Bunnets n Bowlers* a useful historical document as well as a compelling read.

As he writes in the Foreword, 'it is a social diary of lives, attitudes and an environment that reflects the many working class communities that no longer exist'. This poetical journal employs language that is never fussy and does not suffocate with the over-use of regional vernacular, instead peppering the poems with the odd 'gallus', 'shoogly' and 'cludgy' like well-timed swearing in a sitcom.

Steeped in alcohol and machismo, the Glasgow shipyard was a volatile environment in which to work. The whiff of violence hung permanently; after a particularly gruesome incident in *The Health Hazards of Alcohol*, Whittingham recounts how 'the violent cabaret/rollercoasted my insides/and I went home that night/and cried'.

Yet underpinning life in the yards was a comradeship forged by the sense that strength could be achieved in unity. In *Black and White*, Whittingham and his colleagues shout down a visiting MP at a public meeting, forcing him to exit 'because of his freedom of speech being violated/by an intimidating workforce/that bordered on the edge of mob rule'.

There are themes which enforce the message that so little changes as time marches on. *Earning the Right* surveys the binge-drinking ethos of working hard through the week to play hard from Friday, by which point its lead character 'had earned the right/to prepare himself for another/weekend of serious swallying'.

Corporate speak is no modern phenomenon either; in *The Shoogly Peg*, 'a wizened journeyman' summarises a management volley of 'initiative objectives' and 'proactive synergy concepts' to a younger colleague as 'it's like this son...yir jaiket's oan a shoogly peg.' That last line is representative of the caustic wit that flows through this collection.

Bunnets n Bowlers is a time machine of a book. It drags the reader kicking and screaming into an era when most attended the school of hard knocks. The poetry arrives at an immediacy that is difficult to achieve in weighty tomes of labour history. In *Industrial Deafness*, Whittingham muses 'It's strange/in my head/I can still hear these words being said'. So too can readers of this book.

Daniel Gray
author, *Homage to Caledonia*