

‘Now playwrights could be got from the ranks of the working class’: Joe Corrie and the 1951 Edinburgh People’s Festival

By Sarah Leith



Joe Corrie performing on the streets, undated. NLS, MSS.26551, reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

In a letter to the University of Edinburgh folklorist Hamish Henderson, the Fife miner and poet Joe Corrie thanked him for his support, while he also reflected upon his own artistic career:

How nice it was of you to put in a good word for me for the Edinburgh weekly. Believe me, I do appreciate this... I do think I have suffered from the inferiority complex. No one has taken much notice of me except the working man reader. Mind you, the poets I have met have all been very nice chaps but there has been a gulf between us... [However,] I have been a bit daft in my time. I wrote for the sheer love of writing and then just put the M.S.S. into cardboard boxes without submitting them anywhere. ^[1]

Dated 10th August 1968, this was one of the last letters that Corrie was to write before his death in the same year.^[2] It was portentous, then, that he took this opportunity to consider what he perceived as his obscurity within the Scottish art world. Although Corrie displayed undue modesty here, this is, unfortunately, the orthodox interpretation of his career. Forty years after Corrie's death, Henderson's biographer Timothy Neat was even able to dismiss Corrie's influence with the remark that, by the 1950s, Corrie had been 'sidelined for years as a socialist has-been.'^[3] Given that he secreted away the majority of his work in cardboard boxes, Corrie must shoulder some of the blame for the general neglect of his work that this conference today seeks to redress. However, to what extent are these ideas that Corrie's work was unimportant and ignored by his fellow poets true? By exploring the context of the production of Corrie's play *In Time o' Strife* by Glasgow Unity Theatre Group at the first Edinburgh People's Festival in 1951, this paper aims to question the accuracy of this image of Corrie as neglected artist in mid-century Scotland.^[4]

Corrie's work was appreciated by a variety of people during his lifetime.^[5] Corrie's popular dramas realistically depicted the lives of the Scottish workers, amongst whom his works were extremely popular. Linda MacKenney has revealed that, for most of 1929, Corrie's Bowhill Players brought *In Time o' Strife* to working-class 'audiences of between eight hundred and a thousand people a night' and that the play became 'so popular' that 'One American critic – who hailed Corrie's dramatic genius –

was shocked to find nursing mothers pacing the isles of the theatre, breast-feeding their wailing offspring.^[6] As the American critic's comment suggests, Corrie was heralded by workers and intelligentsia both within and outwith Scotland. Henderson, who was at once academic, folklorist, song collector, poet and radical left-wing intellectual, was a great champion of Corrie's talent.^[7] Such was Henderson's appreciation of Corrie's work that *In Time o' Strife* was showcased as part of his very first Edinburgh People's Festival.^[8] This provided an alternative to the city's International Festival which celebrated such high art as the music of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.^[9] *In Time o' Strife* was the first play put on at festival time that reflected authentic contemporary working-class Scottish experience and that demanded that art produced by a Scottish miner be viewed as equal to the so-called high art celebrated by the International Festival. Corrie was undoubtedly slave to his own sense of inferiority and, as a result, questioned his influence upon Scottish literature and culture, particularly in the post-war years. However, this paper will highlight that this production of *In Time o' Strife* reveals the continuing relevance of Corrie's socialist message into at least the early 1950s and it will also reveal the play's legacy as part of a programme which helped to lay the foundations for today's Edinburgh Fringe.

The Edinburgh International Festival was founded as a celebration of high art from around the world; the official festival had been established in the immediate post-war years as a platform to unite the nations through bringing together world cultures in one European city.^[10] However, some, especially those associated with Scotland's political Left, criticised the International Festival for its elitism.^[11] Attempting to unite the European nations together through culture for the month of August was all very well, but the Scottish working classes, in fact, felt detached from this festival of high culture which they viewed as unwelcoming and irrelevant to their everyday lives. One contemporary anonymous poem succinctly summarised the feelings of Edinburgh citizens:

Ye may talk of Bach and Mozart
Ye may talk of Harold Pinter
Ye may think this town is culture's crown –
Have ye been here in the winter?^[12]

As these lyrics suggest, in any case, come autumn, Edinburgh returned to normal, the festival seemingly having had no positive impact upon either the city or its people.

While the Edinburgh working classes felt alienated due to this festival's elitism, they were also simply unable to enjoy the festival's events due to the high prices of tickets.^[13] The journalist Osmond Robb despaired in the Communist newspaper the *Daily Worker* on 22nd August 1951 that

Ever since the Edinburgh Festival opened in 1947, complaints have been heard that this was no festival for the people...Prices are high. There is no reasonably cheap Festival centre. Above all, there is no contact or consultation with the hundreds of thousands outside the exclusive group responsible for the programme-planning...All this has meant apathy towards the Festival. There is a feeling that it is an affair of a well-to-do minority, British and foreign, an extravagant bait for tourists...^[14]

Robb attacked the commercialism of the International Festival that had driven up the prices of the tickets and that, as a result, had thus excluded working-class Scots from the festival. In Robb's view, the official festival was a British establishment money-making scheme that had little to do with popular culture. However, as Robb commented later in the same article, 'Now the Scottish Labour movement is doing something about it.'^[15] Henderson and Scottish labour organisations, including the Edinburgh Trades Union Council, founded the People's Festival in 1951 as a socialist alternative to the Edinburgh International Festival.^[16] For the first time since 1947, working-class Scots could enjoy shows during the festival season in Edinburgh. Another article in the *Daily Worker* by Communist children's author Honor Arundel praised the organisers of the People's Festival for their 'positive challenge to commercialism and "art for dollars' sake."^[17] There is a sense that the entertainment put on by the People's Festival was viewed as pure and uncorrupted and that it was founded on a love of genuine art rather than a love of money. In *Time o' Strife*, in contrast to Corrie's fears that Scottish popular drama was inferior to the nation's high

art, was then part of a display of genuine artistic talent which contrasted with the high art that had been tainted by association with bourgeois money-making.

While the International Festival was elitist and expensive, it was also widely felt that it neglected Scottish culture. There was a contemporary suspicion that there was no Scottish culture to put on display, but while depictions of Scotland were not, in fact, entirely absent from the official festival programme, it is certainly true that displays of Scottish art were few and far between. Representations of authentic working-class Scottish culture were, in any case, non-existent and the People's Festival sought to rectify this failing. In the October 1955 edition of the *Scots Magazine*, one L.J.A. Bell queried 'Why cannot we have more shows... to Tattoo standard, suggesting the life and history and music of our native land?'^[18] He conceded that

We have no tradition of writing operas or staging plays, and he who looks for a great treasure-house of Scottish stuff that the Festival producers are neglecting, will have to look mighty hard... [However,] it would be well worth while to look more closely still for anything good that is Scots, out of the past; or to foster anything modern that might be of Festival standard – if it exists.

[19]

Bell made his comments a year after the last People's Festival in 1954, which had failed due to the Labour Party's removal of its support in 1952 when it was suggested that the People's Festival was really 'a Communist front'.^[20] Bell's comments ignore the alternative festival, most likely, because he was unsupportive of its socialist agenda or indeed suspicious of it as Communist propaganda. Unfortunately, Bell's failure to identify Corrie as a contemporary Scottish playwright supports the orthodoxy that Corrie was generally disregarded, but, writing for the conservative *Scots Magazine* with its preference for romantic visions of Scotland, it is very likely he rejected Corrie's work on political grounds. However, Bell's remarks are still important as they serve to effectively highlight the lack of Scottish culture on display during the official Edinburgh Festival.

Reminiscing about this time in a 1965 article entitled 'Folk-singing in Auld Reekie', Hamish Henderson explained that the organisers of the People's Festival sought to found 'a native popular festival, based on the Scottish working-class movement which would undertake the sort of cultural activity which the 'big' Festival seemed likely to ignore'.^[21] The two plays showcased during the People's Festival week were Glasgow Unity Theatre's production of Corrie's *In Time o' Strife* and Theatre Workshop's performance of the anti-nuclear play *Uranium 235*, which was written by the folksinger Ewan MacColl who had a radical background in workers' theatre and Communist agitation.^[22] In her autobiography, Joan Littlewood, MacColl's first wife and co-founder of Theatre Workshop, explained that while they were 'gatecrashing the Edinburgh Festival... this year's visiting companies sounded prestigiously dull. We could outshine them all'.^[23] Both plays were left-wing propaganda; while Corrie's play realistically depicted the struggles of Fife miners during the 1926 General Strike and at the same time made its audience consider the injustices of the present day, *Uranium 235*, a 'documentary play' written in the immediate aftermath of the 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, was about 'the history of atomic science from Democritus to Einstein' and it brought left-wing protest against nuclear weapons to the Edinburgh Festival.^[24] Writing for Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of the Left*, MacColl explained that he 'thought that theatre should [itself] become a weapon'.^[25] As well as contemporary political culture, the People's Festival also celebrated Scottish tradition. The People's Festival Week programme also included 'a "ceilidh" – a programme of Gaelic and Scots folk songs – with a commentary by Hamish Henderson' as well as 'lectures by Tom Driberg, M.P., Dr Cederic Thorpe Davie, the Scottish composer, and Hugh MacDiarmid, who has always maintained that the official Edinburgh Festival is a snobbish fraud.'^[26] Propaganda for left-wing politics, the first Edinburgh People's Festival also pursued the labour movement's agenda of promoting a people's culture and elevating this culture to the level of the International Festival's so-called high art. As a result of the staging of *In Time o' Strife* and *Uranium-235*, the journalist Osmond Robb, again writing for the *Daily Worker*, was able to declare that 'Now playwrights could be got from the ranks of the working class'.^[27] Bringing Corrie's play to festival time in Edinburgh brought left-wing politics and culture into the bourgeois-dominated Edinburgh art world and

emphasised that depictions of Scottish working-class and industrial culture were of as much artistic merit as the Italian operas performed in the New Town.

Largely ignored by conservative newspapers, there is unfortunately little evidence of the reception of *In Time o' Strife* at the People's Festival apart from the criticisms of Communist writer Honor Arundel in her *Daily Worker* article, 'I Go to a Sing-song'. On the whole, Arundel enjoyed the People's Festival, commenting that *Uranium-235* 'stole the limelight as being the most talked about play of the [whole] Festival.'^[28] Arundel was also full of appreciation for the ceilidh which Henderson organised as the main event of the People's Festival, claiming that the

Most exciting thing during the week was the ceilidh organised by Scottish poet Hamish Henderson. He collected a group of authentic folk singers, who gave a sing-song starting formally at 7.30 and ending in another hall, hilariously, at 2 a.m... Whether it was 72-year-old Jessie Murray, a fishwife from Banffshire, singing "Barefoot through the heather," Jimmy MacBeth with his...song about a tinker's life, or Flora MacNeil with her plaintive Gaelic lament for the dead at Culloden, it was absolutely enthralling.^[29]

However, her enthusiasm for the People's Festival was dampened by Corrie's play as she claimed that she was thoroughly disappointed by its content, although, she admitted to it being 'extremely well acted' by the miners.^[30] Arundel, however, misinterpreted the play as the 'story of a sluttish miner's wife...who lived in squalor, kept her child home from school and spent all her money on the horses'.^[31] This is in fact the antithesis of *In Time o' Strife*'s plot, which centres around strong working-class women who in effect upheld the General Strike.^[32] It is unclear whether this is a wilful or unwitting misinterpretation; Arundel and her husband the actor Alex McCrindle were committed Communists and perhaps the play, with Jock's questioning of the Bolsheviks and the Communist Party, did not fully support the cause.^[33] Arundel's review of *In Time o' Strife* is, therefore, unfair, but it provides the only, if unfortunately misguided, reaction to Corrie's play at the 1951 People's Festival.

Arundel's review of *In Time o' Strife* does not do the play justice. While she criticised it and undervalued its importance, in reality, Corrie's work played an integral part in the mission of the People's Festival and the aims of the wider Scottish political Left to encourage the development of Scottish working-class creativity as well as appreciation of popular tradition and culture. Through Corrie's play, contemporary and political working-class voices were introduced to the Edinburgh Festival. Alongside Henderson's riotous, all hours ceilidh and displays of traditional folk songs, *In Time o' Strife* contributed to the elevation of so-called contemporary low culture to stand side by side with the International Festival's displays of high art during the August of 1951 in Edinburgh. These depictions of popular tradition and more contemporary experience set a precedent from which the Edinburgh Fringe as we know it today was set to grow. Corrie was probably gladdened to read at the end of her review that Arundel did not enjoy the rest of her stay in Edinburgh. Detailing her last evening in Edinburgh, she, quite rightly, complained that

A facet of Scottish life which did not appeal to me was an experience I had in an Edinburgh pub. I went in for a drink with a few friends and, because I was a woman, we were hustled into a little wooden box. The door was securely shut and even the hatchway to the bar slammed down so that none of the locals should be distracted from the serious business of drinking by the sight of a female.^[34]

Or perhaps, in reality, Corrie would not have troubled himself too much. Although Corrie had confessed to Henderson that he regretted that his work had not achieved wider acclaim, in the same letter in which he revealed his inferiority complex, he also displayed a quiet confidence by confiding that:

Not that I have ever cared a damn what folk thought of me or my work, but I'm just stating a fact. So a word from one like yourself has given me a real kick. I wish it had happened years ago I might have done a lot more good work.^[35]

[1] Corey Gibson, *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics* (Edinburgh, 2017), p.3; Linda MacKenney, 'Introduction' in Linda MacKenney (ed.), *Joe Corrie: Plays, Poems and Writings* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp.7-15, at p.7; Joe Corrie to Hamish Henderson, 10th August 1968, Hamish Henderson Archive, University of Edinburgh Library, n.p.

[2] William Hershaw, 'In praise of the common man – a mindin o' Joe Corrie', <https://www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2017/11/praise-common-man-mindin-o-joe-corrie> [Accessed: 28th October 2018].

[3] Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: A Biography: Poetry Becomes People (1952-2002)*, Volume II (Edinburgh, 2009), p.171.

[4] Osmond Robb, 'People's Festival', *The Daily Worker*, 22nd August 1951, p.2; Angela Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post-war Britain* (Edinburgh, 2013), p.60.

[5] MacKenney, 'Introduction', p.9 and p.11; Linda MacKenney, 'A national or popular drama? The debate between Scotland's conventional and popular drama traditions, 1927-1947', *Chapman* VIII and IX (1986), pp.42-47, at p.42 and p.44.

[6] Linda MacKenney, 'A national or popular drama? The debate between Scotland's conventional and popular drama traditions, 1927-1947', *Chapman* VIII and IX (1986), pp.42-47, at p.42.

[7] Gibson, *The Voice of the People*, p.1.

[8] Gibson, *The Voice of the People*, p.107; Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals*, p.43 and pp.60-61.

[9] Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals*, p.1.

[10] Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals*, p. 2 and p.42

[11] *Ibid.*, pp.60-61.

[12] Anon., 'A festival for the people, with a dash of politics too', *The Scotsman*, 21st August 2006 <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/a-festival-for-the-people-with-a-dash-of-politics-too-1-466915> [Accessed: 28th October 2018].

[13] Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals*, pp.60-61.

[14] Robb, 'People's Festival', p.2.

[15] *Ibid.*, p.2.

[16] Gibson, *The Voice of the People*, pp.106-107; Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals*, pp.60-61.

[17] Neil C. Rafeek, *Communist Women in Scotland: Red Clydeside from the Russian Revolution to the End of the Society Union* (London, 2008), p.164; Honor Arundel, 'I Go to a Sing-Song', *The Daily Worker*, 10th September 1951, p.2.

[18] L.J.A. Bell, 'The Festival – A Time for New Ideas', *The Scots Magazine* 64 (October, 1955), pp.17-22, at p.19.

[19] *Ibid.*, p.19.

[20] Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals*, p.62; Anon., 'A festival for the people,'.

[21] Hamish Henderson, 'Folk-singing in Auld Reekie' in Alec Finlay (ed.), *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Song, Folk and Literature* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp.5-15, at p.9.

[22] Gibson, *The Voice of the People*, p.107; Ewan MacColl, 'Some Origins of Theatre Workshop' in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (Abingdon, 1985), pp.205-255, at p.213 and p.226; Raphael Samuel, 'Preface' in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (Abingdon, 1985), pp.ix-xi, at p.x; Ewan MacColl, *Journeyman: An Autobiography* (Manchester, 2009), p.237.

- [23] Joan Littlewood, *Joan's Book: Joan Littlewood's Peculiar History As She Tells It* (London, 1994), p.216; James Smith, *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930-1960* (Cambridge, 2013), pp.80-81; Neil Spencer, 'Ewan MacColl: the godfather of folk and who was adored – and feared', *The Observer* 25th January 2015
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jan/25/ewan-maccoll-godfather-folk-adored-and-feared> [Accessed: 11th November 2018].
- [24] MacColl, *Journeyman*, p.237.
- [25] MacColl, 'Theatre Workshop', p.226.
- [26] Robb, 'People's Festival', p.2.
- [27] Osmond Robb, 'Edinburgh Festival: Toward a People's Culture', *The Daily Worker*, 31st August 1951, p.3.
- [28] Arundel, 'I Go to a Sing-Song', p.2.
- [29] *Ibid.*, p.2
- [30] *Ibid.*, p.2.
- [31] Arundel, 'I Go to a Sing-Song', p.2.
- [32] See Joe Corrie, *In Time o' Strife* (London, 2013).
- [33] Rafeek, *Communist Women in Scotland*, p.164.
- [34] Arundel, 'I Go to a Sing-Song', p.2.
- [35] Corrie to Henderson, 10th August 1968, n.p.