INTERVIEW

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"Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire": An Interview with Laura Hird[1]

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In 1996 Kevin Williamson, editor at Rebel Inc., an imprint of Canongate Books, published *Children of Albion Rovers*, a collection of novellas written by brilliant emerging young writers from the 1990s Scottish literary scene. Laura Hird's first published story literally put her face—on the cover—and her name among a group of male authors in this collection, where her story "The Dilating Pupil" (1996: 135-170) appeared alongside the works of Alan Warner, Irvine Welsh, Gordon Legge, Paul Reekie and James Meek. This book would launch Hird's career as a writer and she would reappear as an "Original Rover" in Williamson's 1998 anthology *Rovers Return.* Her first collection of short stories *Nail and Other Stories* (1997) and her novel *Born Free* (1999) roared originality and offered a daring vision of the city of Edinburgh; and her latest collection *Hope and Other Urban Tales* (2006) put the cherry on top with uncomfortably true personal stories about queer Scots as part of her urban observations.

Laura Hird was born in Edinburgh in 1966 and her whole life has been linked to the arts and the city of Edinburgh: her mother was a local actress, which ensured that Hird grew up surrounded by colourful characters in the Scottish capital, where she has lived most of her life. In 1988 she moved to London to do a BA in Studies in Contemporary Writing at Middlesex Polytechnic, graduating with an Honours Degree in 1991, and in 1997 she received a Scottish Arts Council Writer's Bursary. Hird is a Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund Bridge, which she joined in 2015 and became coordinator of in 2017. She also contributes to the project's aim of helping Scottish students in their academic writing through workshops. Since 1999, she has participated in many Arvon Foundation courses as a tutor and worked with mental health groups in secondary schools and colleges throughout the UK.

Nail and Other Stories was short-listed for the Saltire Society Literary Awards in the category of Scottish First Book of the Year (1998). It thus proved to be an extraordinary debut collection, and reviewers at the time (such as those at *The Times*), although directly comparing her with Welsh, were already focusing attention on her distinctive voice, some considering that it surpassed his. Full of morbid humour and painfully honest descriptions, Hird's stories deal with power relationships and conflicting family values. Her fiction always offers her unique view on the city of her birth and its people which is not always pleasant, yet always phenomenal. For instance, in "Imaginary Friends" (1997: 35-46), a little girl describes, through her innocent eyes, encounters with her paedophile piano teacher; "The Last Supper" (1997: 47-67) tells the tale of a flat-tenant and his revenge on his landlord by setting the place on fire; in "The Hard Sell" (1997: 69-75), Lizzie has sex in the bushes near a pub with a man from her evening class who she finds "vaguely amusing in an irritating sort of way" and who was "so thoroughly infatuated with himself" (1997: 69); while the protagonist in "There Was a Soldier" (1997: 189-195) enjoys the smell of the burning female corpse he has previously sexually assaulted, as it reminds him of being on tour in Londonderry with his battalion. Hird's stories are mainly set Edinburgh and, through them, she offers her unparalleled perspective on the beauty of some of the city's hidden locations, as can be clearly seen in "I Am Gone" (1997: 167-188) and "Routes" (1997: 77-99).

Hird's first and only novel to date, *Born Free*, was nominated for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 1999 and the Whitbread First Novel Award in 2000. It is narrated from the point of view of each of the four members of a dysfunctional family, all of them victims of their own personal struggles: Angie, an alcoholic mother; Vic, a depressed father; and Joni and Jake, two teenage siblings who tend to dramatise most aspects of their lives. Life is seen through the eyes of violent, despondent characters who have, at the same time, vivid, strong personalities, especially the various women who feature. Hird presents this through a reversal of gender expectations whereby both the mother and the daughter interact with men only for their own personal

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and sexual satisfaction. Moreover, Joni's constant anger towards the male characters indicates her reaction against being defined by men. Angie, Joni, Vic and Jake feel imprisoned in their home and struggle to find an escape. It is through the exploration of these attempts at escaping that Hird displays her talent for destroying boundaries and creating new places of comfort in rather unorthodox spaces. *Born Free* is a novel about spatial transgression, as Hird challenges the limits between public and private, which become obscured in the spaces presented in the novel and, also, in Hird's whole oeuvre.

Hope and Other Urban Tales established Hird's position as a Scottish woman writer who has conquered a male-dominated literary world. Indeed, she is now considered to be one of the most widely acclaimed contemporary women short-story writers in Scotland (Lumsden 2000: 167). Not only has she provided talented representations of marginal voices which contribute to the reshaping of archetypes in Scottish literature, just as Irvine Welsh and others did in the late twentieth century, but she has also explored further and delved into gender issues, contesting binaries—male and female—and incorporating yet another aspect of academic focus, sexual difference. In fact, she had already introduced queer characters in the 1990s in the *Nail* story "I Am Gone", as she also did in her next collection in the stories "Hope" (2006: 1-67) and "Meat" (2006: 211-230). As such, Hird's fictional oeuvre offers a combination of national and gender identity issues, which are necessarily linked to the representation of space in general and the representation of the city of Edinburgh in particular.

Fearing that readers might assume Angie's character had been inspired by her real-life mother, June, Laura Hird dived into her next project, publishing a collection of letters from her departed mother, which she had sent to her while Laura was studying in London. Leaving her usual gritty narratives aside, *Dear Laura: Letters from a Mother to her Daughter* (2007) offers yet another insight to female voices, universal as only a mother-daughter relationship can be, but this time full of love, care and advice, contrasting starkly with *Born Free*'s characters. Combined with Laura's context-clarifying passages, June's letters narrate the worries of a mother whose child has left the nest, all throughout Laura's college years until her death in 1999—a period which her daughter describes lovingly. In her honest style, Hird portrays her younger life and relationships with the members of her family outspokenly, confessing her true, not-so-loving feelings towards them at times, presenting in this way the complex truth of family relationships all around the world. "1988: Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire" is the title of one of the chapters of the book, a phrase which represents her darkly funny style, which is undoubtedly inspired by her own life experiences.

Her most recent publication is "Spun", a historical-fictional narration for the collection *Protest: Stories of Resistance*, published by Comma Press (2017: 83-107). For eight years, she managed a non-profit international arts-related website which featured interviews, reviews, short fiction, poetry and other works by writers and artists who, she thought, were not being given the attention and recognition they deserved. Laura Hird generously accepted to be interviewed in June 2019 at Level's Café in Holyrood Road, during my research visit to the University of Edinburgh that year.

Clara Botamino: Your work is mostly set in the city of Edinburgh or locations that seem similar. Why did you choose to write the city? Did you feel that there was a reason why you had to focus on it?

LH: Because I know it so intimately from growing up and living here and through stories told by parents, grandparents, friends, natives, generations of locals. It is part of me. Why were so many novels set in London, Paris, New York? Somewhere else. The stories were always similar but unique to these places. I had taken for granted all the different parts and complexions I'd lived through, but they seemed in principle no different from other experiences written about. And because it was home, and it's like a character in itself. And also when it is written about—or back then, because it was a while ago that I wrote that book (*Born Free*)—our depictions of Edinburgh were all about the High Street and the Royal Mile and Greyfriars Bobby and that wasn't really my Edinburgh. Glasgow had an identity through Kelman, Gray, Owens. A more honest working-class story I could relate to. I wanted to read similar stories written in the city I lived in. So I wrote them. And it was so good to write about the place that I was born and that I was so familiar with.

CB: How often/to what extent do you use your own experiences as inspiration for your stories?

LH: Generally, it's something that you'd overhear. You pass a conversation that someone's having in the street and you just hear one line or two lines and you think, "what is that all about?" and "what led up to that and what's gonna happen now", and I sort of get a lot of my ideas like that, snippets of conversation or things that I pass and question: "what's the story behind that?" And another thing is just things I think are unfair that have happened to other people. What I do at the moment is helping students to work on their academic writing, and I do an exercise with them which is called "memories of an unfairness", and they have to think about something in the past, something they heard or happened to them, or something that happened that they read in the news or… And they need to write three reasons why it's unfair, then they need to write three reasons from the point of view of the perpetrator, justifying what they have done. It's a good exercise for creative writing, but also to help myself understand things, people's behaviour that I don't quite get. I try to put myself in their head.

CB: You create strong and fierce female characters and you have said before—in an interview for *The Barcelona Review* (Adams 2003)—that you have grown up surrounded by strong women. Does this refer to people you knew well or to literary/cultural figures who were an inspiration for you?

LH: I wrote these characters with no thought that they were strong, but on reflection they were. Fierce? I was reflecting myself at my worst. I was still naive as to what strength really meant. I guess the daughter in *Born Free* would resemble me in my teens and my character.

When I made that comment I meant my mum, grandmother, auntie, pretend auntie, piano teacher, teachers. They pushed, kept going, overcame life and death, overcame me. Women were seen as being weak, but they were not at all. They were strong because I never saw their weakness. They held it all together. The men went to work, brought the money (some of it), did what they were told, seemed dependent on the women. I did not grow up with women that men would hit or men that would hit women. The women, quietly and, on reflection, passive-aggressively, had the men under the thumb, other than the conventional cliché (especially in Scottish fiction and movies, the man was always a violent alcoholic, and it was such a cliché). The men seemed rather shy, reserved and depressive. My mom was lovely and my dad was totally devoted to me and my mom.

I didn't read books written by women for a long time. I expected them to be middle-class crap. I feel bad saying that now, but there is truth in that. I simply wasn't interested. It was the 1970s and early 1980s and it was just always the men that were put into the forefront and for the very reason that women didn't really have a voice. There were lots of female writers that I missed subsequently.

CB: On your official website (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/laura-hird), we can find an author statement section that reads: "I write to describe the world as I see it, in all its ugly beauty, minus the boundaries of taboo or political correctness". If we consider that in your novel *Born Free* space is transgressed because the characters abandon those practices deemed as "politically correct" (as you say), then any boundary (as in socially or conventionally established rules) that might have existed before disappears. What do you think about this?

LH: I think because these things have to be in there to be honest, we can't just brush things under the carpet, or if you're writing about them, to reflect what you think about them you have to express certain things. You said something in your article (Botamino González 2018) about when Angie brings her lover back in the house that wasn't home for her, but the action of bringing him in has made it home for her and she finally feels fond of the house. It really made me think. The other characters, they get that feeling somewhere else: the son finds it at the neighbours', he feels safe there, and the daughter just anywhere.

Home to a lot of people is where they would hope to say what they want to get off their chest but can't. For many Scottish people, this is still the pub. Friendship or kinship is down to who you let call you a cunt. The different things that "friends" can get away with saying that would be offensive to anyone else or anyone listening. Animal behaviour. Never discussed but happens naturally. Anyone coming in hearing it would think a fight was about to break out. And that's maybe the point. Marking out territory. We are here and always have been so we can say what we want. They escape their empty rooms. Or through drink, drugs, internet, gambling.

CB: Would you say that you present the city purposefully in a way that readers can imagine themselves walking through the streets, entering the shops, going to work, looking at buildings, etc?

LH: Definitely, parts of the city I'd never seen represented in the pre-packed picture of Edinburgh are parts I know best. The real bits. When I write scenes, I have the streets very much in my head. Like many communities all over the world, the centre of the community is and often has been the local shop. It is the only continuity left. I love the bridges, the Dean path, the railway paths, Gorgie, Morningside, Bruntsfield. I'm still fascinated by different parts of it, working in schools. The places I'd only ever gone by on a bus. The supermarkets and their staff and customers. There is just so much to see, not just the architecture but the people. Edinburgh is my childhood, it's my past, and so many things that aren't there anymore but I remember what they were like, maybe old railway paths and parts where you walk every day and you think, "I hope they don't change, it's the only bit left".

CB: Thinking about the relationship between space and emotions, is there a connection between the characters you write and the places where they are presented, as a way of associating a place with a feeling or with a specific meaning for that particular character?

LH: I still feel it myself when I walk in the Lawnmarket, because my mother grew up just above what is Deacon Brodie's Close, that's where her grannie stayed and I can still imagine it, certain things and bits of Edinburgh constantly trigger different bits of my life and I also like having them in my writing: it's like having part of my life in there. Also being aware that the city is changing. For example, at the time I was writing "Hope", they were building the Infirmary, but I wanted the old hospital to be in the story because I have lots of memories in there, of losing people there, and to sort of immortalise that part of my life. Places bring back everything I can remember, everything: childhood memories, bits of stories I've written about… Places don't

just have one memory, they have all the memories because they are really evocative and, even though things are changed, they are still there, just like the people who are not here anymore.

CB: You said in an interview for The Royal Literary Fund's "Writers Outloud" that you show the "good" side of unlikeable characters because you're interested in the "black and white part" of people. Would you consider this to be related to the tradition of the split self so often present in Scottish literature, the so-called Caledonian Antisyzygy?

LH: I guess I know Scottish people more than people from anywhere else, but I've always found it to be part of the psyche of the Scottish people I've known, this split personality, and it comes out as people who are extremely kind and charitable, but they dislike people also. It fascinates me what really goes on in their heads. Charity is an addiction and allows for excessive judgement. Ridiculously over-protective parents, people in slightly inflated jobs hooked on power, but they still are wonderful people. And then when someone is quite awful and unpleasant to other people, showing vulnerability about themselves. I thought everyone was like that. I'm not as fascinated by unlikeable characters these days because they are everywhere. The darkness that intrigued me was really there in some people in greater degrees than I even imagined, to the point of banality. People nowadays are deeply racist and deeply offensive, and I think "how can you still be like that?" And they sit on the periphery and comment on people's conversations with this offensive crap. Or someone who would come out with a really homophobic comment and you think "you seem quite well-balanced, what is your problem?"

CB: "I Am Gone" is a story narrated by a character who is essentially a ghost. Why?

LH: I feel like a ghost sometimes. I was playing around with writing a ghost story. So, imagining what people would do if I weren't there. I was in my first relationship with a woman and felt like a ghost in terms of her marriage, mutual friends and her lack of feeling. I was finally with a woman I was in love with, but couldn't tell anyone, even my best friend. She was straight but just experimenting, it seemed. I imagined how long it would take her to find another extra marital lover if I was dead. She already had by the time I finished the story. I also think of the idea of being watched. I do feel like a ghost sometimes and I also think of when someone has been killed in an accident, of the grief of those that are left and that they act in the oddest sort of way as well.

CB: I have read that you would like to spend more time with *Born Free*'s character Angie. Why particularly Angie? What is so special about her? Are you planning on writing her solo novel?

LH: She was good fun to write. She expressed then what an awful mother I feel I would have been and I enjoyed proving it. It was good to really indulge in my own self-loathing. When writing her chapters I felt I had an excuse to be awful, i.e., it was research. I find it liberating, it's good to get things out that way, it was perfect for me to express things. And I quite liked her, she wasn't a popular character in the book in terms of sympathy, but I liked her weaknesses. I wrote a draft of the sequel years ago and I do bits now and again. She is the truest depiction of a woman I've ever read, because it is me.

CB: Talking more about *Born Free*, what made you choose to narrate teenage voices? Did you find any difficulties when writing these voices?

LH: Not really. I enjoyed them too and I still remember my teens quite clearly. Your teens are so difficult and painful. I've felt sorry everyone has to go through them ever since I was one. As soon as sex kicks into your thoughts, or external pressures for it. Wanting to fit in and be liked but be different and hate everyone. I wanted to relive it, but not have to relive it. And, also, I wanted to add these things on top of it, like Angie being more immature than the children. The character's complete selfishness. Being lost but desperately looking for somewhere to belong, be accepted.

CB: Is there a particular reason why Victor works as a bus driver in the novel?

LH: To use a route as a narrative. A way of helping include all the bits and pieces of Edinburgh that you don't usually see. Yes, a bus goes through the centre of town but then it goes to Portobello, Wester Hailes, Sighthill, all these places that you never see. And just for observation because Vic is quite an insular character, and I liked using a lot of people getting on and off of the bus and what he sees from the bus. I don't drive and buses have always been ripe places for inspiration.

CB: In relation to this, in your story "Routes" the whole narration takes place in a moving bus making stops. Could you tell me a bit about this story? Why a bus going around Edinburgh? What inspired you to write it?

LH: I used to go about on buses to escape myself in my early teens. Just get on a bus on a circle route and back, to feel connected and see what people did at night. The 44 bus route was one of these. The story was a reflection of that. It was also a route that I used a lot subsequently and always used to think about what it meant to me when I was younger. The part with watching the girl not being allowed to get in the bus because she was 10 pence short happened to me, and I always wondered what happened after, if she got home safely that

night. Buses make me feel safe. I still love buses. I look at everyone on their phone with earplugs in. Going up Cairngorms on the train, my favourite part of the journey up to Dalwinnie, snow heavy on the mountains, deer outside, a girl on the phone.

CB: In reviews, you are often compared with male authors whose work also reflects life in Edinburgh. Especially Irvine Welsh. You all started to write and get published around the same time, and your first story was published in the collection edited by Kevin Williamson *Children of Albion Rovers* (1996) along with stories by Welsh, Alan Warner, Gordon Legge, James Meek and Paul Reekie. How do you feel about those reviews?

LH: At the time, it was useful that it was coincidental, probably the fact that I was writing right at that moment made it get more attention than it would have done ordinarily. At that particular time, the press was trying to lump everyone in together like we were all best friends. I knew these people, they were all very nice. But the press, when people are aspiring writers and write something, they say "who should I approach?", even to try and get an agent they have to say "my work is a cross between this and this". And that's all that people seemed interested in then and now. Surely, they should be looking for a piece of work that isn't like anything that's ever been before and not the one that they can pack and know on what shelf it's going to go before the book is even finished. Going to an early Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner, etc., reading inspired me to write a story and send it to Kevin Williamson. It almost gave permission that it was alright to write about the parts of Edinburgh that folk actually lived in and say what the hell you liked about it.

CB: Since your latest publication, the short story collection *Hope and Other Urban Stories* (2006), and your epistolary tribute to your late mother *Dear Laura* (2007), you've contributed to other collections like *Protest: Stories of Resistanc*e, which linked up writers and historians, published in 2017. What have you been working on since then?

LH: Bits and pieces I write just for myself or friends, which is what I wrote in the first place. Work and having to sell the house I grew up in takes up most of my thoughts. The publishing world has changed rather a lot since I last had a solo book out. I found the business of promoting books terrifying enough back then. I have 60,000 words of the sequel to *Born Free* that Canongate commissioned 22 years ago. I would like to escape and write, but I have a routine of self-destruction and comfort. They're still waiting for it, they're very patient! I wanted to write a short-story collection about bridges in Edinburgh, there are hundreds of them! They fascinate me.

CB: Anything that might be in the bookshops soon?

LH: I've gotten involved with another anthology by Comma Press. The *Protest* one linked up writers and historians, this one is about horror stories and different kinds of fear, so they teamed me up with a psychologist.

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