

ANTHONY MAY is a PhD Student affiliated to the Helen Bamber Centre for the Study of Rights, Conflict, and Mass Violence at Kingston University. He has recently submitted a thesis that examines cultural nationalism in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The main areas examined within this thesis are sport and literature – their impact upon cultural nationalism is assessed and the effects that they have are analysed in detail.

Email:
anthonymay.research@googlemail.com

Article

‘Corrupted Bodies’

The Relationship between Power, Corruption, and
Illness in Irvine Welsh’s *Filth*

Anthony May



Introduction

COVERING THE PERIOD 1979-1998, IRVINE WELSH’S NOVEL *Filth* depicts endemic corruption within Scotland’s police force. The novel shows the corrupt behaviour that became the norm within Scottish institutions, and also within the British government, which those institutions serve. The corrupt police practices shown in the novel became firmly entrenched within the eighteen-year period of Conservative rule (1979-1997). Further to this, it is suggested that the corruption depicted was a consequence of the individualism that marked the ideology of the period.

Filth strongly promotes socialist ideals, and these ideals have come to define the beliefs held by a majority of working-class Scots. As a

consequence of its support for socialism, *Filth* can also appear to be strongly supportive of Scottish nationalism, and this is especially the case when the novel is read in the light of Irvine Welsh's later promotion of Scottish nationalism and independence. The novel discusses the conditions under which contemporary nationalism began to grow, and is in many ways a precursor to the overt nationalism of Welsh's later novels and journalism.

The principal character in *Filth* is Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson of the Lothian and Borders Police, and the novel describes Robertson's physical and mental breakdown. Welsh has called Robertson a 'kind of Scottish Bad Lieutenant' and 'a composite of almost everything bad [he] could think of'.¹ Like many of his colleagues, Robertson is racist, sexist, and homophobic, and he utilises his membership of the Freemasons to avoid criminal charges related to his violence and drug abuse. He suffers from a number of physical and mental problems which Welsh presents as being a consequence of his corrupt mind-set. The breakdown and eventual suicide of Robertson can be seen as the meting out of a kind of authorial justice against a representative of Scotland's state institutions, the methods and ideologies of which are portrayed in an extremely negative light.

Throughout the United Kingdom, those who are generally opposed to the methods of the police often refer to the force using the slang term 'the filth'. The term is used in the title of the novel in reference to this. However, it is clear that the term is not used lightly, and the novel suggests the existence of 'filthy', corrupt methods and beliefs within the Lothian and Borders Police Force, which is presented as representative of all the major public institutions in Scotland during the 1980s and 1990s. As well as being filthy in terms of methodology, and in his personal beliefs, Robertson has a 'filthy mind' in terms of his sexual habits, and is also filthy when it comes to personal hygiene. The character is designed to personify the many different ways that the term 'filth' can be used, and one of the principal aims of the novel is to highlight the connections between these different meanings, using Robertson as a cypher.

The following investigation will begin with an examination of Robertson's corruption in terms of physical and mental health, before moving on to analyse the other forms of corruption described in the novel. These are all interrelated, and include political corruption, institutional corruption, 'filthy' points of view regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious background, and a wider societal corruption involving all these various factors. The relationship between the various forms of corruption will be discussed; Welsh presents power as the ultimate corrupting variable, and the pursuit of absolute power as the source of most corrupt behaviour.

Physical and mental corruption in *Filth*

In *Filth*, Robertson develops a rash on his legs, testicles, and penis, which his doctor says is related to his stressful and unhealthy lifestyle. Rather than dealing with this problem, Robertson exacerbates it by eating only fried food and pies, as he is unable to cook. He also has unprotected sex with a number of different partners, including prostitutes, and he is in very poor sexual health. Robertson is incapable of using his washing machine, which means that his rash also worsens due to the filthy condition of his clothing. In preference to addressing this, Robertson spends most of his time in bakeries, public houses, or Masonic lodges, and when he is at home he drinks himself into a stupor in order to sleep.

In addition to his rash, Robertson contracts tapeworms through eating a piece of pie that he has not cooked properly. One of these tapeworms narrates parts of the novel, in sections that are marked out through the outline of a worm, and which overlay Robertson's narration. Initially, the tapeworm is not fully sentient, and is only able to will Robertson to eat, in order that it may grow. However, as the novel progresses it resolves to learn more about its host. The tapeworm uses Robertson's memories of his past to provide the backstory to his current situation, as it narrates the sections of the novel which describe Robertson's teenage years in a Midlothian pit village, and discuss his motivations for joining the police.

The ailing Robertson visits his doctor who makes him aware of the worm, and he attempts to flush it out using laxative pills. The conservative and reactionary policeman refers to the tapeworm as being 'like an Arthur Scargill in the healthy body politic of eighties Britain, the enemy within'.² This reveals his right-wing political beliefs, and is deeply ironic; Robertson's body is anything but healthy, and as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the tapeworm has a more developed and nuanced social conscience than Robertson does. It is aware of its role as part of a wider community, and wishes to help this community to flourish. This is just one of the many layers of irony in the novel; the conservative Robertson becomes host to an organism with socialist tendencies. Robertson loathes socialism in any form, and believes that one of his main duties as a policeman is to punish those who are sympathetic to any element of socialist ideology.

The plot of *Filth* loosely centres around a murder investigation that Robertson is supposed to be leading; a young black tourist has been killed after a night out in Edinburgh. At the novel's denouement, it becomes clear that Robertson actually committed this crime himself whilst dressed as his ex-wife. Robertson's decline is described using three separate narrators; Bruce Robertson himself is the principal narrator, and the majority of the events in the novel are presented through his perspective. The tapeworm is the second narrator, presenting Robertson's backstory. The principal areas focused upon are the late 1970s, when Robertson was a teenager, and the early to mid 1980s, when the character was a young policeman. When Robertson dresses as his wife, a third narrator, 'Carole', appears, offering a different perspective on the events that the principal narrator discusses.

The sections narrated by Carole demonstrate that Robertson has developed a split personality, and that he has paranoid and delusional episodes characterised by extreme violence and exhibitionist behaviour. It is clear that Robertson is in the middle of a mental breakdown, and Carole becomes an alter ego through which he is able to indulge his most violent fantasies. He is also able to use Carole in order to indulge the fantasy that he is a reliable husband with a normal family life; the alter ego is a manifestation of both extreme violence and apparent serenity, depending upon Robertson's mood-swings.

Personal and political corruption in *Filth*

Robertson's physical condition is presented as the consequence of a mental breakdown, which in turn is caused by the character's strong desire to possess power in all his social relations. The need for power becomes an obsession for Robertson, and the novel presents power as a corrupting force which warps behaviour and causes injustice on both the personal and societal levels. This is especially the case when the kind of power utilised or

lusted after is absolute; *Filth* suggests that when a great deal of power is vested in one individual, the results can be catastrophic. This relates strongly to the political ideology promoted in the novel, and also to the ideologies that are attacked.

The kind of power promoted in *Filth* is collective; it is argued that decisions should be taken for the benefit of the majority of people whom those decisions affect. This is reflective of the dominant political ideology held by many of Irvine Welsh's fellow working-class Scots; David McCrone argues that Scottish nationalism is best understood as an expression of political difference from England, and states that Scotland has an 'alternative sense of national identity' which is based upon left-wing principles of governance.³ Welsh's work reflects this situation, and *Filth* continually promotes the benefits of socialism.

While the novel promotes a political agenda opposed to that followed by successive Westminster governments, *Filth* is seldom directly nationalistic. However, Welsh's work does repudiate the ideologies of British governments from 1979-1998, and describes the conditions in which Scottish nationalism grew during this period. As a consequence, *Filth* can appear to promote Scottish nationalism, especially when Welsh's contemporary commitment to this is considered. The novel is best understood within the wider context of the rise of Scottish nationalism, which gained its initial momentum from the anti-Thatcherite sentiments expressed during the 1980s and 1990s. The sentiments expressed within *Filth* reflect those which have driven the growth of Scottish political nationalism in the contemporary era. For this reason, it is fair to argue that the novel has become a nationalist text, although it was not unequivocally nationalistic at the time of publication.

A number of commentators have discussed the contrast between traditional Scottish working-class values and those of the modern Conservative party. Jonathan Hearn defines Thatcherism as chiefly being the belief in 'neoliberal social policies and radical free market agendas' and notes that Scotland 'has tended to oppose' such approaches.⁴ As McCrone states, the perception in Scotland is that 'Modern Conservatism speaks with a southern English voice', and the needs of South East England are prioritised over those of every other part of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.⁵

One consequence of this perception is an increasing dissatisfaction with the Westminster government. This began during the 1980s; as the balance of power shifted and Scots began to feel marginalised within the United Kingdom, Scottish people became more nationalistic. Grant Farred claims that Thatcherism 'evacuated Scottishness and destroyed any oppositional notion of the identity'; in reality, it did the reverse of this.⁶ As Ronald Kowalski argues, Margaret Thatcher can be seen as 'the saviour of the nationalist cause' in Scotland; by attacking the values held by many working-class Scots, Thatcher changed the terms in which the Union was understood in Scotland.⁷

Welsh's strong opposition to the neo-liberal social and economic policies that defined the Thatcher era, and also the years of Conservative and New Labour government that have followed it, is one of the most significant elements of his work. The author has argued that '[to be] working-class in post-Thatcherite Britain is to be disenfranchised, and the additional factor of being Scottish within an English dominated union makes you doubly marginalised'.⁸ Welsh's novels consistently present

successive British governments as having treated Scotland extremely poorly, with policies led by, at best, wilful neglect. A good example of this can be seen in *Trainspotting* (1994), in which one of the principal characters, Mark Renton, argues that because the Conservative party became unpopular in Scotland during the 1980s, the party simply chose to ignore Scotland's social problems.

Renton argues that the governments of Thatcher and John Major both felt that there was 'nae votes for the Government [...] here, so why bother daein anything fir people whae urnae gaunnae support ye?'.⁹ However, Welsh also characterises British government policy towards the Scottish working-class as often involving something worse than neglect; outright hostility, and prolonged attempts to 'break the resistance' of the Scottish working-classes to Conservative policy. (261) This is a view shared by Murray Pittock, who argues that due to their increasing unpopularity in Scotland, during the 1980s the Conservative party 'ceased to listen to views in Scotland which did not originate among their own supporters'.¹⁰ As this base became increasingly narrow, the views of ordinary Scots became increasingly unimportant to the British government.

The perception that the British government was hostile to the beliefs of many working-class Scots increased during the 1980s, as the government began to close many of the industries that had sustained Scotland's economy and provided work for hundreds of thousands of people. As Pittock suggests, 'heavy industry was vital to the Scottish self-image', and the closure of factories and mines was seen by many as an attack on Scotland itself.¹¹ Welsh certainly describes government policy in this way, and takes a particularly strong line on the issue. The closure of Scottish industry is presented in *Filth* as a deliberate, needless and callous attack on the Scottish working-classes, perpetrated by an uncaring and actively hostile government.

Welsh depicts the Miners' Strike of 1984 as being characterised by the desire of the miners to 'better one's fellow man' and to achieve solidarity within their community. (261) These are some of the values traditionally associated with socialism. By contrast, he attributes to the British government the need to 'punish that goodness as a weakness' and to push through an agenda that is characterised by 'cynicism and vileness' in its pursuit of absolute power. (260-261) Welsh argues that the British government's approach to power was (both in 1984 and at the time of publication: the novel does not attribute a different agenda or ideology to the New Labour government) that it is 'something to have and to keep and to enjoy', rather than something to share for the benefit of all citizens. (261) Those who helped the government achieve their goals in defeating the striking miners are described in exceedingly negative terms, both in *Filth* and in *Skagboys* (2012) which also discusses the Miners' Strike. Bruce Robertson is a good example of these negative descriptions, as he joins the police force and helps to break the strike, with personal power being the strongest motivating factor in this decision.

In *Filth*, Robertson 'idolises' Margaret Thatcher. (388) The motivation behind Robertson's actions is to control others, and to have power over them; the ultimate power that he craves is 'to send thousands of people to their deaths' by starting a war. (389) As a consequence of this, in the early 1980s he became a supporter of Thatcher's decision to go to war in the Falkland Islands, perceiving her to have shared his fantasy of 'sending others to their deaths from the safety of an oak-panelled office' in the ultimate

demonstration of control over the destiny of others. (389) Robertson's idolisation of Thatcher and her perceived methods is given as one of his principal reasons for joining the police. Welsh describes Robertson as possessing 'the impulse to hurt and control...the urge to hurt [and] demean'. (389) His continued idolisation of Thatcher and her perceived methods is given as one of his principal reasons for joining the police and adopting corruption as his methodological norm

Filth describes Robertson's motivations in detail, and the character says that what he enjoyed when he joined the police force was:

That rush when you're at a picket line and you've got your truncheon and shield and the whole force of the state is behind you and you're hyped up to beat insolent and spastic scum who question things [...] into the suffering pulp they so richly deserve to become. It's a great society we live in. (160)

He adds that he 'hates them all, that section of the working class who won't do as they are told: criminals, spastics, niggers, strikers [...] it all adds up to one thing: something to smash', (160) Robertson is made the representative of a Thatcherite mind-set, and Welsh uses the character to demonstrate the destructive nature of the response to the Miners' Strike and other similar events during the 1980s.

This is especially clear when the opening section of *Skagboys* (2012) is also considered. The novel begins with a description of Mark Renton's experiences at the 'Battle of Orgreave'. The police are characterised as brutal and unforgiving, and as having organised the whole event in order to beat and hurt as many miners and trade unionists as possible. Defenceless, Mark Renton is attacked by a policeman, and his unarmed friends are beaten as they try to escape from the violence. This action is supported by the British government, which also wishes to end the strike, partly because they believe it to be damaging to industry in Britain, but more importantly because the striking miners are a symbol of left-wing resistance to right-wing, neo-liberal policies. The motivations of the miners and their supporters are described positively by Welsh, while the police are described in extremely negative terms in *Skagboys*, just as they are in *Filth*.

Robertson's decision to join the police is described as an opportunity to gain power over those who once tormented him; the tapeworm describes Robertson as having had a disruptive and troubled time as a teenager, as he was sent to live with his grandmother after the death of his brother, which he partly caused. He was unpopular in his community, and most people shunned him. While most of Robertson's family and community were involved in the strike, Robertson himself was on the other side, fighting against the majority of people that he grew up with. This allows him to believe that he is superior to those who were on 'the losing side'; this is something that he keeps with him until just before his death. (262)

However, winning this particular battle is not portrayed as a positive event, and the novel states that in gaining power over others 'you must accept the language of power as your currency, but you must also pay a price [...] the price is your soul'. (262) Robertson is depicted as having sacrificed the ability to 'feel', in an emotional sense, in his pursuit of power. (262) This has particularly severe consequences, as Robertson becomes increasingly violent and sexually promiscuous, and eventually his wife, Carole, leaves him due to this behaviour.

It becomes clear that Robertson has assaulted Carole on several occasions. He also attacks his associate in the Freemasons, Clifford Blades,

and has an addiction to sado-masochistic sex games involving near-strangulation, showing that power itself comes to be sexually exciting for the depraved Robertson. Alongside the increasing prevalence of sado-masochism in Robertson's life, he has a number of affairs with women whom he casts aside once he has used them. These women include Clifford Blades' wife, Bunty, and his sister-in-law, Chrissie, and his actions demonstrate his individualistic and uncaring nature. Robertson also uses prostitutes on a regular basis, and he attempts to make an illegal pornographic film involving bestiality. He watches such films regularly, and is not concerned by their illegality, demonstrating his lack of interest in upholding the law when it goes against his personal interests.

One of the most significant incidents in the novel concerns the young daughter of one of Robertson's many enemies, Conrad Donaldson QC. Donaldson is the defence lawyer of choice for most of the people whom Robertson tries to convict. When Robertson discovers the 15 year old Stephanie Donaldson in possession of a small quantity of ecstasy tablets, he sees a way to destroy his enemy. However, his need for power over Stephanie takes over, and rather than arresting her, he humiliates Stephanie by forcing her to perform fellatio on him. The need to assert power is extreme within Robertson, and it overtakes reason in his mind; Robertson, unconcerned with upholding the law, is more interested in abusing his position to gain power over others.

Racism, sexism, homophobia and sectarianism

Welsh depicts the police force and other Scottish institutions as being dominated by people who are white, male, Protestant and Unionist. The routine abuse of other groups by this dominant group is part of a wider scheme to prevent other groups from sharing the power that Unionist males have developed. For this reason, the 'Lothian Forum on Racial Equality' is particularly despised by Robertson and most of his colleagues. Open displays of racism and sectarianism are depicted as an attempt to keep power within the dominant group, by ensuring that anyone outside this group is excluded from positions of responsibility. The same is true of homophobia and sexism. The idea that people from outside the dominant group are inferior and incapable of working within Scottish institutions is spread through a variety of methods, but most notably through the networks opened up by Freemasonry.

Robertson routinely refers to black people as 'coons' and 'niggers' and it is clear that he hates all members of ethnic minority groups in Scotland. (46) The murder that Carole commits is carried out as revenge, because Robertson, at the height of his rage, believes that the black man he kills is a suitable proxy for the man that Carole has left him for. Carole leaves Robertson for a man that he believes to be inferior, and his decline begins as soon as she has left. His racism is depicted as having become more extreme after this event (this is suggested by the tapeworm which provides the narrative of Robertson's history), but he already held strong views on race before it.

While none of Robertson's colleagues goes as far as to kill a black man, his viewpoints on race are presented as the norm within the Lothian and Borders police force. Educational classes designed to combat the prejudice that is presented as rampant within the force end in chaos. Robertson's colleague Gus Bain proclaims that 'Scotland's a white man's country. Always

has been, always will be' (p.46). Another detective, Dougie Gillman, is suspended for racially abusing members of the Lothian Forum on Racial Equality. All but one of Robertson's colleagues openly express racist views, and the detectives work together to disrupt the anti-prejudice classes that they are told to attend, and to disrupt the work of the forum, which they loathe.

The only detective who does not routinely make racist remarks, Amanda Drummond, is a new recruit to the force, and as a woman in a male-dominated environment she is routinely belittled as a 'silly wee lassie'. (77) When he is narrating as himself, Robertson thinks of his female colleagues, and indeed all women, in terms of their potential as a sexual partner. However, when he is Carole, he talks in terms of the power of women, albeit in terms of their allure and sexual attractiveness. Carole advocates monogamy, and it is clear that Robertson's confused mind exacerbates his problems. In one of his personas, he only thinks of women as sexual objects. In another persona, he wishes to actually be a woman. There is no suggestion that his colleagues share these contradictions – their routine sexism is portrayed as the norm within the police force, and this is depicted as having conditioned Robertson's mind-set whilst he is at work.

Homophobia is also ever-present in the novel. A particularly strong example of this can be seen in the treatment of a detective who occasionally displays camp behaviour, Peter Inglis. Robertson is attempting to gain a promotion, and so he suggests that Inglis (a rival for the post) is homosexual, in order to remove him from the running. He does this by taking his colleagues to a gay nightclub (which he has visited as Carole, and which he pretends not to have been to before) and bribing a rent-boy to approach Inglis as if they are old associates. Once this has happened, Inglis is ostracised from the other detectives, and is accused of being a 'poof' and a 'nancy boy'. (259) As a consequence, Inglis takes time off work and his name is removed from the list of those who are being considered for a promotion. Robertson's superior, Bob Toal, reveals that he does not believe policemen are able to take orders from gay men, and says 'how can you have confidence in a man who's going to be constantly undressing you with his eyes, masturbating over images of you?' (264) *Filth* presents homophobia as the norm throughout Scottish institutions, but especially the police force.

Sectarianism is also presented as a major problem within the Scottish police. Robertson's homophobia, Unionism, and sectarian views are all linked, as he suggests that 'papes' are 'all shirt-lifters' (p.129). He also uses the term 'fenian scum' to describe those of Irish Catholic descent in Scotland, as well as 'bog-wog' and 'Romanist'. (293) He suggests that all Catholics are criminals, and calls the only Catholic policeman that he encounters 'a dirty carrot-topped bastard' and 'an odious piece of racial vomit'. (321-322) *Filth* depicts these views as endemic within the police force. Furthermore, the novel suggests that they are produced and reinforced within the Freemasonry movement, of which all Robertson's male colleagues are members. The Freemasons are presented as a Protestant-only movement in Scotland, and sectarianism is rampant within the lodges that Robertson attends. There is a strong link between Unionism and Protestantism in Scotland, and so the link between Unionism and corruption is also reinforced through *Filth*'s depiction of Freemasonry.¹²

Membership of the Freemasons is depicted as being very important within the police force, and those who are not members of 'the craft' are not considered for promotions at all. (322) When Robertson needs to obtain

favours, he refers to his fellow officers as 'brother', and reminds them that Freemasons have a duty to look after each other's interests and advance each other's position at work. Welsh presents the influence of the Freemasonry network as widespread; it affects most institutions, especially local and regional government. It also affects Scotland's sporting bodies; Welsh often utilises football as a mechanism for exploring the effects of sectarianism in Scottish society, and *Filth* is a good example of this. This approach is relatively common in Scottish cultural production; as Patrick Reilly argues, 'in football a curtain is lifted upon certain attitudes and mindsets otherwise kept discreetly hidden'.¹³ In *Filth*, Welsh makes the connection between sectarianism in football, and its prevalence in wider Scottish society.

Welsh is far from alone in making this link. One year after *Filth* was published, the composer James MacMillan made a particularly famous and culturally significant speech in which he alleged that sectarianism is widespread in Scotland. The speech was called Scotland's Shame, and within it MacMillan argued that the most frequent and obvious manifestation of sectarianism can be seen within 'the activities of [Scotland's] referees and sporting bodies'.¹⁴ This argument is also made by Joseph M. Bradley. Discussing the socio-political divide between supporters of Scotland's Protestant and Catholic-affiliated clubs, Bradley argues that 'football provides an environment in which to make known otherwise repressed or unarticulated political attitudes, cultural affinities, national allegiances and prejudices'.¹⁵ At football matches, prejudice can become clear; Welsh argues that this is also the case in Masonic lodges and within the procedures followed by Scottish police.

The link between these three important elements of Scottish society is made clear in *Filth*. In the novel, a senior football referee discusses his bias towards Glasgow Rangers, a team with a strong Protestant-affiliated following and a long history of sectarian selection policies.¹⁶ The referee attends the same Masonic lodge as Robertson, and discusses an incident in which he denies the visiting team at Rangers' Ibrox Park stadium a clear penalty, allowing Rangers to win the league title. The referee argues that if he had given the penalty, it would have been badly received at the lodge. He also states that the linesmen were similarly biased, allowing a Rangers goal which was clearly offside. He describes the day as being characterised by a 'gala atmosphere' with 'everyone singing "we're up to our knees in Fenian blood"'. (190) Welsh depicts the Freemasons as exerting a corrupting influence across Scottish society, and in doing so, he also depicts Unionism as a corrupt political perspective, held by sectarian bigots.

Filth does not suggest that Scottish nationalism in and of itself will resolve problems with corruption and bigotry. However, there is a strong link made between hardline Unionism and these serious issues, and in light of Welsh's later promotion of Scottish nationalism, the portrayal of Unionists in *Filth* can certainly appear nationalistic. There is also a strong link made between right-wing politics and corruption, and this is a recurring feature of Welsh's work. The author suggests that a socialist government would be more effective at tackling the issues discussed in *Filth*, or at least have more of an inclination to do so.

This viewpoint, though simplistic, is nevertheless the one taken in the novel. Since Scottish nationalism is, at present, a movement whose main political party have adopted a left-wing stance, it is suggested that Scottish nationalist governments may become more effective than their British counterparts at tackling bigotry. The Union itself benefits bigots and racists,

at least while it is governed by political parties who are portrayed as unwilling to seriously tackle bigotry. The overall argument that can be inferred from the novel is that if people who support the Union were to be removed from their positions of power, racism, sectarianism, sexism, and homophobia may be diminished as a consequence.

Alcohol abuse and 'filthy' government policies

Robertson consumes high quantities of alcohol and cocaine at Masonic lodges, described as 'filthy'. This is partly because Robertson arrests other people for being drunk or for possession of drugs, while he himself engages in substance abuse; Robertson's hypocrisy is a clear example of his corruption. Membership of the Freemasons allows Robertson to avoid the criminal charges that he would face if he were an ordinary member of the public. Robertson is frequently violent after consuming alcohol, and this is a key factor in the murder that he carries out. However, this is not the only element of Robertson's alcohol abuse that is discussed. Welsh also focuses upon the wider issue of alcohol abuse in society, and argues that it is government policy to neglect the problem in Scotland. Once again, the British government are portrayed as ineffectual, or indeed wilfully ignorant of a societal problem. This also appears nationalistic, as the British government have it within their power to address this social problem, but are presented as signally failing to do so.

Alcohol is presented as being as dangerous as any proscribed drug; the novel compares the consumption of alcohol and the consumption of drugs such as ecstasy, and suggests that the former is as harmful as the latter. Welsh is often argued to 'glamorise' drug use, especially in newspaper and magazine reviews which hang around a particular sound bite or method of presentation. A good example of this is Sean O'Hagan's interview with Welsh, which appeared in the *Observer* on 4th December 2005. O'Hagan labels Welsh 'the undisputed high priest of nihilistic drug consumption'.¹⁷ This suggests that Welsh's work is completely decadent, and contains no critical discussion of drug abuse whatsoever. In the interview, Welsh states that he is no longer a drug user, but this has little bearing on the tone of the piece as a whole.

Similarly, Decca Aitkenhead's review of *Skagboys* and interview of Welsh, which appeared in the *Guardian* on 15th April 2012, argues that Welsh has become the 'poster boy' for drug consumption.¹⁸ These have become standard tropes in discussion of Welsh's work, and it is comparatively rare for the critical elements of Welsh's depictions of substance abuse to be discussed in any real detail. Aitkenhead does mention that Welsh's work has been used in government sponsored anti-drug programmes, but does not explore this fully. Welsh's work is far more complex than many critics suggest, and while his characters often argue that drug use is a 'consumer choice', addiction is treated as a serious matter. (366) Drugs that are highly addictive are presented as such, and the downside of their usage is presented in graphic detail.

In particular, *Filth* discusses the consumption of 'super-lagers' such as Tennents Super and Carlsberg Special Brew in an exceedingly negative way, and there is a clear authorial intent to portray these products as playing a key role in the 'obliteration' of the lives of those who become addicted to them. (357) 'Super-lagers' are described as 'not a recreational drug...[they are] as strong as heroin or crack'. (356) The novel states that 'you don't need

to market hard drugs like those...the desperate will always find them'. (356) The fact that 'super-lagers' are freely available is strongly criticised, and the British government are presented as being highly irresponsible in allowing people to become addicted to strong alcohol, whilst demonising other drugs.

There is a suggestion that Tennents Super is the most dangerous drug of all those consumed in Scotland, because it dulls the individual's senses to such an extent that they become 'staggering and incoherent', unable to play any part in society. (357) Robertson's eventual addiction to 'the purple tin' is the key to his eventual suicide, as he has become 'dulled' by alcohol to the extent that he is unable to think of anything else. (357) His physical dereliction is complete once he has turned to super-lagers as a method of 'dulling' his mental problems. Robertson becomes a 'jakey', incapable of functioning normally within society. He is just one of many characters within Welsh's work that fall prey to alcohol addiction; other examples include Rab McLaughlin (aka 'Second Prize') in *Trainspotting* (1994) and *Porno* (2003), who throws away a promising football career due to his alcoholism. Danny Skinner, the main protagonist in *The Bedroom Secrets of the Masterchefs* (2007), is also an alcoholic.

Robertson's eventual alcohol-fuelled demise is another of the ironies in the novel, as he earlier extols the virtues of alcohol abuse, arguing that it keeps him and his colleagues in work. His argument is that because violence is one consequence of alcohol abuse, it is good for the police force to encourage the consumption of alcohol in preference to drugs like ecstasy, whose effects are less marked by violent behaviour. He states that government policy should focus upon tough sentencing for drug possession, because if 'kids are scared to take illegal drugs, then they'll turn onto legal ones like alcohol as a substitute'. (244) To Robertson, the consequence of this is more violence, more police, and a greater chance of promotion within the force for himself. This way of thinking is being lampooned, but it is also portrayed as prevalent within the police force; only one of Robertson's colleagues disagrees with him.

The novel suggests that a further consequence of the promotion of alcohol consumption over other types of drugs is that there will be 'mair prisoners, mair prisons, mair wardens, mair security guards'. (244) This will give the economy an artificial boost and would be 'pump-priming, basic Keynesian economics'. (244) Robertson and his colleague Ray Lennox argue that this would be perceived as overspending by a future Conservative government and, as a consequence, other services would need to be cut back – these would be 'education, social work and health and aw that shit'. (245) This would further disadvantage an already marginalised Scottish working-class, and therefore Robertson and his colleagues are supportive of such measures.

Robertson equates the working-class with socialism, and therefore wishes to see them in as derelict a position as possible. Despite his working-class origins, Robertson perceives himself to have progressed to become a member of the middle-class. The folly of this viewpoint is clear when he is forced to leave the police force following his breakdown, and lacks the money or the connections to look after himself properly. The notion of true social mobility in a money-oriented society is satirised; once Robertson's money has run out, all his pretensions at being middle-class vanish. He needs the 'socialist' welfare state, but due to budget cuts, the state lacks the resources to help him.

Robertson is released straight back into the community from hospital, where he has been receiving treatment for his many mental and physical problems. He becomes the victim of the social care cuts that he and his colleagues have favoured, and rather than receiving any prolonged period of care, he turns to alcohol instead. He is actually offered a can of Tennents Super in the foyer of the hospital itself, by a 'jakey' whose presence seems to not just be tolerated, but encouraged. The 'jakey' takes the place of a nurse, and in lieu of proper aftercare, he offers strong lager.

Once he leaves hospital, Robertson is depicted as having little control of his actions as he succumbs to his mental illness and his alcoholism. In the latter stages of the novel, Robertson is actually portrayed in a much more sympathetic light, as he is the victim of social mechanisms rather than the aggressor who forces his authority onto other people. His social mobility is strictly linked to income, and as soon as he loses his regular source of money, he becomes a casualty of the system that he once promoted. This element of the plot implicitly promotes the merits of a strong public sector and welfare system, as the consequences of a weak system are severe, and even terminal in Robertson's case. *Filth* reflects the high level of support for the large state in Scotland, and given the opposition that nationalists have to budget cuts and the small state promoted by successive British governments, this once again appears nationalistic, although it is most strongly motivated by socialist ideals.

Within *Filth* there is the meting out of authorial justice, but there is also a warning that anyone can fall victim to the problems that affect society in Scotland, whatever their race, gender, ethnic background, or profession. In his weakened position, Bruce Robertson has no way of fighting back against the power of his alcohol abuse and mental illness. Once he becomes weak, he is of no use either to himself or to the institutions that he has served, and it is central to the novel's overall message that the final victim in *Filth* is Robertson himself. The pursuit of absolute power has corrupted him, and he is now as much on the losing side as any of those whom he once held power over.

Filth and Scottish politics

Bruce Robertson is symbolic of many different kinds of filth, including mental and physical corruption, sexual depravity, racial and sexual prejudice, and corrupt behaviour. *Filth* portrays the pursuit of power over his peers as the source of Robertson's corruption. The novel also depicts those who hold power in Scotland and the wider United Kingdom as fundamentally corrupted. Successive Conservative and Labour governments are portrayed in this way; the practices of Robertson and his colleagues are presented as having emerged during the Thatcher era, and continued largely unchallenged through the Major premiership.

At the time that the novel was published, in September 1998, New Labour's Tony Blair had been Prime Minister for over a year; the novel is sceptical about the possibility of change under Blair, with one of the corrupt policemen praising Blair for getting 'rid of that unions and socialism nonsense in the Labour Party'. (246) *Filth* suggests that there is little difference between the ideology and methods used by the Conservative party, and those of New Labour. Both are portrayed as neo-liberal, right-wing parties, and the policemen depicted in *Filth* do not fear that the Blair

government will make any serious attempt to change their practices – indeed, they celebrate the fact that the advent of a Labour government has brought about no serious crackdown on the corruption, racism, sectarianism, sexism, and homophobia that the novel suggests became endemic in the Scottish police force during the 1980s. *Filth* suggests that some attempts were made to challenge corruption during the 1990s, but these are not taken seriously by most of the senior policemen depicted in the novel, who feel able to satirise and disrupt the equal opportunities and racial awareness courses that they are sent on. This means that the courses have a very limited impact. Blair's government are depicted as no more likely to challenge corruption and bigotry than their predecessors were, and New Labour is depicted as having right-wing, neo-liberal ideologies at its core.

A key lesson of *Filth* is that the election of a socialist government would greatly improve social conditions in Scotland (and the wider United Kingdom). The novel is not directly nationalist, and the ideology discussed within it is largely sympathetic to socialism. However, as Scottish nationalism has become associated with left-wing policies regarding social justice and collective responsibility, a link can be made between Scottish nationalism and socialism. In many ways, *Filth* is the precursor to the more strident Scottish nationalism of Welsh's later career, and many of the reasons for the growth of nationalism in Scotland during the 1980s and 1990s are discussed in the novel, including the strong opposition to Thatcherism and neo-liberalism that largely defined Scottish public opinion in the period examined.

Welsh has consistently attacked the actions of Margaret Thatcher and her government, as can be seen in a number of his novels, including *Trainspotting* (1994) and *Skagboys* (2012). The latter novel in particular contains a coruscating denunciation of the Thatcher government's health, justice, and employment policies. Welsh's distaste for neo-liberalism can also be seen in essays such as 'Sneers and Self-loathing on the Scottish campaign trail',¹⁹ which is supportive of Scottish nationalism, and contrasts its core values to those of British governments since 1979. Contemporary Scottish nationalism is to a large degree defined by its opposition to Thatcherism and the neoliberal government policy that it has inspired, and Welsh's work often reflects this. Even though *Filth* may not have initially been planned as a nationalist text, in the light of Welsh's own growing nationalism, and the continued rise of Scottish nationalism as a cultural and political movement, it can certainly be read as one by a contemporary audience.

The novel was published one year before the devolved Scottish parliament re-opened for business, and devolution is not discussed as a serious factor that may challenge corrupt practices in Scottish state institutions. Despite the prospect of certain responsibilities being devolved to the Scottish government, ultimately power over the most important issues of policy was (and remains) Westminster's, and so the chances of devolution having a serious effect upon corrupt practices is dismissed. This is not just the case in *Filth*, but also in Welsh's later work, including *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (2007), which suggests that due to it lacking power over many of the most important policies that affect Scotland, the nation has a 'toytown parliament'.²⁰

Conclusion

In *Filth* Welsh depicts 1979-1998 as a period in which corruption flourished and become the norm. Ultimately, responsibility for this lies with right-wing, neo-liberal governments, and also with those who support their aims and ideology. The novel's support for socialism is clear, and Welsh promotes collectivist governance and a strong, effective welfare state and public sector, as opposed to the small state favoured by successive British governments. This also appears nationalist, as many of the values promoted by Welsh have come to define political Scottish nationalism. The actions of the British state during the period that the novel discusses are described as 'filthy', and ultimately this promotes the idea that a socialist and nationalist alternative may provide more effective and sympathetic governance in Scotland.

Governmental promotion of filthy policies regarding alcohol is presented as a major cause of social harm, but also as inevitable in a society that values the pursuit of absolute power over the pursuit of policies which are for the common good. The harm that alcoholism is causing within Scotland is also presented as a consequence of the British government's wilful ignorance of problems that affect Scotland's working class. Neo-liberal policies are described as 'filthy' in terms of their motivations and also in their effects, both upon society in general and upon *Filth's* main protagonist, Bruce Robertson, in specific. Robertson's adulation of Margaret Thatcher is depicted as a cause of harm in itself, because he aims to replicate what he perceives to be her policy of gaining as much personal power as possible.

As a consequence of his need for power, Robertson's relations with other people deteriorate rapidly. His use of women for sex leads to his wife leaving him, and his problems with hygiene stem from this. His physical health is affected by his poor diet and his inability to complete any domestic task, and also by his use of prostitutes. Alcohol and cocaine also affect his physical and mental condition; his immune system is weakened, and his paranoia and delusional behaviour are exacerbated by the comedowns and hangovers that he experiences. He contracts a tapeworm which consumes the nutrients that his body needs. Ironically for a 'filthy' organism that has corrupted Robertson's body, the tapeworm has relatively pure motivations, at least in comparison to Robertson himself. Its desire to better itself mentally, and develop alongside other similar organisms, is in contrast to Robertson's selfish quest for power over other people.

Robertson is symbolic of corruption within Scottish institutions, and his attitude towards groups who are not white, male, Protestant, and Unionist is depicted as the norm within Scotland's police forces. The portrayal of hardline Unionism as fundamentally corrupt adds to the sense that *Filth* can be read as a promotion of Scottish nationalism. Robertson is racist, sexist, homophobic, and also holds strong anti-Catholic opinions, and this is presented as endemic within his particular group. His membership of the Freemasons allows these beliefs to flourish in a supportive atmosphere. The Freemasons are depicted as a corrupting influence in Scottish life, with state institutions dominated by the movement's members. This leads to corruption and the reproduction of harmful opinions and attitudes within those institutions. The polysemy of filth in Welsh's novel highlights the links between personal, societal, and political corruption in the 1980s and 90s, and has considerable implications for current political debates in Scotland.

Kingston University

Notes

- 1 Irvine Welsh, in Ian Peddie 'Speaking Welsh: Irvine Welsh in Conversation', *Scottish Studies Review* 8, 1 (2007), p.136
- 2 Irvine Welsh, *Filth* (London: Jonathan Cape 1998), p.171
- 3 David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London: Routledge 1992), p.172
- 4 Jonathan Hearn, *Claiming Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon 2000), p.3
- 5 David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation*, p.173
- 6 Grant Farred, 'Wankerdom: Trainspotting as a Rejection of the Postcolonial?', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103, 1 (2004), p.222
- 7 Ronald Kowalski, "'Cry for Us, Argentina": Sport and National Identity in late twentieth-century Scotland' in Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter (eds.) *Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World* (London: Routledge 2004), p.74
- 8 Irvine Welsh, in Peddie, 'Speaking Welsh: Irvine Welsh in Conversation', p.133
- 9 Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Vintage 1999), p.315
- 10 Murray Pittock, *The Road to Independence? Scotland Since the Sixties* (London: Reaktion Books 2008), p.78
- 11 Ibid, p.41
- 12 Graham Walker's (2001) paper 'Identity Questions in Contemporary Scotland: Faith, Football and Future Prospects' (*Contemporary British History* 15 (1) pp.41-60) uses the terms Protestantism and Unionism interchangeably, and the paper is by no means alone in doing so. The link between the two movements has become so close that the two are often seen as elements of the same overall worldview.
- 13 Patrick Reilly, 'Kicking with the left foot: being Catholic in Scotland' in *Scotland's Shame: Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*, ed. by T.M. Devine (Edinburgh: Mainstream 2000), p.34
- 14 James McMillan, 'Scotland's Shame' in *Scotland's Shame: Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*, ed. by T.M. Devine (Edinburgh: Mainstream 2000), p.14
- 15 Joseph M. Bradley, 'Sport and the Contestation of Cultural and Ethnic Identities in Scottish Society', in *Immigrants and Minorities*, 17, 1 (1998), p.142
- 16 In 2010, the head of Scotland's football referees, Hugh Dallas, was dismissed from his post for sending an email containing a sectarian joke about the Pope. The Catholic Church in Scotland demanded his removal, alongside that of five other employees at the Scottish Football Association (BBC Sport, 27th November 2010). This incident certainly gives some credence to the allegations made by MacMillan, and is something of an echo of the fictional account in *Filth*.
- 17 Sean O'Hagan, 'Irvine Welsh: I'd rather look at the hills than get wasted', in *The Observer* 4th December 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/dec/04/fiction.irvinewelsh>> (Accessed 6th February 2013)
- 18 Decca Aitkenhead, 'Irvine Welsh: I'm the same kind of writer as I am a drinker. I'm a binger', in *The Guardian* 15th April 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/apr/15/irvine-welsh-writer-trainspotting-skagboys>> (Accessed 6th February 2013)
- 19 Irvine Welsh, 'Sneers and Self-loathing on the Scottish campaign trail' in *Financial Times* 4th May 2007.
- 20 Irvine Welsh, *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (London: Vintage 2007), p.379

Works Cited

- Aitkenhead, Decca, 'Irvine Welsh: "I'm the same kind of writer as I am a drinker. I'm a binger"' in *The Guardian* 15th April 2012. Online.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/apr/15/irvine-welsh-writer-trainspotting-skagboys>> (Accessed 6th February 2013)

-
- BBC Sport, 'Referees chief Hugh Dallas is sacked by the SFA', on *BBC Sport* 27th November 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/scot_prem/9230531.stm (Accessed 6th February 2013)
- Bradley, Joseph M, 'Sport and the Contestation of Cultural and Ethnic Identities in Scottish Society', in *Immigrants and Minorities* 17 (1998), pp.127-150
- Farred, Grant, 'Wankerdom: Trainspotting as a Rejection of the Postcolonial?', in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103, 1 (2004) pp. 215-226
- Hearn, Jonathan, *Claiming Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon 2000)
- Kowalski, Ronald, "'Cry for Us, Argentina": Sport and National Identity in late twentieth-century Scotland' in *Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World*, ed. by Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter (London: Routledge 2004) pp.69-87
- MacMillan, James, 'Scotland's Shame' in *Scotland's shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*, ed. by T. M. Devine (Edinburgh: Mainstream 2000) pp.13-24
- McCrone, David. *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London: Routledge 1992)
- O'Hagan, Sean, 'Irvine Welsh: I'd rather look at the hills than get wasted' in *The Observer* 4th December 2005. Online. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/dec/04/fiction.irvinewelsh> (Accessed 6th February 2013)
- Peddie, Ian, 'Speaking Welsh: Irvine Welsh in Conversation', in *Scottish Studies Review*, 8, 1 (2007) pp.130-139
- Pittock, Murray, *The Road to Independence? Scotland Since the Sixties* (London: Reaktion Books 2008)
- Reilly, Patrick, 'Kicking with the left foot: being Catholic in Scotland' in *Scotland's shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*, ed. by T. M. Devine (Edinburgh: Mainstream 2000) pp.29-40
- Walker, Graham, 'Identity Questions in Contemporary Scotland: Faith, Football and Future Prospects', in *Contemporary British History* 15, 1 (2001) pp.41-60
- Welsh, Irvine, *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (London: Vintage 2007)
- *Filth* (London: Jonathan Cape 1998)
- *Porno* (London: Vintage 2003)
- *Skagboys* (London: Jonathan Cape 2012)
- 'Sneers and Self-loathing on the Scottish campaign trail' in *Financial Times* 4th May 2007. Online. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/23023f9e-fa6b-11db-8bd0-000b5df10621.html#axzz2FhfjIb5a> (Accessed 6th February 2013)
- *Trainspotting* (London: Vintage 1994)