

Making (short) work (of a couple of double gins) while the world spins

by Glenn Patterson

Britain and
Ireland Lives
Entwined



Glenn Patterson was born, and lives, in Belfast. He is the author of ten novels, including *The International*, *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* (Belfast's first One City One Book Choice) and *Gull*, set in the DeLorean Motor Company's Belfast factory in the early 1980s. He has published two collections of essays and articles – *Lapsed Protestant* and *Here's Me Here* – and two other non-fiction works, the most recent of which, *Backstop Land*, came out on 31 October 2019, the day that the UK didn't leave the EU. He is the co-writer, with Colin Carberry, of *Good Vibrations* (BBC Films), which the pair later adapted for stage, and in 2016 he wrote the libretto for *Long Story Short: the Belfast Opera*, composed by Neil Martin. A new novel, *Where Are We Now?*, will be published by Head of Zeus in March 2020. He is the director of the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast.

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The man I will call Donovan (that being his name) and I have been trying to find a date for this since just after Christmas – ‘before the New Year is too far advanced,’ we said – and have arrived, a little sheepish at our crapness, at the early evening of Thursday 21 February, spring a mere hop and a skip away.

The arrangement is we will meet in Berts Bar on High Street. It’s too soon to call it a haunt, but we have met there before – sat, in fact, in the exact same seats, at the short end of the counter, next to the door through to the toilets, and the Merchant Hotel’s main entrance, facing on to Skipper Street.

As before, Donovan’s motorbike helmet is already on the counter when I arrive. He will not be needing it again tonight: home is a short walk from wherever he has parked.

Home for me is a mile-long ride east from the Albert Clock stop on Belfast’s new rapid transport system – the Glider – further down High Street.

(And, yes, I did think of changing ‘mile-long ride’ to ‘mile-long glide’, but then... well, wait till you’ve used it yourself then you tell me.)

If you had asked me, back when the two of us became friends at the end of the 1980s, five years before the first IRA ceasefire, to imagine the types of place where we might meet 30 years on, a 1950s retro

cocktail bar and grill would have come a considerable way down the list. But then I wouldn't have seen me living in east Belfast either (most people we knew then clung to the more religiously mixed south) or coming in and out of the city centre on a bendy purple bus, or Donovan for that matter ever having need of a motorbike helmet, let alone being able to fit all that hair he used to have inside one.

The hair is shorter now, and almost wholly grey. My own is coming up white these days in the photos I increasingly look at – like that bit in *The Exorcist* – through a lattice of fingers.

The barman asks me what I am having. I tell him another of whatever gin that is in the glass Donovan has set beside the helmet. 'So, a double, then?' the barman asks and Donovan deadpans.

'Sure,' I say, though I am not entirely, 'a double.'

We do the catching up, seven weeks more of it to get through than if we had managed to meet when we originally intended. We talk about partners and children and preparations for an annual charity event in memory of Donovan's late father-in-law, who died from muscular dystrophy, which ends with a description of a dinner served to Donovan and his ex-wife by Marco Pierre White – 'paté, kedgeree, crème brûlée: simple, but amazing.' As any Jimmie Lunceford fan knows, t'ain't what you do that gets results.

(I say that as though I am a Jimmie Lunceford fan, but in truth I am more Fun Boy Three/Bananarama vintage – *Do-do-do-do-do, do-do, do-dooo*. I only found the Jimmie Lunceford original when I was writing this.)

We talk, Donovan and I, university politics: we are professors now as well as parents. This in a sense is just how it goes: each generation is a tide that comes in and fills the holes or roles the last one left as it receded. Which isn't to say we haven't put a shift in. As people who entered the academy through the practice channel (theory for me runs to a single phrase: what you do defines you), we are constantly trying to keep our professional papers up to date.

I mention a movie I am working on about the two sets of Dunlop brothers – Joey and Robert, and Robert's sons William and Michael – whose lives and, in the case of the first three named, deaths have for nearly four decades defined Northern Ireland motorcycle road-racing.

Donovan tells me that he spent all his childhood summers at his grandparents' in Portrush – home to the biggest event in the road-racing calendar, the North West 200 – that he had, as a kid of seven or eight, a little motorbike of his own that he would ride up and down the drive, or endlessly take apart and reassemble, see how it worked. He went every year to watch the racing, until 1979, the year three riders died (one a close friend of Joey Dunlop, a member of the 'Armoy Armada'), after which the uncle who had always accompanied him said that was it, they were never going back again.

The day, some time after this, that he walked into his parents' room and saw a camera sitting on the bed, his first instinct was to take it apart too, see how it worked. (Though not, unfortunately, how to put it back together before his father came in.) Next thing he was a 17-year-old travelling Ireland with just the camera for company, persuading writers like Heaney, Banville – William Trevor – to contribute pieces to his debut *32 Counties* book.

(And as I write that, 30 years on, what strikes me most is not the literary figures he enlisted, but that title. *The chutzpah!*)

I cannot have known him as long as I have without hearing about this foundational road-racing passion before, but there could be as much as three decades' worth of other stuff piled on top, whole relationships begun and ended; the inside as well as the outside of my temples might be bleaching out a bit.

And then, even on first sip, this gin was unmistakably double. I can barely remember – halfway through it – what I had for lunch.

So, of course we order another, and keep talking.

I think, when we talk, we are – without saying as much, even to ourselves – looking for places of intersection: here perhaps – or here – there is something we could do together. Something like the essay about the border we did the year before last for the *Guardian Weekend* magazine and for which we revisited some of the south Armagh locations (Bessbrook, Forkhill) from Donovan's 2007 *British Watchtowers* series, though my abiding memory of those particular early spring days is again of talking – while we drove (we took it turn about and each came away convinced the other was the worse driver), while we ate, talking even while, each in our way, we worked.

I wrote mainly on the sheets of A4 I always carry around with me – folded three or four times (A7 or 8) to fit in the palm of my hand. When I ran out of paper I wrote – again as I often do – straight onto the hand. I don't know if it is an affectation, but it feels like the least mediated form of writing, as unconscious sometimes as scratching.

I was in the middle then of writing a novel, whose working title – *Iterations* – was informed by the sense, which Brexit enhanced rather than introduced, that all entities and identities were open to change and revision, informed too (if it isn't perverse to say) by a dislike of the word iterations and its creep into everyday discourse. As in 'chef has introduced a new iteration of the menu'.

I still dislike the word, but as with all titles chosen early it has sent down roots that are hard to extirpate without completely messing up the surface.

Until your publishers get the hold of it and tell you that they will publish, yes, but not, under any circumstances, with that title. So *Iterations* becomes *Where are we now?*

To those drives around the border with Donovan, I attribute the appearance in the finished novel of a locations management company, run by a brother and sister brought up, in Tyrone, by Esperanto-speaking parents ('the county's two and only'), which is tasked with finding a hill, somewhere along the border to stand in for the site of the battle of Annaberg, fought between Polish insurgents and German Freikorps during the Third Silesian Uprising of May 1921.

Well, why not?

Unfortunately, the company can't find any Northern Irish extras willing to play the parts of the Freikorps (proto Stormtroopers), so in the end it has to recruit them from Northern Ireland's own Polish community, a few of whom confide in the Esperantists' offspring that it might be the last thing they do before they move south, fearing the worst from Brexit.

Donovan, meanwhile, has been photographing lighthouses.

Correction, Donovan has been making work about lighthouses. That is the term he always uses. I remember – a decade ago – spending some time in Berlin with the artist Victor Sloan for an exhibition

and accompanying book on a Prenzlauer Berg bar called Luxus. I struggled all the time we were together to find the right term for what it was Victor was doing with his camera ... Taking pictures clearly wasn't it, as Victor demonstrated the night I said that by holding the camera out at arm's length and firing off a shot into the dark without even looking. (Although – and I could be wrong – I always thought a version of that off-the-cuff image found its way into the final exhibition.) So, I have adopted Donovan's term myself.

There is something pretty fundamental about make and work. Like all single-syllable words, they seem to go to the very core of the language and therefore of how we exist in the world, and never mind the political landscape. Well, all right then, how I as a writer exist. Sometimes I make work that people can read, sometimes I make work that people can watch, once or twice I have made work that people can sing, I have even made work that people can – with counters and cards and rolling dice – play.

But back to the lighthouses. Donovan has been collaborating with writer Chris Klatell, who has seen in them something of the same thing I have seen in *Iterations*, a pick to unlock the present moment, in this case the centrality of borders to its thinking. The lighthouses they are interested in are the ones that can be seen from the edge of one land mass, sending out their signal from the next land mass over. One of the prompts was a line in *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf: '[W]e must wait for the future to show.'

Donovan has already exhibited some of the work – a single two metres squared lightbox image of Griz-Nez Lighthouse, Pas-de-Calais, taken from Cliffs of Dover as part of the 2018 Brighton Photo Biennial – but it is no more than an extract from a novel. This is still work in progress.

Just a couple of weeks before we meet, indeed, he was out again. The work he is making is not just concerned with geography, but also politics. The day, or rather the night, of his most recent foray was the occasion of the first meaningful vote (who knew, before Brexit began, they had meaningless ones?) on what we had all taken to calling 'Theresa May's Deal' on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.

He had, what's more, been keeping a close eye on the weather. The forecast on the morning of that day was for snow heading our way across the North Channel from the west coast of Scotland. Donovan, thinking to capture that too, was going to Torr Head, the closest part of Northern Ireland to Scotland, where, with a group of friends (and entirely incidental to what Donovan was about), I had watched the sunrise on 1 January 2000, having watched it go down from the most westerly part of Donegal on 31 December 1999. Torr is, to quote the Antrim Coast and Glens website, 'an excellent example of metamorphosed limestone and indicative of volcanic rock sequences in Ireland and Scotland' – as rugged a sentence as you could possibly meet – and is very, very exposed, especially on the far side of the ruined coastguard hut that sits atop the limestoney, volcanicky outcrop.

Standing up there some days, battered by the winds, you could be forgiven for thinking the hut had simply blown away and that you were doomed any minute to follow.

It was an area Donovan knew very well, having for the past several years spent most of his weekends there, but even in daylight, even in midsummer, the roads leading to it could be tricky, the steep path up to the headland treacherous, and this was night, midwinter, with weather closing in.

He had taken the precaution of phoning a friend who lived locally and asking him if he could meet him in his car and drive him, and his gear, to where the road ran out at the foot of the path. He had a bottle of whiskey with him as a thank you, and when, getting into the car, he turned to set the bottle in the back seat, was surprised to see his friend's ten-year-old son sitting there.

Donovan, who had arrived at the meeting point on his motorbike, was already dressed in multiple layers for the shoot and before getting out of the car again put on his motorcycle helmet – (a) because it was cold, and (b) because it really, really was treacherous up there – then shouldered everything he needed, including the couple of cans of beer that would keep him going while he waited, and struck out alone up the path.

To get the shot he had in mind, Donovan was going to have to wait until he saw the snowstorm begin its slow roll across the channel from Scotland, a distance of less than 15 miles.

And then there was the light itself.

'Each lighthouse has a different interval,' he tells me, 'like a signature. So, like, Mull is 21 seconds. If you're a sailor and see a flash of light and 21 seconds later another flash, you know you're at Mull.'

The interval at the lighthouse directly facing Torr is seven seconds.

So, geography, politics, meteorology and finally mathematics: 'You wait for the flash of the light and then you count seven seconds just to make sure: yes, there it is again, that's the right one. Now, the exposure on the camera is three seconds. So, you're going to have to press the trigger five seconds after the last flash to be sure of getting the next one. And you can't look down at your watch or phone or you'll miss it. So, what I've started to do is count out loud: one elephant, two elephant, three elephant ... Do you remember that?' he asks side-stepping out of the story ...

'Gregory's Girl.'

A nod, '... four elephant, five elephant – press ... got it. Or hope you have. Photography is all about control and surrender.' (The following morning, I find a folded napkin in my pocket with the big B for Berts printed on it and the words control + surrender in my handwriting. If I didn't know better, I'd wonder where I had been the night before.) 'And, of course,' Donovan says, 'the light' – the other light, he means, the photo in photography – 'keeps dropping, so you have to take that into account when you're calculating the exposure ... So, you count again: one elephant, two elephant ...'

He stops, freezes practically, his voice drops. 'I suddenly have this feeling there's somebody else there ...' He looks over his shoulder – in the then-and-there of us sitting on our stools, looks over his shoulder, where what I see is the half-curtained window looking out on to Skipper Street, but what Donovan sees or wants me to see is what he saw that night, as he stood on Torr Head in his helmet, one elephanting, two elephanting, open can of beer to hand: the kid, his friend's ten year-old son, who had somehow found his way up here, no layers, no motorbike helmet, no dad.

'What are you doing?' the kid asked, before Donovan (he's still looking over his shoulder in the bar) could ask him the same thing.

'I'm making work.'

And only now does he turn back to me to tell me the rest of the story, about the shot he got as the meaningful vote itself was taking place and the snow clouds arrived overhead, about the descent from the headland to the road below – ‘I was so scared, I was shouting at the kid as if he was one of my own’ – and already I am thinking I will write this, already I am trying out things in my head (the way Donovan looked over his shoulder just now: the boy was there) and two other guys have come in and sat at the counter, where the long leg of the L meets the short, and they are giving us the Belfast eye like it wouldn’t take a big lot for them to pick a fight – especially as Donovan has, mid-story, managed to get in ahead of them and order us another round of drinks.

A part of me wants to apologise to them – ‘he was caught up in telling me something, he didn’t see you’ – apologise for the whole spectacle of the two of us ... and another part doesn’t care what it looks like to them or anyone else: this is as much a record of our particular moment in time as any work either of us might make. No, wait: this is the work.

Postscript, 6 April 2019

We are back on our stools at the short leg of the L-shaped counter of Berts Bar. Donovan has had a fight with a razor – his words – which has put paid to most of the rest of his hair. (In old barber’s parlance, I’d call it a Number 4.) On the other side of the counter, the barman is pouring cartons of tomato juice into a catering-size mayonnaise tub, it looks like, stripped of its label. To the tomato juice he adds, while Donovan and I do our catching up, a couple of small bottles of freshly squeezed lemon juice, a couple of tablespoons of celery salt, not that I could pick celery salt out with absolute confidence in any other twilit room, but I have a fair idea by now where this is going, or I have until he starts tearing up handfuls of basil and chopping chives. Not so Bloody Mary now, I think, as whatever you bloody well fancy. ‘Believe me,’ the barman says when I express surprise, ‘by the time that’s ready, the basil and the chives will have taken it into a different league.’

‘So when will it be ready?’

‘What’s this, Friday ...? Tuesday.’

I haven't told Donovan yet I am writing this, and there are a few things I need to check – it was risotto Marco Pierre White cooked you, right? No: kedgeree (as you now realise you are indeed reading the corrected version) – but before I have had a chance to we have gone off in another direction, talking about a cache of photographs he was recently shown that provide a new angle on Northern Ireland's recent past. It's the artist's role to deal with legacy, Donovan says, and I say what I have always said when the question of legacy is raised, that art might be the only way of dealing with it, for however much fact an official recovery process might amass there is unlikely to be much truth in it, to which Donovan is about to say something else when over the Berts Bar sound system comes a shuffling beat. 'When I was a kid about half-past three, my daddy said, son, come here to me. Says things may come and things may go, but this is one thing you ought to know ...'

It's only Jimmie Lunceford.

I stop Donovan: 'Remind me,' I say, 'to come back to that song ... Go on.'

And he does.

The barman does.

We all do.