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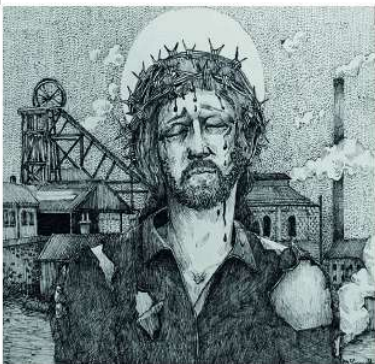
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## 'A POWERFUL WORK OF SCOTTISH WORKING-CLASS LIBERATION THEOLOGY': A REVIEW OF 'THE ORGREAVE STATIONS'

 28 June 2024 / Posted by Alastair McIntosh (https://www.culturematters.org.uk/author/alastair-mcintosh/)

 Post Views: 4,169



### The Orgreave Stations

Poems by William Hershaw

Images by Les McConnell



*Alastair McIntosh reviews The Orgreave Stations, by William Hershaw with images by Les McConnell. Photos below by Alastair McIntosh, images by Les McConnell*



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A few hours after I had been sent this book to review, I went down to the GalGael Trust here in Greater Govan for the weekly community meal. Our big boat, the *Orcuan*, a birlinn or Hebridean longship is in for a repair, and at the work benches the trainees chiselled and sanded their various woodworking projects. So much else goes on. The bronze casting and foundry work. The crocheting, the leather work. And as I wandered up to the back of the machine shop, I noticed that a storage zone was stacked with perhaps sixty sturdy wooden chairs, each with prayer book holders on the back. Quite likely, some local church that was closing down had sent them in for us to use as seating, or to recycle the oak wood.



It was a windy, wet and fairly quiet night at GalGael. I stood alone. I stared, and stepped back, and took some pictures. The meaning of William Hershaw's poems, *The Orgreave Stations*, heart-wrenchingly illustrated by Les McConnell, had started what is now a 36-hour long process of lowering me down its pit shaft.

The Battle of Orgreave took place between police and striking miners 40 years ago at a South Yorkshire coking plant on 18th June. Earlier that year the National Coal Board had announced the closure of 20 collieries with the loss of 20,000 jobs. Miners had come from as far away as Fife in a show of solidarity, but they were to be administered a brutal lesson. According to the BBC, an estimated 6,000 police from all over had been bussed in to form a cordon round that plant and kettle the pickets. With dogs, shields and nightsticks raised, the riot squads charged on horseback.

Suffice to say that, 40 years later, the South Yorkshire Police told the BBC: "It would not be appropriate ... today to seek to explain or defend the actions of the force in 1984 as everyone involved in policing the Miners' Strike has long since retired and the information we hold has not been properly assessed." The relevance outlives Margaret Thatcher. As Hershaw puts it in his introduction, "Forty years after the Miners' Strike, the leader of the UK Labour party felt the need to publicly praise Thatcher's leadership ... conclusive proof of the UK's continuing lurch to the right."

So, what are *The Orgreave Stations*? McConnell's cover image shows a battered miner standing by a colliery winding wheel, his head bleeding from a crown of thorns. The Stations of the Cross are the 14 stops (or "stations") of Jesus' last day. Contemporary Catholic versions start with the loneliness of the Garden of Gethsemane, move through his betrayal, trial by Pilate and scourging, to the cross and to the grave.

In Hershaw's book, Christ is the union's health & safety rep. His disciples are Big Pete, Little Jack, Kind Andy, Mattie, all the rest, and Judas too. In the 1st Station, *The Road to Gethsemane Allotments*, he stands upon the War Memorial steps and riffs on words from Saint Mark's gospel: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself*.

*"Heads up, comrades, all gathered here today,  
Though it sticks in your throats, you'll hear me out!  
Try to forgive them – love the lousy lot."*

And yet, in the 4th Station, *Big Pete*, even Big Pete ...

*... denied him: "I worry, look –  
I cannot see a way to win this fight ...  
The papers say that Thatcher will not turn –  
We should have put it to a vote to strike,  
We're out to bring the country to its knees,  
And though it's all a crock of made-up shite  
There's even some in Labour who agree."*

And it's me, Alastair, back in Govan, standing in the GalGael, up the back of the machine shop where nobody much goes because it is a restricted area, and I'm looking at the pile of prayer chairs.



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We keep on getting things from churches that are closing down. A few years ago it was a pulpit. Alan Torrance brought me round a slab of step from Govan Old, it's at our doorstep.

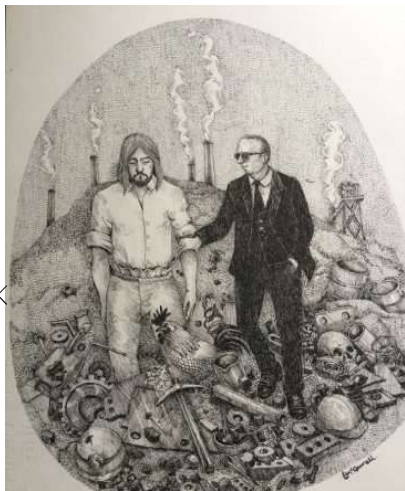
Big Pete goes on:

*"Some comrades have gone home, they need the dosh,  
There's others never joined us from the off.  
I read a bishop said the strike is wrong ..."  
Three times the cock crew in the still of dawn.*

And I'm pondering on pews without their bums, and where Jesus lays his head today, and those chairs that find a Station in our workshop. Recalling I was born in Doncaster, 1955, Scots father to an English mother, doctor married to a nurse. My first four years of life were Armthorpe. My earliest memories, of its slag heap. There used to be a steam train, Chuffy, that ran to-and-fro from the pit to dump the tailings, so close that Mother would dash to grab the washing off the line and save it from the smuts. For we lived up the posh end of the village, by the cemetery. Our big house was opposite the big house of the pit manager. I happened to go back and seek it out, the big white gates, the slag now levelled, on the day of the Brexit vote.

In those days, while the NHS was new, doctors and miners didn't get on. There was a heightened social class divide. The miners were always after dad for sick notes. "It's very hard to tell if back pain's genuine," I can remember him saying. Fred the builder put a big wall round the hose. "When you die Fred, can I have your paint brushes?" I asked, apparently. We never played with miners' children. Like the Buddha as a youth in his palace, you don't learn much of suffering when you're raised behind a wall. The 5th Station (below) is *Judged by Pilate*:

*They stood upon a waste of broken lives,  
A blasted nowhere slag heap without hope,  
A line of coughing skulls on a frayed belt,  
Dark-suited, he took Jesus by the arm...*



Our circle was Mark Watson the chemist and his cheery wife June, Ron Pearson who had the garage, and Fred's wife Barbara who was mother's nursing friend. We were babysat by a kindly "Auntie Wright". She had a terraced cottage down the bottom where the village broke to corn field. Her husband was a wiry little man who spoke few words and was forever black, from being down the pit. Mind, when he'd scrub, he'd turn pellucid from the dearth of sunshine down the pit. Bless Auntie Wright, and so to the 9th Station (below), *The Women*:

*Daughters of the kitchen, bang your pot lids,  
For you and your husbands, for hungry kids,  
Wake the conscience of the Government [...]  
Your selflessness that shames their shallow lives [...]  
Women who were the first slaves, stand up proud,  
Go wake the deaf and scream your suffering loud.*



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On we move in this wee book, I find tears in my eyes as I move from Station to Station. Christ is crucified across the black hole of the pit. *The Good Thief* is the 11th Station. “We’re trapped, we’re fucked, but don’t you worry son,” and yet, “The boy was fading and his spirit gone,” but “down here in the dark we’re all Good Thieves.”

The money bowl for GalGael’s weekly meal sits open all evening, unwatched. “How come”, I’d joked with John and Livvy just ten minutes earlier, “There’s folks in here done time, but nothing much goes missing?” I didn’t catch John’s words against the background workshop din, but I caught his noble laughter and perhaps, “... good thieves!”



Jesus is stretched out across the pit shaft, and strung up on the cross. Whereafter, the 12th Station (below), *Jesus Speaks with his Mother and a Disciple:*



We never saw it, mother, had no clue,  
 It would always be thus, we had no doubt.  
 Jesus was born in a post war dream,  
 Jesus was born in a council scheme [...]   
 Somehow the poorhouse would become much kinder,  
 Unknowing they'd own source to Ryan...



*Profit's never mentioned at an inquest.  
Ignored like pleas to deal with gas or flood [...]  
We'll never hear them say why they lied:  
No need for an inquiry – "no one died".*

*The earth did tremble, pitheads fell,  
Hal an tow, Here we go!  
The soldiers nearly shat themselves:  
See them go! [...]  
The pit wheels stopped, time stood still,  
Hal an tow, Here we go!*

*May all your struggles now be past,  
All souls like coal must turn to ash.*



William Hershaw and Les McConnell have produced a powerful work of Scottish working-class liberation theology. And I'd guarantee you, if we put on a performance of *The Orgreave Stations* in the GalGael workshops, those 60 prayer chairs up the back would fill, and dance with praise once more. For in a living community – call it a “communion” if you prefer – there are no empty pews, or lonely people tossed out on the slag heap.

Tags: The Miners' Strike (<https://www.culturematters.org.uk/tag/the-miners-strike/>), The Passion of Jesus (<https://www.culturematters.org.uk/tag/the-passion-of-jesus/>)

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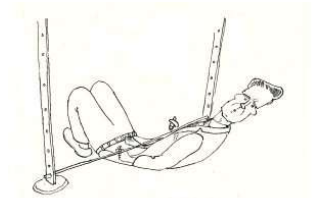


### ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

Alastair McIntosh is a Scottish writer, academic and activist, involved with Scottish land reform especially on Eigg, and campaigned successfully against the Harris superquarry in Lingerbay. He is a Quaker, an honorary senior research fellow (honorary professor) in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow, and a founding trustee of the GalGael Trust (<http://www.galgael.org/>).

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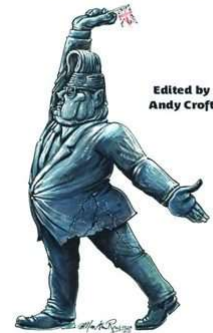
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