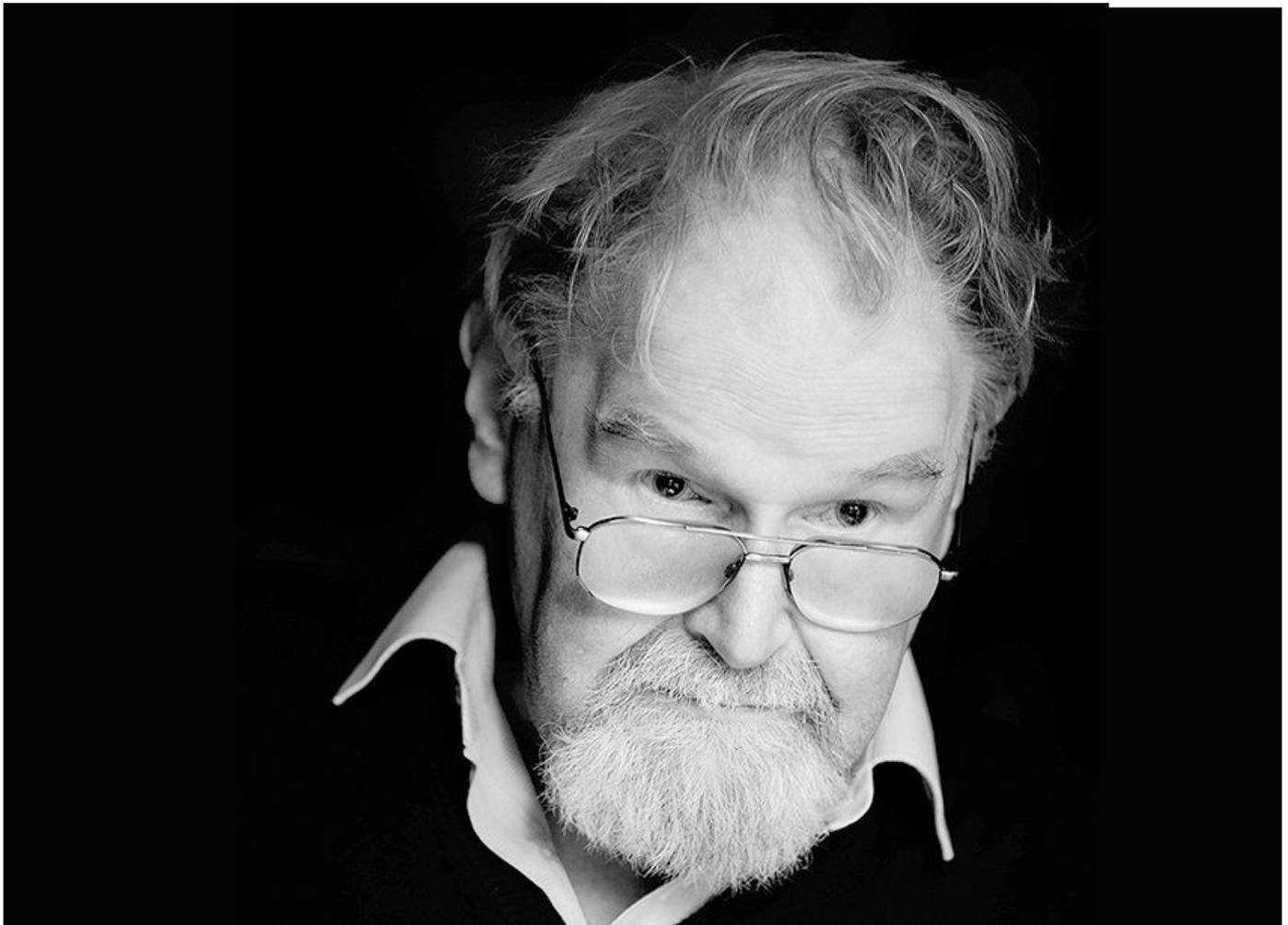


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By [Rodge Glass](#) January 22, 2020**ARTS & CULTURE**

ALASDAIR GRAY (COURTESY RODGE GLASS)

One night in summer 2015, under a vast night sky mural in the Òran Mór Arts Centre auditorium in Glasgow, there was a film showing. In fact, two. The subject of both, Alasdair Gray, once an intense, asthmatic working-class boy from northeast Glasgow and now Scotland's most celebrated literary artist, was in the audience, fidgeting and scratching as he watched. Above us, I could see his Garden of Eden mural writ large on the ceiling, despite the low light. I was also scratching myself—seeing Alasdair do it always made my eczema worse. I was waiting for the right moment to ask him to sign a picture for my baby daughter. He was eighty, at the time. I was afraid I might not see him again; I was living in England. Now, in the weeks after his death, days after I've moved back to Glasgow again, I wonder how to make sense of his loss. Our conversation that night, conducted while watching the pop-up screen, made me re-engage with his work in a new way. And it gives me something to do now he's gone.

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Janine. He was responsible, along with the likes of Liz Lochhead, James Keenan, Agnes Owens, and Edwin Morgan, for transforming the Scottish literary landscape Morgan had once called “a wasteland” into the rich, varied, diverse, and outward-looking place it is today. He made Glasgow the subject of his life’s work, creating “imagined objects,” as he called his creations, about his disappearing, changing city. In *Lanark*, the famous line, “not even the people of Glasgow live in it imaginatively” was rendered obsolete by his own achievements. No wonder people whispered when he passed them on Byres Road.

I first met Alasdair when I served him a drink at a pub, then was his tutee at the University of Glasgow when I was working on my debut novel (he once rewrote an entire chapter by hand, sticking bits of paper on with glue to cover over my words). Later, I worked for him as secretary, dogsbody, driver, and much else besides. My writer’s education took place in his bedroom, on a cheap chair at his bulky old computer, while he waved his finger shakily over my shoulder, shuffling words around on the screen, writing his books off the top of his head as I typed. He sang music hall ditties on the toilet. He was free, and maddened, and maddening, too. He was utterly single-minded at times, easily distracted at others. He was disarmingly honest and was often taken advantage of by others. From the day I began work at his home, Alasdair insisted on paying me a “tradesman’s wage,” which was sometimes more than he was earning himself, and certainly more than I’d been paid at the pub. Over the four years I worked with him, Alasdair turned plays into novels, recycled emblems and vignettes, reused and reworded old sentences he felt he hadn’t got quite right decades earlier. He wrote a novel based on rejected radio plays from the seventies and once fell asleep trying to finish off a political book, having got horribly distracted by the Act of Union of 1707. It was not a regular job.

He was the most inspiring individual I’ve met and he shaped my worldview. In more recent years, though I’ve grown up, moved away, had a family of my own, and mostly concentrated on my own work, I’ve always returned to both the man and his work. In the avalanche of good wishes, emails, pictures, sketches, and videos sent by well-wishers in recent weeks—some just wanted to tell their Gray anecdote to *someone*, so they told me—I felt grateful to find out new things about the life I had spent so long trying to piece together. One man contacted me with details of Alasdair’s anti-apartheid work with South African writers, way back when. Another sent a personal sketch doodled inside a book. Another, a copy of a letter I had long ago typed for Alasdair while he boomed with laughter behind me. Despite his death, because of it, people kept bringing him back to life.

The first film shown in Òran Mór was a rarely seen BBC documentary, *Under the Helmet*, from 1964. In flickering black and white it showed a stick thin, serious, be-suited young Alasdair Gray looking into the camera saying, “This isn’t how I talk to my wife. This is how I talk to a television machine.” By today’s standards, the pace of the film was achingly slow, the tone dry. The camera panned steadily over Gray’s visual works, lingering on details while the artist read his grim poetry over the top. A black Adam and white Eve, embracing, their chins locked together facing skyward on a Glasgow church wall, soon to be demolished. The serpent, feet sticking out, looking on. In *Under the Helmet*, the documentarians indirectly suggest that their buttoned-up subject was no longer alive, believing a dead young Scottish artist might be more interesting to viewers than a live one. They had good reason for that suspicion. Gray had been ignored by critics and the public, painting his murals for free, sleeping on floors. Soon, his major early murals would be knocked down, neglected, marginalized, painted or papered over. This would keep happening for another forty years before a radical reappraisal in his old age. In the early sixties, Gray’s literary

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on the screen, Gray complained into my ear that artists are so often seen within the context of their personal lives, and that these things have nothing at all to do with art itself. I remember smiling. “I respectfully disagree, sir,” I said, in my bad impression of a Radio 4 voice. “But then, I would.” I think he laughed, though maybe it was a wince. I wish I’d just had the courage to listen and not speak. These are the things that bother you, when someone dies. The stupid things you said. How you can’t unsay them.

The second film shown that night, made by director Kevin Cameron and again broadcast by the BBC, this time for Gray’s eightieth birthday in 2014, was a different beast entirely. But for the subject’s distinctive reedy, stuttering voice and his way of moving his head when talking, it might have been a film about someone else entirely. This artist was a confident extrovert—overweight, joyful, loud, often laughing or talking in different accents—shown designing the subway mural at his local station, or wobbling on the scaffolding of his greatest work at Òran Mór, totally consumed by painting, which he said was more relaxing than writing because it was physical exercise as well as mental. In this incarnation Gray was still highly self-aware, but he was now playful with it. He had already achieved his aims. Against the odds, Gray had become famous in his own lifetime, an overnight sensation in middle age. After *Lanark*, he produced over thirty books and a thousand paintings, portraits, illustrations, and murals. This was the man many in Scotland and around the world now recognize, the so-called national treasure (he hated that), the socialist, the democratizer, who said his favorite sound was the “the sound of deadlines whooshing past my ears!”—and whose misattributed quotation (“Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation.”) adorns the Canongate wall of the Scottish Parliament. Who turned down a knighthood, honorary degrees, and literary awards, and who reveled in replying to aspiring writers that no, sorry, he couldn’t help them get published because he was “such a selfish auld bugger.”

Cameron’s film is done with subtlety and affection, and no small amount of insight, though Gray the man, the personality, is very much front and center. In one scene, Alasdair is shown hungover, having lost the plans for the next stage of his Òran Mór mural. He looks every bit the hapless alcoholic as he ambles down the road from his house, manic with fear at all that work wasted. (The plans were later found in the pub.) While watching, Alasdair turned to me and said, “I do understand why folk show me this way. But I wish they’d just concentrate on the *work*.” I’m not going to pretend I know if he was referring to me, too, in that comment, but whether he was or not doesn’t matter. I know that’s what I did in my biography. So concerned to get the man on the page for future generations, his voice, his movements, his opinions, his loves, and his losses, I sometimes forgot to foreground the work. Which is why, after that night in 2015, I told Alasdair I would return to writing about him, but this time concentrating on the work and its legacy. The last conversation we had in person discussed all the ways we might approach this together in years ahead. “If I’m spared,” he said, as he always did. After he was confined to a wheelchair, that sentence held greater weight.

Over the next few years, I’ll be closer to Alasdair’s Gray work than ever. I’ll be convening a conference in Glasgow reappraising his art, which was for too long seen as a small room in the house of his reputation. I’ll be commissioning new works that respond to Alasdair’s, as he responded to those who came before him. Meanwhile, he and I were due to appear together at Glasgow’s Aye Write! Book Festival in March to discuss his last book, *Purgatory*, part two of his response to Dante’s *Inferno*. We spoke about it shortly before he died. Instead I’ve curated an event featuring writers, artists, and friends who will read from his writing and discuss his work, its scope,

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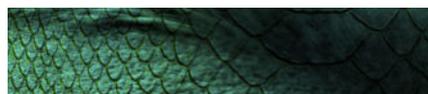
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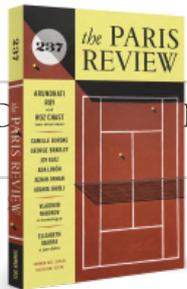
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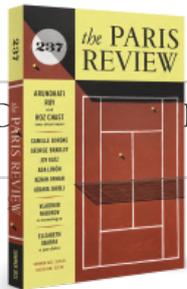


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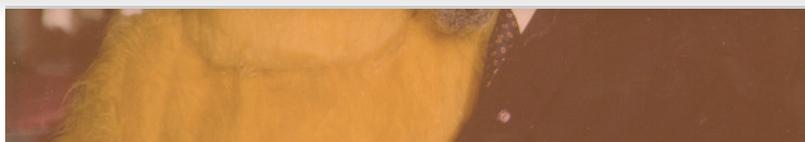
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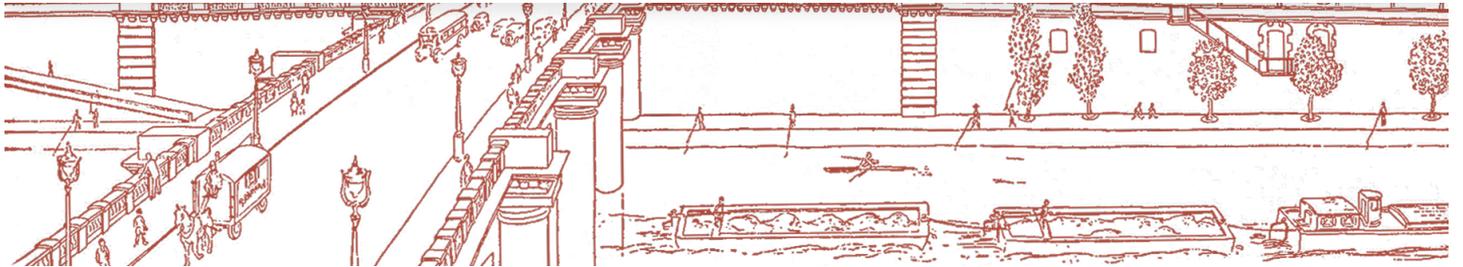
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