

‘Buying a Minster Minute’: Reflections on ‘Barnsley Main Seam’

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Pearse Hutchinson’s poem ‘Fleadh Cheoil’, first published in *Expansions* (1969), describes, among other things, a mass, if temporary, return of prodigal sons. Men (and the music festival does seem to be something of a stag do; the only woman mentioned at all is Devorgilla, to whose ‘penitent chapel’ the poet briefly alludes) are drawn to Ennis from all parts of Ireland, but also from Scotland and England, ‘Kirkintilloch and Ladbroke Grove’ (*Collected Poems*, p. 43). The Irish residents, whether wearing ‘dowdy Sunday suits’ or the ‘wild black brindled hair’ which metonymically substitutes an IRA trenchcoat, have a certain confidence in their appearance which has deserted the returnees, who present themselves in ‘flash ties and frumpish hats’, if they are not ‘ex-British Tommies in drab civvies’ (*CP*, p. 44). The emigrants, in a familiar literary manoeuvre, exude displacement: flash and frumpy at once, civilians nonetheless indelibly marked by military experience. The awkward position of the returned migrant is a topic which animates much twentieth-century Irish literature, though rather more drama and prose than poetry – Hutchinson’s work is notably concerned to address in lyric poetry social issues which are commonplace in more *engagé* genres.

The poem ends with the poet’s reflection on the remark of a young man who appears to reverse well-worn ideas about returned emigrants’ displaced identities:

a boy about eighteen,
tall and thin, but, easy to be seen.
Clare still written all over him
despite his eighteen months among the trim
scaffoldings and grim digs of England;

[.....]

turning to me to say, 'You know what I think of it
over there?

Over there, you're free.' (*CP*, pp. 44-5)

Where older men come back imprinted with Glasgow or London in the form of demob suits or cheap flash ties, this lad is a little bit of Co. Clare in the building sites and lodgings of his expatriate life, a life he sees as one of personal freedom. It's tempting to think that his perception of freedom is a consequence of his rootedness: more suggestible characters might be influenced to their detriment by expatriation, but with 'Clare written all over him', the boy can experience freedom without risking an essential identity. The poet is as sceptical of this kind of essentialist thinking as he is of the boy's initial claim:

Repeating the word 'free', as gay and sad as his music,
repeating the word, the large bright eyes convinced
of what the red mouth said, convinced beyond
shaming or furtiveness, a thousand preachers,
mothers and leader-writers wasting their breath
on the sweet, foggy, distant-city air.
Then he went on playing as if there never were
either a famed injustice or a parish glare. (*CP*, p. 45)

The negative conditional mood holds the boy's illusion and the poet's doubt of freedom in balance. The close of the poem typifies a certain Irish view of Britain as a locus of both freedom and injustice, the freedom presumably social and sexual, the injustice legal and political. In typifying it, however, the poet also gives us the means to question it. Where are those oppressive preachers, mothers and leader-writers

located? Are they to be imagined back in Ireland, fulminating against the sweet freedoms offered by a distant British city? Or are they part of the boy's expatriate life too, one that he either ignores or is yet to encounter? The answers to these questions determine our view of the apparent antithesis in the last line, and suggest it would be a mistake straightforwardly to align England with 'injustice' and Ireland with an assonantal 'parish glare.' Hutchinson's social conscience leaves us in no doubt that Ireland can be unjust as it is provincial, but we might be slower to recognise his critique of English provincialism.

Barnsley Main Seam (1995) includes a squib dedicated to Paddy Joe Hill, one of the Birmingham Six, on his release. It alludes to Hill's comment that his wrongful imprisonment was the result of 'English justice, not British – we can't blame the Scots or the Welsh':

For British

read English.

For Justice

read Law. (*CP*, p. 239)

The satirical point is easily grasped: the belief that Britain is synonymous with England issues from a provincial, ignorant mindset that sees no distinction between justice and legalistic authoritarianism. But further reflection on the epigram begins to unravel its terms. Irish people, especially those from the Republic, are as likely as the English to make the vulgar error (near-unimaginable in Wales or Scotland) of confusing Britain and England. The pincer-jaws of the antithesis endorse without question Hill's acquittal of the Scots and the Welsh of the imperialist prejudices that facilitated the framing of the Birmingham Six. While Scotland's separate legal system means that his absolution of the Scots is a matter of fact; that he also exempts Wales

makes the attribution of blame an ethnic matter. While the scale of the wrong done to Hill makes drawing attention to such petty instances of Anglophobia seem churlish, it is surprising that Hutchinson, who writes with sympathy and insight about English society and culture, accepts it without demur.

Perhaps the oddest side-effect of the quatrain's antithetical structure is the value it places on 'British', aligning it implicitly with 'Justice'. Hutchinson's main purpose, like Hill's, is clearly to debunk a cant phrase (*British justice is the finest in the world*) and the lazy thinking that goes along with it, but nonetheless 'British' emerges as a positive term when compared with 'English'. If 'English' and 'Law' are the corrupt reality, the logic of analogy installs 'British' with 'Justice' as travestied ideals. 'British' identity is not valued in Ireland, where 'West Brit' is still a current term of abuse, and it is growing more parlous in Scotland and Wales, but it cannot have escaped the notice of a dedicated multiculturalist like Hutchinson that 'British' is the identitarian term of choice for Black and Asian people, resident mostly in England, who find 'English' racially exclusive. This usage might help to explain the poem's reliance on an equation of Britishness with fairness which might seem old-fashioned, even imperialistic, to many British people, but it does not diminish its anomalousness. Nor can the squib accommodate Hutchinson's usual attention to social class, thereby rather crudely implying that the English people are coterminous with their unjust law lords. 'British Justice' suggests that while Hutchinson's sociable poetics might have room for outrage and protest, the righteous certainties of epigrammatic satire lie outside his range. It is to longer forms that the reader turns to find the discriminating attitude towards British and English culture which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin identifies: 'he has written very well about England. Despite often writing

an anti-imperial poetry, he has a great feeling for the Cotswolds and for Yorkshire, for strange and ancient corners of the neighbouring island.’¹

The title poem of *Barnsley Main Seam* begins not at the coalface, but with an ant's-eye view of York Minster's magnificent ceilings. In describing their 'Impeccable snow, eternally fresh, gold-clustering [...] / honey-knobs, pommés mousselline' (*CP*, p. 235), Hutchinson seems to have in mind the Lantern Tower ceiling. Inaccessible and awe-inspiring as it is, the Lantern Tower is not as intimidating as the stained-glass windows in the north transept, known as the Five Sisters:

and for-all-that more accessible
to the tiny floored nape craning up
(like Čapek flat on his back in the pocked Alhambra)
than the Five Grey Sisters:

grey-stained infinite-oblong glass,
austerest glass, how rich a grey,
an almost velvet grey, bleak brocade,
stuff so harsh hauteur
you'd never want to stroke,
noli-me-tangere-vaginic charm — (*CP*, p. 235)

The north transept is the oldest part of the Minster, and the Five Sisters its oldest glass, dating from about 1260. Although the five slender lancets, each nearly seventeen metres tall and one and a half metres broad, might suggest primitively-conceived human forms, ‘Sisters’ is a corruption of ‘Cistercian’, the order that commissioned the window. Retroactively, however, the window has been associated with women’s causes, and after twentieth-century restoration was dedicated to the

memory of women killed during the two world wars. Its grisaille decoration, apparently aniconic, but incorporating foliage motifs and a twelfth-century medallion featuring Daniel among the lions, is breathtakingly beautiful, even though protective exterior glazing limits its translucency. For Hutchinson, though, an austere inhumanity mars its beauty. Its *noli-me-tangere* quality is less evocative of the risen Christ's injunction to the Magdalen (though it partakes of a similar hauteur) than that of Thomas Wyatt's allegorical hind. The traditional identification of the 'Diere' of Wyatt's sonnet with Anne Boleyn, seductive, unpopular, unable to produce a desired heir, is relevant to the poem's subsequent commentary on femininity. Rejecting the cool grey Sisters, the poet aligns himself instead with the egalitarianism of Burns and the good humour of Karel Čapek's travel writing. That both writers are icons of socialism suggests a political dimension to Hutchinson's ambivalence about the Five Sisters, though we have to move away from 'Barnsley Main Seam' to find it expressed explicitly.

'Burnham Deepdale', published in *Climbing the Light*, a decade before *Barnsley Main Seam*, also engages with the politics of stained glass, and does so more directly than the later poem. These are its opening lines:

Once in a dark porch in Burnham Deepdale
we looked at a very small stained-glass window
at human level, you could touch it:
The Sun, not afraid to come in.
A big round golden beaming face,
filling the whole small space of glass,
blazing away merrily, lighting and warming,
not scorching — (CP, p.201)

The porch windows at St Mary's Church, Burnham Deepdale, in Norfolk, contain beautiful examples of fifteenth-century glasswork. However, their present arrangement is an eclectic mixture devised by Victorian restorers. Their welcoming 'human level' is probably similarly accidental: they were placed in the porch by the same nineteenth-century enthusiasts – they may not have even originally belonged to St Mary's at all.

The first stanza of 'Burnham Deepdale' records something of a false memory. Each of the porch windows has a small roundel at the top, one depicting a moon almost certainly originally part of a crucifixion scene. The matching sun, however, has been lost since the nineteenth century, and was replaced with an angel's head, quite fine in its own right, but not the 'big round, golden, beaming face' that Hutchinson describes. Having seen the moon, however, it is easy to imagine what the sun must have looked like, and bitterly regret its loss, which Hutchinson's poem seeks to make good. York Minster's south choir aisle houses a sixteenth-century crucifixion in stained glass (also moved from a former location in a parish church named St Mary's) which features a similar detail to that which is missing in Burnham Deepdale. Hutchinson's mental connection of the great cathedral to the small parish church in Norfolk suggests that this example might have informed the restoration of the sun to Burnham Deepdale.

'Burnham Deepdale' asks the reader to compare an apparently stable England with the fractured history of Northern Ireland. The 'round, golden, beaming face' that Hutchinson remembers (but does not exist) in Norfolk prompts a melancholy reflection on hope extinguished: 'lighting and warming / not scorching – mo bhrón géar! – / the blighted clay, the drúchtín crushed'. 'Drúchtín' means a slug or snail: the

diminutive of ‘drúcht’, dew, alludes to those creatures’ habitation of damp ground. Dineen’s dictionary recounts a form of folk-divination using the *drúchtín*: the colour of the first slug a girl saw on May morning could tell her the colour of her future husband’s hair. The crushed *drúchtín* of this poem becomes the ruined hope of the *aisling* maiden for a Jacobite alliance, and its ahistorical rhetoric is that of romantic nationalism: ‘Armagh apple-orchards too / have bloomed eight centuries beneath / an Iron Crow’s claws.’ (CP, p. 201)

The friendly sun of Burnham Deepdale also shines in contrast to a different kind of English artefact, the Five Grey Sisters of the Minster:

the Five Grey Sisters cannot be touched,
are out of us, are higher than any benign
friendly Norfolk heavens, they lour, iron-grey,
battleship-bleak, they rule the waves of pity,
they outstare

Barnsley Main Seam. (CP, p. 201)

Here the association of the Five Sisters with authoritarian violence and imperialism is explicit. Hutchinson continues:

Eternity’s filled their tall, shoulderless, hipless,
narrow straightness, with silencers,
but they make an ugly noise like helicopters
over the green garth of Derry,
over the apple-orchards... (CP, p. 201)

The suggestions of female frigidity and sexlessness – the sexlessness of a Britannia – are revisited in ‘Barnsley Main Seam’ and its anger with a certain Iron Lady.

English culture has two aspects in 'Burnham Deepdale', a friendly warmth which works at the 'human level' of the parish church, and an untouchable, ruling-class hauteur suggested by the Minster. Neither, Hutchinson seems (at least at first) to claim, can come to terms with the discontinuous texture of Irish experience:

So how can folk whose very breath
is continuity ever understand
us whose breath is broken, whose old gold glass
they've broken, made us break,
make us break still? (*CP*, p. 202)

The poem's snatches of Irish song and its *aisling* motif seem to confirm that the 'folk whose very breath / is continuity' are English, where 'we' are Irish and the question wholly rhetorical. But that the poet reaches these reflections through contemplating eclectically reassembled scraps of pre-Reformation glass, in an area of England that saw vigorous iconoclasm during the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and which had its very geography transformed with the land reclamations of the nineteenth, prompts at the very least the acknowledgement that there are other forms of disruption of land and population than the martial and imperialistic. The question is perhaps not rhetorical but genuine and urgent, a plea for a means by which continuity may come to understand brokenness: the insistent alliteration might be read either as the bombast of certainty or its splintering. It is moreover an expression of doubt, emphasised by its short-winded lineation, that there is such a thing as unbroken utterance. The next stanza owns that loss also characterises English culture, if only that humane, artisanal part of it that typically earns Hutchinson's regard: 'the altars / broken as if for ever, / no glass-painters left even in Blandford' (*CP*, p. 202). Continuity is a fiction promoted by the narrow

derangement of imperialism: 'Is the continuity merely a papering-over, / an endless combat-jacket? / sang-froid just a strait-jacket?' (*CP*, p.202).

Habitual wear of such restrictive garments harms even the ruling classes. The poet of 'Barnsley Main Seam' is drawn away from his contemplation of the Five Sisters to notice another grey, aristocratic artefact: the tomb of William of Hatfield. Fourth child of Edward III and his fecund consort Philippa of Hainault, William was born in February 1337 and died in the summer of the same year. His tomb effigy in York Minster, however, depicts an adolescent in armour. I haven't been able to trace the source for Hutchinson's claim that he was thirteen at the time of his death, but what follows strongly suggests an awakening sexuality cut short: 'no Amsterdancing prinside now for him' (*CP*, p. 235). The unusual word 'prinside', which is not in the *OED*, might allude to a 1975 collection of poetry, *Een Prinside* by the gay Dutch poet Arnold Spauwen, who wrote under the pseudonym Owen Sylvester. As well as punning on 'prince' and 'parade', then, an alternative sexuality is suggested for, if not the infant prince who lies in the tomb, the 'lissome' effigy which tops it. This 'lissome silvery armour-body' is conscripted unwillingly into the cult of deathly power which Hutchinson sees residing in the Five Sisters:

only one young boy, not five pious bayonets,
just one dead boy who never chose
to be born a prince but perhaps more easily
forgot he didn't
than
the miners who made the timber model
of Barnsley Main Seam (*CP*, p. 236)

Here we encounter the artefact which gives poem and collection its title, a model made by George Hector, a disabled mining instructor and maker of scale models, and installed in the Minster in 1960 as a tribute from the miners of Yorkshire (the Minster itself stands on part of the Selby coal seam.) Hutchinson stresses the humbleness of the material and the quality of the craftsmanship:

not in sumptuous colours woven
not in bleak brocade
but well worked in wood
working away at the coal-face — (CP, p. 236)

The modest scale and unassuming position of the Barnsley Main Seam model can be gauged from the pillar and door which flank it.

From this easily overlooked artwork, Hutchinson then turns his attention to a largely forgotten aspect of English history: the hunger protests in Devon at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century: ‘A hunk of white bread, spattered in blood, / and a black rag, aloft on a pike: / the hungry women of Honiton made their protest clear.’ (CP, p. 236) The eighteenth-century hunger march that Hutchinson describes is typical of working-class protest of the era in its theatricality – with women taking a leading role in the drama – and its emphasis on moral economy and natural justice. Hutchinson mentions the same striking symbol in an earlier poem, ‘The Poet Rides on Horseback through the Night’. This poem, also from *Climbing the Light*, derives its structure from two interwoven rhetorical devices. First, the speaker rejects official or generalised nomenclature in favour of a colloquial and particular idiom, sometimes with an Irish nationalist slant: ‘Flute-player not flautist / not Northern Ireland but the Six Counties / not the Maze but Long Kesh.’ (CP, p.197) The other rhetorical strand uses the title of a gospel song composed by Johnny Cash,

‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’, to recall musical performances significant to the speaker. Hutchinson refers to the Honiton hunger protests as part of a forgotten vernacular history:

Not Great Britain or the U-nited Kingdom
but England: where hungry women
bore bread and blood on a pike, (*CP*, p.198)

The relationship of polity to country here is the reverse of that suggested in ‘British Justice’. ‘England’ signifies protest, the ‘strange and ancient corners’ of occluded history; the homogenising ambition of the larger national formations is derided with a mock-colonial emphasis on the first syllable of ‘U-nited’. But the analogical implications of ‘The Poet Rides...’ become complicated in a very similar way to those of the quatrain. Though the choice of words in each case tells us something about social class or sectarianism, a flautist plays the same instrument as a flute-player, and ‘Long Kesh’ denotes the same prison site as ‘the Maze’. But England, Great Britain and the United Kingdom are not coterminous. Hutchinson bridges the metonymic gap with an attack on ‘Europe’ used as a synonym for the ‘Common Market’:

Not Europe but the Common Market
though half the world now calls it Europe
as though the vast horror and glory and all the art
of Europe could be so
shrunk down... (*CP*, pp. 197-8)

Inverse synecdoche – ‘Europe’ used when ‘Common Market’ is meant – is reductive, but the synecdoche of ‘England’ for ‘Britain’ or the ‘United Kingdom’ constitutes an enlargement, making room for the ‘human-level’ history of the Honiton hunger marchers. This metonymic play might be said to anticipate and deflect the reader’s

objections: that Englishness is not usually incompatible with identification with Britain or the United Kingdom;² that ‘Europe’ used for ‘Common Market’ may be casual, but such usage is almost always contextualised to make impossible confusion of the politico-economic body with the continent.

The commentary on the protestors of Honiton in ‘Barnsley Main Seam’ encompasses gender as well as nationalist politics. The conventional view of late eighteenth-century food riots is that they were led by women in their capacity as housewives – recent scholarship has proved this something of an anachronism, but it suits Hutchinson to draw a parallel with Margaret Thatcher, the ‘milk-thief’ who cultivated an image of housewifely prudence while pursuing radically right-wing economic policies which were destructive of precisely those traditional values.³ The poem appears to suggest two models of femininity: an iron-grey Thatcherite one which encompasses the Five Sisters and is infertile and unsexual, and a positive one which includes the food rioters of Honiton and, perhaps by implication, Prince William’s prolific and well-loved mother, Queen Philippa. For all the poem’s concern for social justice, we might see it as endorsing some of those left-wing attitudes which ignore the politics of right-wing women and attack instead their lack of caring femininity, and confine the approved model of socialist womanhood to the dreary caricature of battling housewife and mother:

Were those riotous women and all the toiling mothers
of miners and masons and all the guilds and all
the muscle called unskilled
back to the tower of Babel and Brú na Bóinne
deep in the miners’ minds? as though to say
to all that antique splendour (so buoyant still):

Men like us made you,
without us
you could not be. (*CP*, p. 237)

Hutchinson suggests a division of labour based on sex – men as muscle and makers, women as mothers – which is anachronistic applied to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: female contemporaries of the Honiton marchers worked underground in Yorkshire, mainly as drawers of coal trucks.⁴ As in ‘The Poet Rides...’, possible readerly demurral is averted with playfulness: which in this instance is temporal as well as spatial – the miners’ sculpture, made in 1960, being imagined as a foundation to ‘antique splendour’. A similar kinetic collage forms the poem’s tentative conclusion, which shuttles between the earthbound and the airborne. The poet notes the signature of Primitivo Pérez in the Minster’s visitors’ book, the autochthonous solidity of whose name is countered by the ‘address’ he gives: ‘from / Where the Air is Clear’ (*CP*, p. 237). That prompts a reflection on whether the tourist noticed the Barnsley Main Seam model and considered stifling coalface conditions, but the figure that Hutchinson then alights upon is again one of movement: the pit elevator or cage, which operates from ground level to the coalface but moves with such rapidity as to produce a giddy sensation of flight. The cage is imagined as a place of homoerotic licence which was earlier in the poem denied to a prince: ‘Young miners flaunting shoulder-bags in the cage / grinning all over their glad eyes / ready for a prinsiade’ (*CP*, p. 237).

The next lines are a little too loose syntactically to provide a fully coherent comparison, but seem to draw a parallel between on the one hand the grey of Prince William’s effigy and the blackened faces of the miners, and on the other the ‘old honey walls’ of York, which recall in turn the ‘honey-knobs’ of the Lantern Tower’s

gilded ceiling. A pun on ‘honey’ returns the poet’s attention to Honiton: ‘and is there honey still for tea / in Honiton? / Or black bread, white faces, bad blood?’ (*CP*, p. 237). As well as the continued play on ‘honey’, it is Hutchinson’s interest in ‘strange and ancient’ corners of England which seems to prompt the reference to Rupert Brooke’s poem of place, since Grantchester is scarcely proximate or otherwise connected to either Honiton or York. The speaker of ‘The Old Vicarage, Grantchester’ is, like Hutchinson’s poetic persona, something of a *flâneur* – but his arch reaction to his surroundings (not to mention his casual anti-Semitism) are alien to Hutchinson’s sensibility. Brooke’s poem articulates social privilege and sophisticated nostalgia, a model of Englishness which, despite its minute emphasis on the local, is very nearly the opposite of that embodied by the rioting wives of eighteenth-century Honiton. We do not have to read very far in Hutchinson to intuit which he prefers, but the comparison is left undeveloped, and how we might relate Brooke’s ironised *Heimweh* to the imperialism which Hutchinson elsewhere indicts remains obscure.

Hutchinson’s work typically proceeds by enlisting the reader’s sympathy for his moral and political beliefs; he is, in the restricted literary sense of the term, a sentimental writer. He values not just communication but sharing of feeling; his poetics are those of occasion and unexpected encounter. His poems about Britain, and perhaps particularly those about England, are illustrative of the virtues, but also the risks of a literature of sensibility. Such a literature is by definition inclusive – if the reader can feel alongside the poet he or she is always welcome within the poem’s structures – but it permits complacency, as poet and reader congratulate one another on their good taste in thinking and feeling alike. Sentimental literature is alert to serendipity and its pleasures, but may also seem desultory and unfinished. The closing verse paragraph of ‘Barnsley Main Seam’, which asserts the ‘entirely’ different colour

of York's 'old honey walls' without specifying from what it is different, is a case in point. Hutchinson's explorations of Britain and England turn on manipulations of received ideas about identity or imperialism, and are consequently dependent upon them. Readerly refusal to endorse or recognise the poet's assumptions unpicks the poems' logic and nullifies their moral charge. His protest poems are continuous with the Honiton hunger marches in being easy to ignore: they presume that natural justice and human decency have purchase on ruling authorities as upon the sympathetic reader, where most available evidence – even that of the poems themselves – suggests otherwise. For Hutchinson's poems to work, sympathy is crucial: lose it, and there is little to sustain attention. The collage of Englishness presented in 'Barnsley Main Seam' remains aesthetically unresolved, which inhibits the evolution of political or moral conclusions. Though Hutchinson seems faintly to disapprove of his claim of aerial provenance, the condition of the daytripper Primitivo Pérez, 'buying a minster minute', leaving his mark 'in the big book in the narthex' (*CP*, p. 237), is curiously representative of the poem itself. The reader recognises and welcomes Hutchinson's offbeat attention to the minute and unusual – whether it is the Barnsley model tucked away among the cultural treasures of the Minster or the history of visceral protest in a town famous for fine lace-making. After tracing a clue through the poem's obscurities, however, we might also be forgiven for wanting to breathe clear air.

NOTES

1. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, 'Pearse Hutchinson', *The Arts Show*, RTE Radio 1, 13 December 2007. < <http://www.rte.ie/arts/2007/1213/theartsshow.html> > Accessed 19th April 2009.

2. Devolution in Scotland and Wales has led to increased visibility for what might be termed English nationalist anti-Unionism, but this remains a marginal movement, one that scarcely existed in 1985.

3. See John E. Archer, *Social Unrest and Popular Protest 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1842, Vol. XV, p. 84 and Vol. XVII, p. 108. See Paul Halsall, (ed.) *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, (September 2001) <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1842womenminers.html>> Accessed 19th April 2009.