

# Terminal

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**Gordon Munro** on a subject that is close to his heart, mind you, there are a lot of subjects close to his heart for he has a very big heart

**N**o other book is needed now. Choose Life. Chose Leith. *Trainspotting on Location* is the book that lets others know what locals knew when they first read the book: "I know these people; I remember hearing that story in Marinello's after the game; I lived in that street." And you have to admire a book that has a glossary with a description of the well-known local graffiti YLT. Tim Bell 'gets' the dynamic that made *Trainspotting* a publishing then a social phenomenon in the 1990s and as *T2 Trainspotting* showed last year into this century too. That dynamic he realises is "...how much Welsh had spliced geography and history into his fiction."

It was that technique that led to the book being a word of mouth phenomenon, then a play a year later in Glasgow, then a film released within 3 years of the book hitting the shelves. Getting that dynamic right is why the film was criticised for largely being filmed in Glasgow whilst the follow up *T2* was largely filmed in Edinburgh. Location was key hence the title of the book.

Brilliantly he starts with a précis of Leith Central Station. A potted history of what could've been the equivalent of Grand Central Station, built when Leith was independent from Edinburgh in a style that was a declaration of intent. Now merely a memory and some rather brilliant photographs, its demise is dealt with here bringing it to its last role as a central motif for the book and the stories it contains. You can still get a sense of the grandeur of it in the Central Bar which has tiling and woodwork that is easily a match for the Cafe Royal uptown but barely rates a mention from bar buffs, despite its frequent appearances in the book and starring role in *T2*. It can be lively but that is also part of its charm. This book gives you many reasons to visit and, as it does throughout, provides

handy page reference numbers so that you can prepare yourself before entering a unique establishment.

Tim gets the episodic layout of *Trainspotting* and even breaks it down into components taking in the original book (first generation) and the prequel *Skagboys* and sequel *Porno* (the second generation). It's clearly done from a close reading of Welsh's books that puts University lecturers who purport to teach students about his work to shame. There are even diagrams to help draw links.

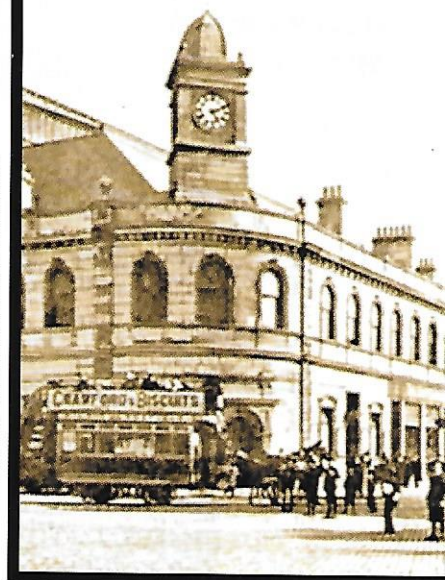
He is incredulous that no-one has taken seriously Irvine's claims in early interviews for *Trainspotting* that music was a big influence on the writing and claims that the structure of the book is like a DJ set - although I think it's more like a pile of singles on a Dansette. Music is still a main motivator for Irvine's work and his pleasure at getting a Clash tune onto the soundtrack for *T2*, *White Man in Hammersmith Palais*, backs up Tim's claim.

But the real star of this book is Leith itself. It's history is part of the hidden backdrop of the book, one local readers knew so the chapters here give a quick 'in' to Leith's period of independence from Edinburgh 1833-1920; including its sectarian history and how it mingles with key characters such as Spud or when Renton whistles *The Foggy Dew* at his brother Billy's funeral to the annoyance of his soldier colleagues; to its role as the pre-eminent port in Scotland for centuries and its 20th century demise. (Interestingly Leith is now the port for the bulk of Scotland's exports and that of choice for cruise tourism so it's on the rise again but not as a major employer or builder of boats.)

Tellingly, the chapter on Begbie links his psychosis to the violence done to Leith. This violence was endemic as police deployed the "he slipped on the



It was an invite to see a preview of *Trainspotting* the play at the Traverse that made agencies realise that working together could help tackle the problem



slippery step your honour" defence for officers over zealous in meting out retribution to those who, like Begbie, were violent in the home. This violence and the cynicism of Sick Boy is compared to the demolition of the Kirkgate, the loss of Leith Hospital and the endemic poverty and slum housing in Leith.

Despite the efforts of good people like Councillor John Crichton who knew the slums had to go and whose trepidation about what replaced it was founded in part on the loss of community spirit, what is now called *social capital*, was realised in ways not envisaged by planners, the council, or the people themselves. This anger rises in chapter eleven as some of the anger of the schemes and building failures such as Grampian, Cairngorm and Fort House or the Varicose Veins flats comes out in the quotes chosen. It's a telling analogy and one that will resonate with a lot of Leithers and the Leith diaspora.

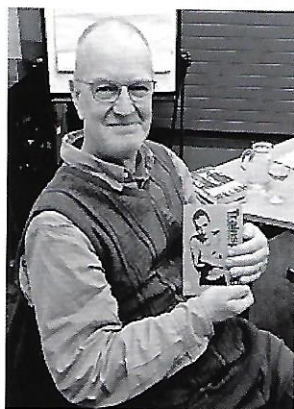
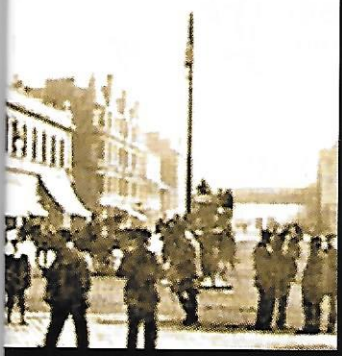
Forced emigration from Leith to what rapidly became inadequate housing in Granton and Muirhouse was a crucial component of what happened next. Which was heroin on a large scale, in Leith and its surrounding areas.



LL'S TRAINSPOTTING TOUR  
 'Top Tour'  
 SUNDAY TIMES  
 'A Vibrant Event'  
 EDINBURGH UNESCO  
 CITY OF LITERATURE

ose Life.  
 ose Leith.  
 M BELL

Trainspotting  
 on Location



Giving a quick potted history of heroin the book then details how in 1974 a local crook driving a brand new red jaguar led to suspicion after discovering it was his property leading to a subsequent arrest for drug dealing. Serious quantities of hard drugs began to arrive via ports and as part payment to street prostitutes. The scene changed from one based on the hippy lifestyle to becoming a commodity with a real street value bringing hard quick profits.

There were other factors at play here too with a potent combination of Edinburgh's scene preferring needle use sharing, street prostitution and sheer quantity, leading to a Muirhouse GP reporting in 1985 that 51% of his sampled 164 intravenous drug abusers were HIV positive. He emphasised that the problem he had identified had personal, social and medical elements and that the drug scene should not just be considered as a law-enforcement matter.

It took a while for that message to get through and quite a few lurid headlines, documentaries, deaths and small courageous interventions from the community but Choose Life. Chose Leith. Trainspotting on Location relates how it was an invite to see a preview of the Traverse production of Trainspotting the play that made agencies realise afterwards that working together could help tackle the problem. Not bad for what the author called a "scabby wee book."

The book even has new things to say about the film. The chapters on it provide insight into the structure, characters, composition and music that made it the phenomenon it became, giving the fiction an appeal that lives on from Tim's Trainspotting tours to frequent revivals of the play on different continents to sales that only local author JK Rowling can beat.

The understated style of the author gently persuades the reader of the literary merits of the work and its various interpretations but also how it reflected the reality of its locations, which are an unacknowledged character ever present in the book. But this style is at its most effective in the postscript where he states:

"It is part of the thesis of this book that problematic drug use is a health and social inequality issue, and the associated stigma is due in large part to the criminalisation of the substances. The collision between intravenous drug injecting and HIV in Muirhouse was a collision waiting to happen. If we keep focusing on a deficit model we will keep getting the same results. Education, prevention and harm reduction, along with the creation of a more equitable society, are more important than ever."

This book shows how Trainspotting, a deliberately transgressive piece of work, can help inform how we work for that change. Irvine Welsh has found the Boswell for his Johnson. ■

► **Info:** Choose Life. Chose Leith. Trainspotting on Location, Tim Bell, Luath Press, £14.99

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 LEITH 2018

FRIDAY 23RD NOVEMBER

THE CORAL

Kyle Falconer

TOM CLARKE - (THE ENEMY) - CHRIS HELME - (THE SEAHORSES)  
 MIRACLE GLASS COMPANY - RITUALS - BANTER THEIFS - TH1VES  
 THE RAH'S - NICK SHANE - ADULLBOY

SATURDAY 24TH NOVEMBER

JAKE BUGG

solo acoustic

THE SNUTS

TWISTED WHEEL

VIDA - BLACK CAT BONE - LUKE LA VOLPE - LOGAN'S CLOSE  
 BROWNBEAR - BILLY MITCHELL - 100 FABLES - ROOT SYSTEM - SHAMBOLICS  
 HAILEY BEAVIS - THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS - BETA WAVES  
 OSKAR BRAVES - PATERSANI - THE RONAINS - AMY LOU - INTO THE NIGHT

SUNDAY 25TH NOVEMBER

GERRY CINNAMON

DYLAN JOHN THOMAS - LUCIA - CARLY CONNOR - WOLVES - CONNOR FYFE  
 BANSHEE - SKELLUMS - KIERAN FISHER - BILLY BIBBY - AARON WRIGHT

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