international journal of scottish literature
www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk
ISSN 1751-2808

ISSUE FOUR, SPRING/SUMMER 2008

Occasional Paper: 'But in Glasgow, There are Plantains'

Kei Miller

A little more than 29 years ago I was born in Jamaica. Barring a 3 month fellowship spent last year at the University of Iowa, and 12 months of post-graduate work in England in 2005, the Caribbean had been my home – the place where my mail was delivered – the place where all sounds had and continue to make immediate sense, the place where I never calibrate my accent to make it understood. For those 29 years, I lived in Hope Pastures, a suburb on the outskirts of Kingston. I lived with my parents. I have found that this can be a slightly curious fact to people who live in more developed countries, that at my age I had not yet moved out. It didn't seem so curious to me in Jamaica where the economy doesn't readily give freedom and keys and concrete and windows to young people. But while the exact age for the possibility of fight from nests might differ from culture to culture, its inevitability is consistent, and so as I approach thirty, an urgency had indeed been growing to leave (not necessarily Jamaica), just to create a home that was my own. The big problem was this: I was a writer; I had decided that anything I did had to be connected to writing in some way. In other words, I had decided to be poor.

Three years ago my books up and left me. They had also been in search of their own homes and had little success finding one in the Caribbean though they had tried. Finally, without the need to pay huge fees or join long queues to get the required visa, they moved, one by one, from a computer where they were composed in Hope Pastures, to the United Kingdom. My first poetry collection went to Heaventree Press in Coventry, my short stories went to Macmillan in Oxford, my second poetry collection moved up North to Manchester where Carcanet gave it shelter, and my novel made its home in London with Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Perhaps it was always inevitable that I would follow my work across the ocean, to be closer to them, and so 6 months ago [December 2007], I moved here, to Scotland, to Glasgow.

I map out that timeline to make the simple point that this is all new to me. I know that in me and my biography there is now an undeniable Scottish-Caribbean Connection. I know that I'm looking at Glasgow and understanding it through Caribbean eyes, but I'm not sure the few observations

I've made in six months can come with any real depth or profundity. This is necessarily an essay of first impressions.

My friends became latterly excited that I was moving to Glasgow. When news of the attempted bombing at the airport exploded onto International news, they all called, not so much concerned as they were impressed that I was moving to a city important enough to be the target of terrorists. It seemed to them then that Glasgow, and they apologized for not having known it before, was right up there with New York and London, a bustling metropolitan, a centre of all things new and forward and diverse. I must admit, even my excitement grew. And even now, when anyone in the UK finds out that I'm living in Glasgow, they say 'wow – that's a city with quite the buzz about it, isn't it?'

I'm not sure how to answer that very leading question anymore – how to say, yes and no. You see, I realize I've gotten into the habit of demanding of big and growing cities that they be multi-everything. Multi-cultural, multi-lingual. That they be diverse in economy and the peoples that populate it. Almost, it seems to me now, they be everything but themselves. Perhaps we feel rightly that variety is a sign of health and a multiplicity of ideas. And Glasgow is diverse. The staunch testimonies of people who have lived there for many more years and decades than my own paltry six months, will attest to that. There are Indian restaurants, Asian supermarkets and African communities. In 1999 Glasgow became UK's first official Dispersal City, helping to take some of the overflow of Refugees and Asylum seekers that had been crowding London. So from Vietnamese Boat people, to Bosnians, to Iraqis, Scotland as a whole and Glasgow in particular is more diverse than it has ever been.

'Wow, you live in Glasgow' the people say, 'that's a city with quite the buzz about it, isn't it?'

Yes, is all I say now. And to myself I think further thoughts. I think Glasgow is not like New York or London where I know I can always find a place because in New York are several worlds, and in London there are several worlds, and several countries, a few of which I can belong to. In Glasgow, there is only Glasgow. It is a city which will never stop being itself. You must learn to fit into that city, which doesn't mean you're not welcome. I've had to think, really critically, what it means when I've called back home and said to my inquiring friends, that Glasgow is great, it's fantastic, it's just that it's not exactly the most diverse city in the world. And I realize that the Other doesn't really look for diversity – he is only looking for himself. And in the sudden swell of immigrants and languages, I do not hear the sounds that always make sense to me. Even in the city centre, where on some days on Buchanan Street a black man strums a guitar, and sings reggae songs so convincingly you sometimes, for just a second, think it's a Bob Marley CD

playing – in those spaces where his voices reveals, not the singer who he obviously has adored and mimicked his whole life, but himself, then I realize he isn't from my part of the world at all.

I will tell you something now – and you must not laugh – but my very first impression of Glasgow was of a place that was full of the sun. I had come last year, for an interview at the University, and the day had been uncharacteristically warm. Students were lounged out in the grass, many of them shirtless, throwing Frisbees and eating icecream. As the man who would eventually become my Head of Department walked me across the lawn, he tried to sell the university to me and said, pointing at the sun and the people basking in it – 'Look Kei, this is what Heaven will be like.'

I looked at all the students and frowned. 'So it's true then, sir. There really are no black people in heaven.'

For the first time in my life, I am I living in a place of my own choosing, paying my own rent, buying my own furniture, making my own home. I am from the Caribbean, but I am living In Glasgow, and for this you must say a kind of mantra to survive. Mine goes like this:

In Glasgow my flat is red and orange and green; people who enter say, with delight, what bright Caribbean colours! They are Ikea colours – but it's true, I have been trying to make the place warm with more than just the heat from Scottish Gas. I've been trying to conjure up an Island in that tiny flat. But I also have orange and green bamboo sticks stuck behind the couch, not because they fit into the colour scheme, or because I think this is an aesthetically pleasing choice, but because my mother would be confused by it – her eyes falling glumly onto the protruding sticks, she would say, 'what the hell is that!?' – and this kind of foreignness makes the space my own. There is for every immigrant a complex interaction and negotiation between notions of local and foreign. We might try, of course, to infuse our new homes in a foreign land with a 'local' aesthetic – a sense of what is beautiful that was developed somewhere else far away – from our own 'locals'. But there are parts of ourselves – the ways in which we were always other, in that other place, that can now find the space to flourish – it is our own 'foreignness', a foreignness that was always local to our hearts, that is now growing. I'm perhaps just warning myself to be careful of these categories of foreign and local, Scottish and the Caribbean, when the nature of the individual in his travels, whether actual or virtual, whether across the world or across the road, is to see things, borrow, reject and revise himself and his tastes. What is happening to me in Scotland, as I establish home, is what is happening to everyone in this world everyday – we are still and always becoming ourselves.

In Glasgow you can be sure to see fat women on the streets in small shirts, the equators of their stomachs displayed proudly and they look on you with an attitude that says simply, 'what? What?'

and I smile because I think I've known these women my whole life, and I'm happy I didn't leave them behind in the Caribbean. In Glasgow while you are certain to always see the girth of women, you cannot always see the skies, or perhaps I should say, you cannot always see the sky's blueness. What a miracle it is when that happens. You appreciate it all the more because of how carefully blue is rationed. Whenever they hear my accent in Glasgow, the taxi men tell me what must be a shared joke in this country – they say, son if you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes. In Glasgow, you cannot always see the mountains – but they are there, the Highlands rise magnificently to the north of the city. And the fact of mountains reminds me of the Caribbean I've known. The popular Haitian proverb goes, 'behind the mountains are more mountains' which speaks of course to the never ending of trials some people have had to go through for generations - but for me it was always a simple description of the landscape of the Greater Antilles, so that I can remember vividly as a child visiting the United States, and seeing for the first time, an uninterrupted horizon on every side, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, afraid, exposed, knowing then that I'd always need mountains to hem me in.

Far, far south of Glasgow is a big city called London. There, I do not stop people on the street to ask for directions any more. I did once, and it made me depressed. I was depressed by how straight people held their heads, and how they pretended they didn't hear me as if I was some kind of street beggar. To the North of London, coming back up to Glasgow is another city called Manchester where I lived for a year and fell deeply in love with the city, because at a small moment of confusion at a traffic light, lifting my head to search for a road sign to remind myself which street I was on, two old white women reached up and they touched my hands and asked 'Are you alright, luv?' and the fact that they called me love, a black man who they'd never met, means that I will always hold that city in my heart. But Glasgow managed to top even that. It was probably the alcohol and the sense of conviviality that New Year's Day brings to the Scottish People, but that was my first day in Glasgow, and walking from Byres Road back to Kelvinbridge where my flat was, I had never been hugged by so many strangers in my life – and frankly, I do not care if they were all drunk, I've decided to accept every hug freely given on that night as an 'Aye, welcome, we're quite happy to have you here.'

In Glasgow I am learning how to cook the Caribbean. It is not really that some sudden wave of homesickness has come over me, or that I never cooked before. I've always loved cooking but in the Caribbean I had never tried to cook mackerel rundown, or gungo peas soup, or escoveitch fish, partly because so many people could do it better than I could ever even attempt. In Scotland the Caribbean becomes a cuisine that I can master – and as I said before, I find this is often the case, that we can become our home-selves most in places away from that home – like my middle class Jamaican friends who having migrated to places in the United States like Ohio found the sudden ability to speak a Caribbean dialect they had never dared speak in their very proper

houses, or even like the man I met years ago in Toronto, who had lived there for over twenty years, dismissed the possibility of ever going back to Jamaica, 'Me' he said, 'Mi naah guh back deh? No sah! Mi naah tell nuh lie. Mi hate Jamaica, Mi bitter it. Me'd a nevah guh back!' And in a voice that had firmly rooted itself in a country, he was declaring his exile from it. Impossible, I thought, you've already taken the island with you.

So it is, in my current cooking and the smells that come from my kitchen, I am self-identifying with the Caribbean – but also, it must be said immediately, with Scotland. You see, it is not enough to learn how to make red peas soup – if you are good, you must make it your own, with your own special touch. I am learning to cook the Caribbean with Scottish ingredients, and dare I say, I'm becoming good at it. I think I now prefer my Johnny cakes to anything served at that house in Hope Pastures – something about the self-rising flour from Lidl, the sprinkle of fine cornmeal from the delicatessen on Great Western Road, all these combine to make a fried dumpling so much softer and lighter and sweeter than the version my mother made. When I tell my mother the things I've been making, she says that I am becoming stoosh – because sometimes I can't find the exact things I need so I make do. My first attempt at escoveitch fish, I couldn't find the tiny sprats that we usually deep-fry so I confessed to my mother that I had discovered instead, escoveitch salmon. I told her that curried lamb tastes every bit as good as curried goat – and without the hassle of bones. I have found that my plantain tarts baked in a kind of muffin cup, with amoretta liqueur mixed into the filling and shredded coconut covering the top tastes better than any plantain tart I have had back home. And when I tell my mother this, she asks, 'are there really plantains in Glasgow?'

In Glasgow it is cold. In Glasgow it rains a lot. In Glasgow, when I moved, the trees were like skeletons. In Glasgow the sounds have not begun to pour gently in my ears, rather, they bang hard against the side of my head. But in Glasgow, mother, there are plantains. And it is these simple things. Plantains more consistently than you find them in Jamaica – as if they import them from a place untouched by hurricanes. In Glasgow, I buy plantains from a little shop on Great Western Road called Solly's, and there you can also find scotch bonnet peppers, which I'd never reflected on before – these peppers I've always thought of as Jamaican peppers, but which had obviously reminded someone long time ago, about something he saw in Scotland. These connections go both ways! Mother, at Solly's you can buy fresh goat meat, and packets of Maggie soup; you can get tinned callaloo and tinned ackee, and the fact of these items, these traces of the Caribbean in Scotland, makes me confident there must be others of us here – in Scotland, in Glasgow, even in the West End. I haven't met them yet. Solly's seems to cater to a mainly African clientele. But one day I will go there and linger for a long while, I will stand all day by the shelf where the tinned ackees are kept, and finally when a young woman or man comes in and reaches for a tin, asking the proprietor, 'Uncle– how much yu selling de ackee dem for?' then,

I will introduce myself, one immigrant from the Caribbean to another 'hey, how you been finding it here?'