

WILLIAM McILVANNEY CAMPUS

Kilmarnock Academy
James Hamilton Primary School and Early Childhood Centre
Sgoil na Coille Nuaidh

officially opened on
11 September 2018

by
Professor Liam McIlvanney
and
Doctor Siobhan McIlvanney



'...the realisation that in each of our lives everybody else is just a tourist.'



William McIlvanney Campus Official Opening 11 September 2018

Foreword

Councillor Douglas Reid, Leader of East Ayrshire Council

Comments from

Deputy First Minister, John Swinney MSP

Official speech by

Professor Liam McIlvanney

Official speech by

Dr Siobhan McIlvanney

Foreword by Councillor Douglas Reid Leader of East Ayrshire Council

“William McIlvanney was a local lad who showed us all that with hard work, determination and passion, anything is possible.

“That’s the ethos we have embedded at the heart of the stunning new William McIlvanney campus, and the formal opening marked a brand new chapter in how we deliver a first-class education to the young people of Kilmarnock and beyond.

“I was delighted that Willie’s family took such a keen interest in the development of the campus and it was absolutely fitting that Liam and Siobhan performed the formal opening ceremony in honour and memory of their father.”

Kilmarnock Academy has had an illustrious 210-year history.

It is the only school in Scotland to have nurtured two Nobel Prize winners – Lord John Boyd Orr and Sir Alexander Fleming and has educated famous crime writers, church moderators, scientists and senior officers from the armed services.

It first opened in 1808 at Green Street and a small part of the original building forms some of the Grand Hall. The school subsequently moved to North Hamilton Street and then to Elmbank Drive, where the tower and observatory was the highest point in Kilmarnock.

The new William McIlvanney campus houses three superb new schools:

- Kilmarnock Academy
- James Hamilton Primary School and Early Childhood Centre
- Sgoil na Coille Nuaidh
(New Woods School for Gaelic education)

The campus opened to pupils on Wednesday 18 April 2018.

Comments from Deputy First Minister, John Swinney MSP

This is a landmark day for the pupils and staff of the William McIlvanney campus for the McIlvanney family for East Ayrshire Council and for Scotland. It is a day of great hope when we formally open a magnificent centre of learning celebrating the profound contribution to our national life of one of our greatest writers.

I am sorry that I am unable to be at the event in person, but I am grateful to be able to share some words with you.

In 1987, William McIlvanney delivered a guest lecture at the Scottish National Party Conference. Entitled “Stand Scotland Where It Did” the published booklet has been on my bookshelf ever since. In the lecture he wrote:

“If you care for your children, care for the society they will have to live in. I care for my children, too - too much, I hope - to want them to inhabit fortresses of privilege within a wasteland of deprivation. That is no gift to give your children. I don't want my children stunted in that way. I want them to live in a society where the potential richness of their nature is encouraged, a society where they are not narrowed into predators but enlarged into sharers, a society where they can see that giving is the measure of humanity, not taking.”

These words are so appropriate for today. Our schools are places where we bring to life the aspirations for our society that William McIlvanney spoke of in that lecture. Where the richness of the nature of our children and young people is nurtured to enable them to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

This new campus will provide the opportunity to transform the lives of young people in Kilmarnock inspired by the creative strength of William McIlvanney. The facilities are of a different league offering pupils and staff new opportunities to shape the curriculum to create the best in innovative educational practice that meets the needs of every young person regardless of their background.

I pay tribute to the vision demonstrated by East Ayrshire Council in this bold and transformative project and celebrate the partnership between the Scottish Government and the Council that has brought it about.

Today, we open a literally world class centre of education an investment in the children of Kilmarnock to help them grow and thrive, built - as William McIlvanney wrote in that lecture - on the foundations of giving not taking.

I wish the staff and pupils of the William McIlvanney campus every joy in creating excellence and equity for all in these outstanding facilities.

Speech by Professor Liam McIlvanney

*Madainn mthath. Slainte mhor agaibh, agus tapadh leibh airson do chuideachd.
Failte gu Campas Uilleim McIlvanney.*

Good morning. It's a privilege to have been asked to speak at the opening of the William McIlvanney Campus. A few weeks ago, my family and I were shown round the campus and were struck by the care and attention that has gone into the design and execution of this tremendous facility. Huge congratulations are due to everyone involved in the planning, funding and construction of the campus, particularly to Kier Construction, to Councillor Douglas Reid and his colleagues at East Ayrshire, and not least to the students themselves, who were involved in the consultation process. It's a resource of which everyone in East Ayrshire can feel justly proud.

Education was, in a very real sense, the guiding thread of my father's life. He worked as an educator – a principal teacher of English at Irvine Royal Academy and Greenwood Academy. He wrote with extraordinary insight about education, in novels like *Docherty* and *The Kiln*. And of course his own education – at Hillhead Primary, Kilmarnock Academy and the University of Glasgow – laid the foundations of his success as a novelist, poet, journalist and thinker.

It was education that lifted my father out of a fairly challenging working-class background in the Longpark housing scheme in Kilmarnock, and in that sense education was an agent of what we would now call 'social mobility'. But education was always much more to my father than a means of getting a job. Education was a way of becoming fully human, of knowing yourself, fulfilling yourself as a human being. My father himself never stopped learning. Whenever you visited him, there would be papers strewn around, a tottering pile of books on his bedside table. He was the embodiment of lifelong learning.

And he, along with our mother Moira, instilled this ethos into my sister and I at an early age. My father could never have been accused of spoiling his children, except in one particular area. Whenever you had finished reading a book, no matter how quickly you read it, my father would take you down to Justin Theodas's bookshop on Welbeck Street and buy you a new one. He thus instilled in us a love of reading and a ruinous addiction to the purchase of books.

Education was important to my father, partly because he knew what it could cost, he knew the sacrifices it sometimes demanded. My grandmother, Helen Montgomery, who left school at thirteen to work in a textile mill, made those sacrifices for my father. When it was expected that my father would leave school to bring in a wage, my gran insisted that my father would finish school and, if he got the grades, go on to University. He did get the grades, and though my grandfather died in the very month my father started at the University of Glasgow, one year before my grandmother would have qualified for a widow's pension, she put my father through university.

My grandmother's actions changed the culture of our family, showed us that education was something for 'people like us'. For a family of working-class Irish immigrants – as we were – that was crucially important. You will all have equivalent moments in your own family histories. And so the opening of this campus is a celebration of those people.

As the son of a novelist, I sometimes found that the world of education and the world of my father's books could intersect rather surprisingly. I remember sitting in the examination hall of Grange Academy in 1985, waiting to take the interpretation paper of my English O-Grade. I became aware that some of my class mates were craning round in their seats to stare at me with inscrutably intense expression on their faces. When the exam began, I saw what the fuss was about. The passage for interpretation in that year's O-Grade was from my father's novel *Laidlaw*, the scene where Laidlaw meets his sidekick Brian Harkness for the first time. I experienced that familiar no-win sensation: if I don't do well in this exam, I'll never live it down; if I do do well, then what do you expect?

The great working-class Yorkshire poet, Tony Harrison, has a poem called 'Bookends', in which he recalls sitting across the fire from his father, and his mother telling him they looked like a pair of bookends. She was right, the poet concludes, because what lay between them was 'books, books, books'.

The same was true of my father and me, except that books connected rather than divided us. We would pass books back and forth across the fireplace in our tenement flat in Fullarton Street, read bits out to each other, discuss the ideas that they raised. And I can still hear my father's voice, not just in the books he wrote, but in the books he read and re-read: in *The Great Gatsby*, in Montaigne's *Essays*, in Camus' *The Rebel*, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

It's also wonderful to see that the campus will feature a Gaelic-medium school, Sgoil na Coille Nuaidhe. One of the most powerful scenes in my father's novel, *Docherty*, features a young Conn Docherty being belted for using his native language. In that case, the language was Scots rather than Gaelic, but it's heartening to see another of our national languages being fostered on this campus. Piseach mhath oirbh!

All his life, my father was a proud Kilmarnockian. Kilmarnock shaped him, taught him, made him. The Bringan, the High Street, St Maur's Crescent, the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock Academy, Ellis Street, the Goldberry Arms, the Portmann Hotel: some of the most important places, in his life and his fiction alike, were in Kilmarnock. He would have been hugely proud that his home town has recognized him by naming this great educational campus in his honour. My sister and I are hugely proud to open it.

Thank You.

Professor Liam McIlvanney
Stuart Chair in Scottish Studies
University of Otago, New Zealand
11 September 2018

Speech by Dr. Siobhan McIlvanney

I want to begin by echoing Liam's sentiments, and to say that we are both honoured to speak at this opening ceremony of the William McIlvanney campus. It is of profound significance to us that this campus was named after our father, and I want to add my deepest thanks to East Ayrshire council and to the people of Kilmarnock for their support in bringing this about. It is a truly impressive, state-of-the-art building and a great gift to the town. I hope it will inspire pupils and teachers to make the most of the learning experiences they have in this building, just as the old Kilmarnock Academy inspired Dad over 60 years ago.

I want to say a few words about what education meant to Dad. If you had asked him to choose the one external factor which had made the greatest difference to his life, he would have said, without a moment's hesitation, 'education', and then, more specifically, 'books'. Dad believed that, if you invest in education, it will take you places, both figuratively and literally, you have never been before. Education at secondary school in Kilmarnock in the 1950s took Dad on a life-changing journey to Glasgow University, via the foreign territories of Latin, Ancient Greek, History, French and, one with which he was more familiar, English Literature. It gave him a life-long love of travel, of different cultures and languages - and a life-long love of reading. And the two are closely linked. Reading allows us to travel without ever leaving our chair. It makes us more empathic individuals by teaching us about the feelings of others. It conjures up worlds in our imagination unlimited by our present circumstances. It makes us think and think differently – which is why certain religions and cultures fear the influence of books – and which is why it is vital that we keep on reading and writing. Dad often talked about the need for creativity to have a subversive element. We need to be confronted with difference, we need to be taken out of our comfort zone and to be exposed to other ways of thinking and behaving in order that we better understand our own. Education and literature help us to do this.

Until the very end of his life, Dad never lost his love for learning. Reading was as vital to him as eating – indeed, a great deal more so! He was at his happiest ensconced in a chair, surrounded by piles of books, whether Greek myths, French philosophy or the theories of Sigmund Freud. Books did not represent an escape from reality for him, but anchored him all the more firmly in it by speaking to what is human in all of us. Dad's enthusiasm for learning meant he truly valued the importance of teaching and of the teacher-classroom relationship. As Liam has said, he was an English teacher at Irvine Royal and then Greenwood Academy, before giving it up to write full-time in the mid 1970s. He used to joke that Scotland's qualifying for the world cup in 1978 also played a small role in his decision to leave teaching since he wanted to take several months off to travel overland to Argentina. (Yes, it is worth pointing out to younger members of the audience that not only did Scotland qualify for the World Cup in '78 but that outwardly sane people were declaring in public the inevitability of Scotland's victory). He did teach again in later life, when he was a writer in residence at various universities, including Strathclyde, Aberdeen and Vancouver. There, he taught creative writing and was extremely supportive of young authors. To all his teaching, he brought the same ability to listen, to make the other person feel valued, to encourage them to realise their 'unmined potentialities', as Ali Smith the Scottish author put it at his Memorial Service.

Dad believed that everyone had their stories to tell, and he loved listening to other people's stories, many of which he quoted throughout his life and which became a source of inspiration for him, just as his stories did for others. As a family, he imbued us with a passion for reading and learning, a passion he has also passed on to his grandchildren. What made Dad such a good teacher, aside from his lifelong curiosity and openness to others was his remarkable ability to relate to children. He was a man who adored children – and they adored him - who exuded a gentleness around them, who was genuinely interested in what they had to say, and who saw in them the future for all us.

I think it is important that Dad's voice is heard at today's ceremony, that we don't only talk for him, but listen to him, since he spoke so frequently and passionately about education and literature as radical forces for change. Aside from writing novels, poetry, drama and essays, Dad also wrote a newspaper column over a period of years, in which he talked about many of the things he held most dear, whether political, social or literary. I want to end by quoting from a newspaper piece in which Dad discussed his favourite writer, William Shakespeare, and despaired at the inverted snobbery which dismissed Shakespeare's writing as irrelevant or as using too many 'big words'. Dad was accused of using too many big words in Docherty when portraying working-class life and dialogue. His reply was to say that some of the greatest articulacy he had ever heard came from working-class homes in the West Coast of Scotland. A good education breaks down such preconceptions, and expands students' horizons by exposing them to different cultures, places and times. In response to those who denigrated Shakespeare, Dad wrote: 'One way to avoid the awesomeness of mountains is to live where it is pretty well flat and never travel. Then every time you climb a hillock you can plant a flag on it and feel like Sir Edmund Hillary'. If I can be permitted to extend the mountaineering metaphor, Dad's greatest hope would be that the William McIlvanney campus encourage its students to look outwards and upwards at the enriching vistas education has to offer and to strive to reach their own summits. I cannot think of a more fitting legacy for his life and work.

Thank you.

Siobhan McIlvanney
11 September 2018

