Born in Kyle: A Love Letter tae an Ayrshire Childhood

By Billy Kay

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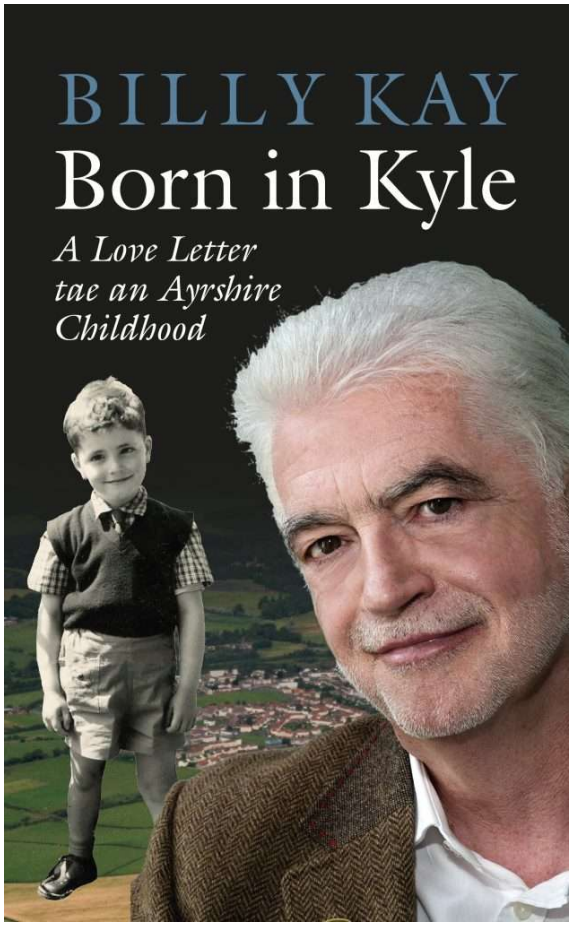

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The Grassic Gibbon quotation I adapted at the beginning of the piece goes on to explore the bi-lingual world inhabited by Chris Guthrie and by me in 1950s Ayrshire:

… you wanted the words they'd known and used, forgotten in the far-off youngness of their lives, Scots words to tell to your heart, how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight. And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true – for a while, for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all.

I was lucky enough to receive *A Scots Quair* as a school prize in my fourth year at Galston High School, and it enthralled me and changed my life. It was so

influential on my cultural and linguistic identity that in later years, I always found it problematic to accept writers from a similar working-class and Scots-speaking background who refused to use or sometimes even acknowledge the existence of Scots in their writing.

At a conference for writers in lesser-used languages in Luxembourg, which I attended, someone asked provocatively, 'why do you choose to write in these languages when you are all bilingual and could write in the principal languages of Europe?' Pierre-Jakez Hélias replied for all of us when he said that it was not a matter of choice, he was *enceinte*, pregnant with Breton, and his creativity had to be given birth in that language.

For me, to stay true to the people I came from and the culture I inherited, I had to write in the living language of my time and place, Scots. If I had written it in English, it would have reached a much bigger audience, but what good is there in writing a love letter in English to a community whose cherished mither tongue is Scots?The book ends with my poem called 'Glencoe', which won the Grierson verse prize at Edinburgh University in the early 1970s and was chosen by the late, great makar Robert Garioch for inclusion in the *Made in Scotland* poetry collection that he edited for Carcanet in 1974. I remember vividly visiting Robert at his home in Nelson Street in Edinburgh to pick up my copy of the book and the thrill of holding it in my hand. If I did nothing else in my life, I thought, with this I've added a totie wee chuckie stane onto the cairn of our national literature. 'Tis Fifty Years Since, an I'm gey prood tae eik anither stane in the form o Born in Kyle on tae the muckle, ayebydand cairn o Scottish Leiterature.

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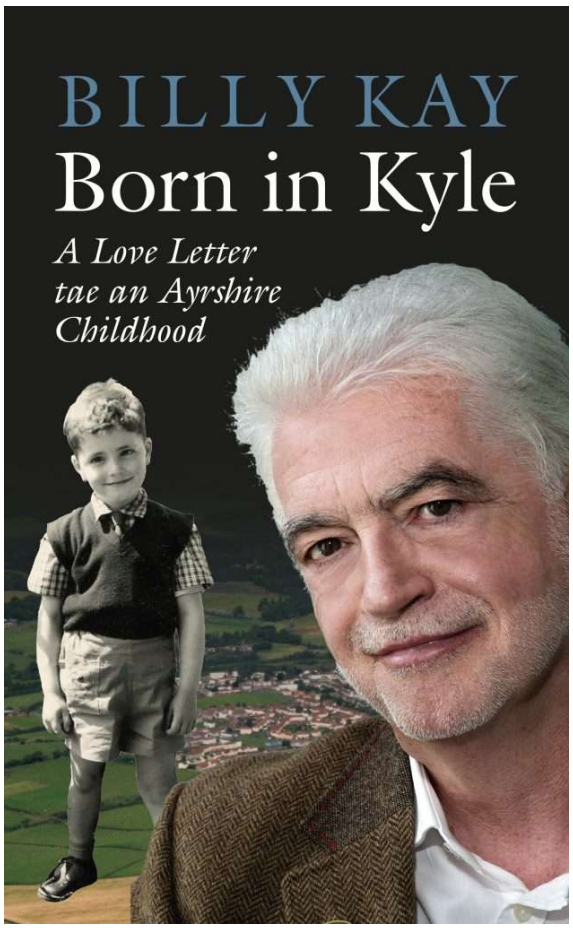

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> *I hae scrievit elsewhaur o the irony o an Ayrshire childhood whaur ye got a prize ae day a year for recitin Rabbie Burns's poetry, syne were in danger o gettin a lick o the tawse the ither 364 days for speakin his language. That wis true up tae a pynt, but maist o the time ye werenae speakin tae a teacher, ye were speakin tae friens an faimily an they gied ye a gowden treisure o Scots words tae tell tae yer hert – tae paraphrase the wark o the makar Lewis Grassic Gibbon: a mogrewis whan awthin wis tapsalteerie an oot o kilter; a clype wis a bodie wha telt on ye ahint yer back; a gomeril wis an eejit; a bauchle wis a wee roond bodie wi no eneuch sough tae sprachle oot a sheuch, a muckle sumph wis a boay that wis challenged in the maitter of harns and didnae hae muckle chance o gettin onywhaur acause o that; a lang staund wis whit a daft boay jist stertin a new job o wark wis sent tae ask for; a gleg wean wis ane that wis alert tae life an aw its possibeelities, ane that wis weel at hersel (English, well at hersel), a wean that wis gled tae be whaur she wis and totally at ane wi her environment; halliket meant somebody that wis kinna muckle, clumsy an awkward in their movements; a sleekit wee nyaff wis a totie wee stunted bodie that wis devious in the wey he traited fowk, trig wis yaised tae descrieve a weel turned oot quine an warstle wis yaised tae describe when life wis a chave or a struggle and ye had tae warstle or wrestle wi aw the things confrontin ye. It literally wis yer mither's tongue as a bairn, an she luikit efter me an ma sisters Mary an Janette wi groomin words an expressions like "gie that face o yours a dicht wi the cloot", or "come here tae I gie yer lugs a guid wash, ye could plant tatties in thaim!" Thir's jist a puckle fae aff the tap o ma heid. But I'm shuir I cuid easily gie ye page efter page o siccan words an no hae tae think that lang*

aboot thaim. That's jist the wey it wis.

The Grassic Gibbon quotation I adapted at the beginning of the piece goes on to explore the bi-lingual world inhabited by Chris Guthrie and by me in 1950s Ayrshire:

... you wanted the words they'd known and used, forgotten in the far-off youngness of their lives, Scots words to tell to your heart, how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight. And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true – for a while, for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all.

I was lucky enough to receive *A Scots Quair* as a school prize in my fourth year at Galston High School, and it enthralled me and changed my life. It was so influential on my cultural and linguistic identity that in later years, I always found it problematic to accept writers from a similar working-class and Scots-speaking background who refused to use or sometimes even acknowledge the existence of Scots in their writing.

At a conference for writers in lesser-used languages in Luxembourg, which I attended, someone asked provocatively, 'why do you choose to write in these languages when you are all bilingual and could write in the principal languages of Europe?' Pierre-Jakez Hélias replied for all of us when he said that it was not a matter of choice, he was *enceinte*, pregnant with Breton, and his creativity had to be given birth in that language.

For me, to stay true to the people I came from and the culture I inherited, I had to write in the living language of my time and place, Scots. If I had written it in English, it would have reached a much bigger audience, but what good is there in writing a love letter in English to a community whose cherished mither tongue is Scots?The book ends with my poem called 'Glencoe', which won the Grierson verse prize at Edinburgh University in the early 1970s and was chosen by the late, great makar Robert Garioch for inclusion in the *Made in Scotland* poetry collection that he edited for Carcanet in 1974. I remember vividly visiting Robert at his home in Nelson Street in Edinburgh to pick up my copy of the book and the

thrill of holding it in my hand. If I did nothing else in my life, I thought, with this I've added a totie wee chuckie stane onto the cairn of our national literature. 'Tis Fifty Years Since, an I'm gey prood tae eik anither stane in the form o Born in Kyle on tae the muckle, ayebydand cairn o Scottish Leiterature.

(c) The Bottle Imp