Talking to Tom Leonard

Dan Stephen

Tom Leonard recently visited the University of Colorado, Boulder, at the invitation of the university's writer-in-residence, the poet Ed Dorn. While there, he was interviewed by history student Dan Stephen for the creative writing department magazine 'Sniper Logic', edited by Ed Dorn's partner Jenny Dunbar. The following is a transcript of the interview with introduction.

When I was given the opportunity to interview Tom Leonard I jumped. After all, Leonard, a native of Glasgow, is not only a leading British poet who had never before travelled to the United States, but is a representative of a literary tradition that is distinctively, even defiantly working class and rooted in local language and experience. Leonard is hardly known in the United States though his work has attracted considerable attention in Britain. He occupies a particular position in the culture of western Scotland, as a contemporary spokesperson for a poetical tradition that, at its best, is willing to defy authority and convention to speak with an authentic voice. Born in 1944, Leonard is an accomplished popular writer and poet whose work is wholly his own, without being overly personal or eccentric. The Glaswegian dialect that structures a significant part of his work is the vernacular of his childhood and locality. The subjects of his poetry, while often political, are the result of his ongoing engagement with that local culture.

For Leonard, politics is part of living, it is as inevitable as breathing. He told me, "Although obviously there is a way in which my work is political, that's because the language itself in Britain is a political issue. It's not that politics is something that I take down from a shelf and do, politics is just part of the process of being. To get through the day is political." Part of the key to Leonard's politics is Glasgow's former position as Britain's "second city of empire" and the paradoxical position of its working class Catholic and Protestant citizens as colonised subjects within a broader imperial culture. In Britain, dialects are markers of relative status and power, and the speech cultivated in elite schools has been a marker of status. While the climate has begun to change, it is still possible for working class speech to draw laughter, or to be a source of discrimination. In a satirical passage in a Leonard poem, a BBC news announcer is given a Glasgow working-class accent to announce bluntly why the BBC avoids working-class accents in its news-bulletins:

> ...if
> a toktaboot
> thi trooth
> lik wanna yoo
> scruff yi
> widny thingk
> it wuz troo...
> yooz doant no
> thi trooth
> yirsellz cawz
> yi canny talk
> right. this is
> the six a clock
> nyooz. belt up.

Leonard's contrary position, that as one speaker in a poem puts it, "all livin language is sacred", has not alway been an easy one to maintain in a British culture that privileges certain dialects, or in that tourist Scotland that in the past has created an industry out of sentimentality. Fake clan tartans and Brigadoon views of history are pleasing to tourists but in overabundance are poisonous to a genuine culture. A large part of Leonard's life has been spent trying to explore and to interpret for himself what is vital and essential about the culture of his own region of western Scotland.

He spent several years during the 1980's as "Writer in Residence" at Paisley Central Library, just west of Glasgow. There he had access to the library's substantial collection of local regional books and pamphlets. Between items of news and religous or political disputation there was a lot of poetry, most of which had been out of print for over a century. The authors were not professional writers but ordinary people: farmers, bakers, mothers, and workers, many of whose poems crackle with wit and bite that still hits home, even after a hundred and fifty years. These Renfrewhire poets were largely self-educated, and they wrote not for a school, academy or publishing house, but for themselves and their neighbours. While working at the Paisley library, Leonard read through this time capsule from A to Z, then made a selection of poems, published in 1990 as *Radical Renfrew*.

Though more than sixty poets were brought back into print after a century of neglect, Leonard insists that the selection process was nothing to do with "levelling down" or suspending criteria. "I rejected a hell of a lot," Leonard told me. "The ones I rejected were often writers who put on a kind of salon-pastoral suit in their writing, using grand-toned language because that was the language they thought poetry should be in. The poems I responded to had in some measure language that was alive, and engaged."

Renfrewshire is the county immediately north of Robert Burn's Ayrshire, and a number of the anthology's poems show the influence of Scotland's best-known poet in terms of poetic form and the writing about everyday things. Political themes evident in the book include work and unemployment, trade unionism, democratic reform, feminism, and republicanism. But the poetry is not all radical in the political sense, and the title *Radical Renfrew* was chosen for a more fundamental reason. "Part of the meaning was to do with the Latin 'radix', or 'root'," Leonard explained. "It was a statement about the root of poetry in this area, using the word root in the various resonances it can have. What are the roots of the culture we are in, 'we' meaning the people in the west of Scotland. Also, here is a poetry that is rooted in the culture of which it is a part."

During his presentation at the British Studies Center, Leonard talked about Alexander Wilson, poet and pioneer ornithologist who left Paisley for America in the 1790s, and there brought out before his death the 9-volume *Birds of America*. "In fact Wilson didn't *leave* for America", Leonard adds, "*he fled.*" Charged among other things with distributing Paine's *The Rights of Man*, Wilson for one satiric attack on a local employer was jailed and forced publicly to burn his satire at Paisley Cross. Like some others in *Radical Renfrew*, he wrote under risk.

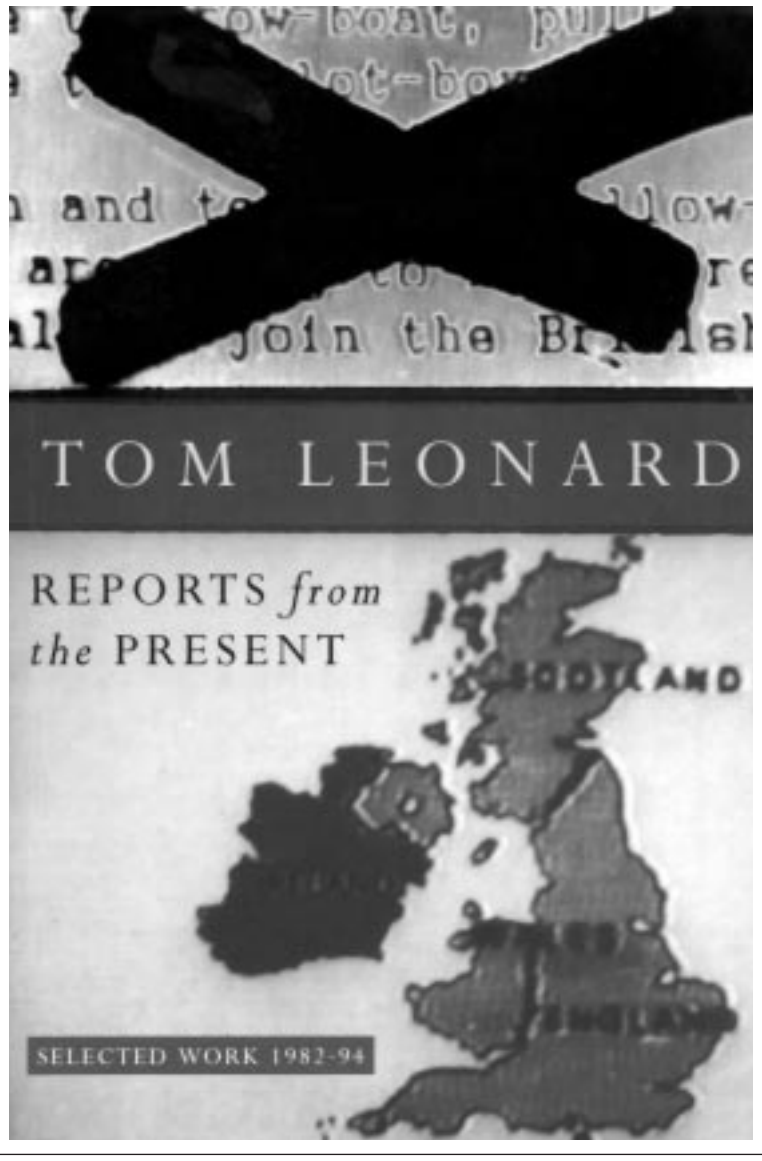
Paine's *The Rights of Man* was popular in Scotland, and Leonard argues that the exclusive nature of the literature and language allowed in British schools was part of the process which counteracted such as Paine's egalitarian ideals. "In fact the spread of the right to vote in Britain paralleled the right to literacy, in that both were allowed within formal codes whose names acknowledge the supremacy of the status quo which must not be challenged: Her Majesty's Government, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Schools, the Queen's English. The rights and values of the monarch and aristocracy were sown into the definitions of what the people's new entitlements to personal expression actually were."

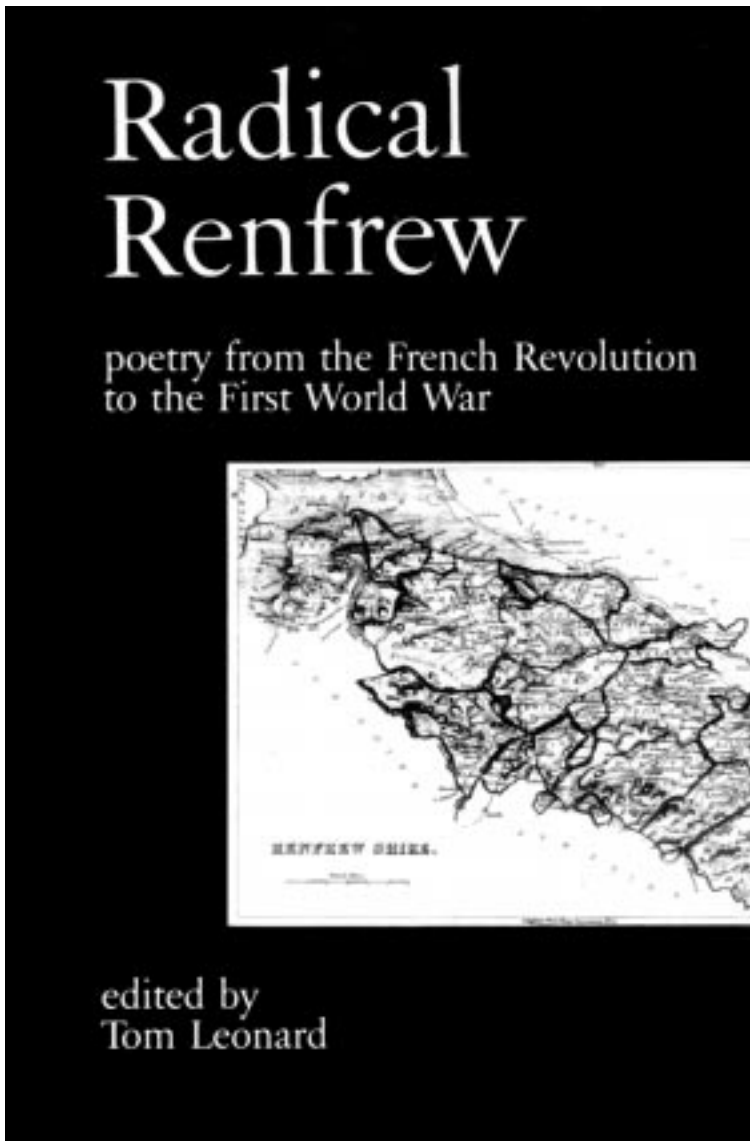
The language and culture of Renfewshire itself became devalued and marginalised. By the end of the nineteenth century the intellectual and linguistic range of the published local poetry had narrowed, often being limited to the sentimental and safe, in spite of continued working class oppression.

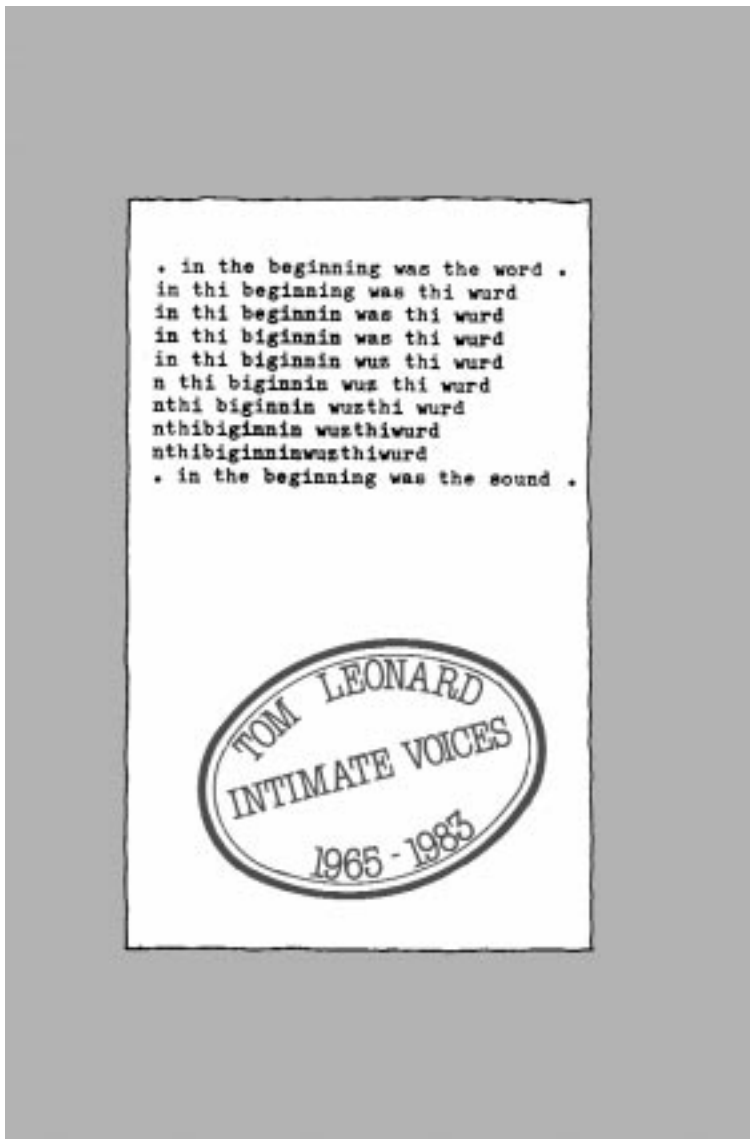
Leonard's views have drawn criticism from some in Scotland who accuse him of attacking Literature teachers just for doing their job, a view he dismisses as "utter rubbish". He puts it that literature teaching is valid insofar as it can avoid functioning as the representative of institutional authority, which "tends to make it into an arm of government." He recognises "the inspirational effect a single teacher can have as a human being offering knowledge and personal engagement with specific works of literature from their own life. This is something I don't denigrate nor would want to." But away from that personal interaction, the structural institution, the competition for grades, prizes or scholarships by students writing essays on literature for examiners, is all opposed to the very nature of what literature actually is. Such practice, says the introduction to *Radical Renfrew*, "turns the living dialogue between writer and reader into a thing, a commodity to be offered in return for a bill of exchange, the certificate or 'mark'. But no caste has the right to possess bills of exchange on the dialogue between one human being and another."

This argument is of a piece with the anti-clerical stance of some of the poets in the anthology itself, who take the view that they do not need any clergyman to judge the quality of their own dialogue with their Maker. Leonard remarks, "When I go to a university library and see yard upon yard of the institution-generated litcrit industry, I see it largely as the byproduct of another clericism."

Leonard's language concerns have led him into broader politics, and at one time or another he has written in support of leftwing causes. During the Gulf War he produced a pamphlet *On the Mass Bombing of Iraq and Kuwait, Commonly known as "The Gulf War"* published by the anarchist AK Press of San Francisco and Edinburgh. This analysed and satirised media control and inconsistencies in reporting of the events, and complained in plain, standard English about the extent of Iraqi deaths due to the bombing and set to continue as a result of the destruction of the country's







infrastructure, and the continuing embargo on the import of medical and food supplies. The booklet went to three printings, and Leonard recalled how moved he was when at an Edinburgh Festival poetry reading in 1991 at which he read some of the satire, a woman approached him from the audience afterwards and said, "Thanks a lot for writing that. My son was over in the thing."

As it happened, Leonard arrived in Boulder in November at a time when tensions between Iraq and America were again building, following President Hussein's expulsion of American weapons inspectors. A renewed American and British bombing campaign seemed likely. Leonard connected the prospect of the bombing once more with control of public language, citing the always-repeated description of Iraq's alleged stockpile of "weapons of mass-destruction". "Ironic," he says, "given that I live in Glasgow thirty minutes' drive from the Trident nuclear missile base with a stock of nuclear warheads sufficent to wipe Scotland from the face of the earth many times over."

Leonard gave two public presentations at Colorado University. At the English Department he gave a talk on the Scottish poet James Thomson (1834-82), author of "The City of Dreadful Night". Thomson, who spent nine months as secretary to a mining company in Central City in 1872, is the subject of Leonard's biography *Places of the Mind*. The same evening at the British Studies Center, Leonard read poems from *Radical Renfrew* together with a selection of his own poetry.

I met him on the Pearl Street Mall on a cold Saturday morning the next day. We wandered around looking for a place to meet and talk, and ended up at the Penny Lane coffee house. Even though Leonard spoke clearly and slowly, there were times when my unfamiliarity with Scottish accents caused me to miss a word or two. He agreed to talk only on condition that he himself could ask me whatever he wanted, saying that for the dialogue to have value both parties had to be on equal ground. I had prepared questions in advance, which I showed to Leonard and to which he referred occasionally, though our conversation wandered far from this prepared list.

Stephen: Do you believe, as you seem to be saying in the introduction to *Radical Renfrew*, that the growth of institutions has tended to cut off dialogue?

Leonard: What I say there among other things is that state institutions in nineteenth century Scotland cut off and controlled the dialogue between the indigenous culture and the people—and therefore more crucially, sought to control the critical dialogue taking place between the people and the state. I don't think that sort of phenomenon rare, nor has it been confined to Scotland.

Stephen: Is it harder to express dissenting opinions today? Even when there seems to be little opposition to dissent, people are not writing—

Leonard: Could you elaborate on that? I don't really think it's true, but I'd like to hear what you think.

Stephen: Well, for example, since 1989, it's hard to dissent to the free market. People think capitalism fought some sort of ideological war with the Soviet Union and won. The last ten years or so have been capitalism running amok.

Leonard: In the former Soviet bloc welfare has been confused with communism, and therefore totalitarianism, and all the rest, and scrapped with the asset-stripping. The waves of that are really hitting Britain and America now, all this crap about welfare being a sign of moral degeneracy. It's about underfunding public services, the political system supposedly directed to the notion that people pay less and less taxes, because people who don't pay taxes are negative entities, society's anti-matter. But dissent takes place as it always has done, in the culture.

Stephen: Our culture is being taken over by advertising and corporations. It's difficult to express an opinion that goes against the grain of that. I don't mean that people are being driven out of the country or thrown in jail, but if you dissent to what everybody supposedly thinks at some level you are assuming some kind of immediate risk. That situation is helped along by newspapers and everything else that often repeat the same opinions over and over again. There's a huge industry connected to corporations that does nothing but generate propaganda.

Leonard: The important phrase there is "what everybody supposedly thinks". The mass newspapers and endless media newsbulletins are as much about marketing a specific sense of phatic communion as about information. Which doesn't generate dissent or critical dialogue. Phatic communion comforts people. You watch the game then go home to read about it.

Stephen: What do you mean by that phatic communion?

Leonard: The phrase is from the linguist Malinowski, it means that level of discourse which is a bonding device, mutual reassurance about shared givens. When somebody says for instance, "Cold, isn't it?" and the other says "Yeh, it's freezing," etcetera. It's not a real question, it would be unsociable in a blizzard to reply you felt warm, you would be thought off your head. *The Crucible* remains a fine play.

The situation can parallel the nineteenth century Scottish education phenomen, in that the gates seem all opened but what gets through is in certain essentials reduced. That gets very obvious in times like the Gulf War, or in Britain recently after the death of Diana, where unbelievably the BBC merged its channels into one on radio and tv, in case you got away from showing your respect. The language everywhere on the British media that week was appalling, obsequious and self-indulgent hysteria, the Gulf War all over again with a madonna in place of the Devil. It was like if you didn't show yourself stricken with grief you should be strung from a lamp-post. As I said last night, I gave up on newspapers and newsbulletins totally for more than two months afterwards. That was actually quite liberating.

Stephen: In the nineteenth century, people did not face an opinion industry.

Leonard: They did when they went to church and school, radical culture survived largely despite these, not because of them. Also if you look at the established newspapers you get the establishment line. My local city newspaper the *Glasgow Herald* for instance, is just one of the many that consistently opposed democratic progress in Ireland and working class advances in Britain. That was standard.

Stephen: But how many people read those newspapers? Their circulation was much smaller.

Leonard: So was the electorate. But then as now there were other narratives, other publications. Dissent is always going on, and always will. You're showing dissent in the basis of your questions.

Stephen: I'd like to wrap things up with something that is just my own personal interest. Somewhere I've heard that you're a fan of the writer and poet Hugh MacDiarmid, who's come under a lot of fire recently. Do you have anything you wish to say about him?

Leonard: MacDiarmid is a major figure in Scotland, the key figure in the attempt to establish a literary form of the Scots language as part of a counter-colonial nationalist strategy. Some of the attack on him you refer to is from those people dismissing everything and anything to do with the Left. One way I fundamentally differ from him is in wanting to use a language descriptive of what actually is linguistically, rather than prescriptive of what ought to be, or historically was: the difference between us is a common one between writers in a colonial or post-colonial state. American writers such as [William Carlos] Williams helped me to my own mode, and MacDiarmid's intellectual breadth, whatever the differences between he and I, is such that it was no surprise to me coming recently on an essay of his in an Edinburgh University magazine from the early sixties in which he was welcoming the publication in the magazine of the then young Allen Ginsberg, and Black Mountain writers like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley.

Stephen: Thanks very much for your time and patience.