Exploring the River Clyde Through the Eyes of Alasdair Gray

BY KONG DELIN, 2024

Have you ever wandered through the streets of Glasgow? If so, you've likely crossed paths with its aquatic artery, the River Clyde.

The Clyde is the ninth-longest river in the UK and Scotland's second-longest, originates south of Loch Lomond in the Southern Uplands. It flows through the heart of Glasgow and meets the Atlantic by the Isle of Bute on the west side of Glasgow, the area is known as the Firth of Clyde. (fig 1)

In the 13th century, Glasgow, then a small town, built its first bridge over the Clyde, which became an important step in its eventual development as a city. During the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, Clyde boosted Britain's trade and shipbuilding industry, making it the world's pre-eminent shipbuilding centre (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Catchment of the River Clyde

Figure 2. Shipping on the Clyde in Glasgow, by John Atkinson Grimshaw, 1881

The Clyde isn't just a body of water, it was an integral inspiration in Alasdair Gray's creative endeavours, bearing witness to Gray's love and friendship, recurring in his novels and paintings. It was the subject of Gray's only large-scale nature mural.

In 1969, on the recommendation of Robin Mason, a high school friend at Whitehill Senior Secondary School in Glasgow, Alasdair Gray painted a decorative mural, 'The Falls of Clyde' for Riverside Tavern at Kirkfieldbank (Figure 3).

Gray chose the waterfalls of Bonnington Linn and Corra Linn as they cascade through the valley behind Lanark—not far from Kirkfieldbank, for the 35-foot-long mural. This place of natural beauty has inspired many writers and painters including Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Turner amongst others.

Figure 3. The Falls of Clyde, by Alasdair Gray, 1969

The mural was covered over in later renovations and in 2009 the building's current owner, Andy Boyle, discovered the mural while refurbishing the walls and invited Gray to personally restore this buried treasure (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Alasdair Gray was restoring The Falls of Clyde, in 2009

The Clyde witnessed Gray's life. In 1970, after the end of his nine-year marriage to his first wife, Inge Sorenson, Gray painted The Firth of Clyde from Arran (Figure 5).

Figure 5. "Long view of Arran" Alasdair Gray, 1970

Moreover, Clyde also found its way into Gray's painting of his friend. Gray often took walks along Clyde with his friends. In a 1977 portrait named Archie Hind on the Banks of the Clyde, Dalmarnock Power Station Behind, Gray painted the Scottish literary scholar Archie Hind - who became his lifelong friend when he was working on a mural for the Greenhead Church of Scotland Mural - in which Clyde is shown in a quiet stream behind Archie (Figure 6).

Clyde features prominently in Gray's literary works as well, playing an important role in Lanark and Poor Things, as one of the real-life locations featured in both fictional novels. In Poor Things, Clyde is the place where the identity of the heroine, Bella Baxter, is transformed. It is here that she takes her life and is rescued by Dr Godwin Baxter, given a second 'life', reborn as a Frankenstein-like 'monster'.

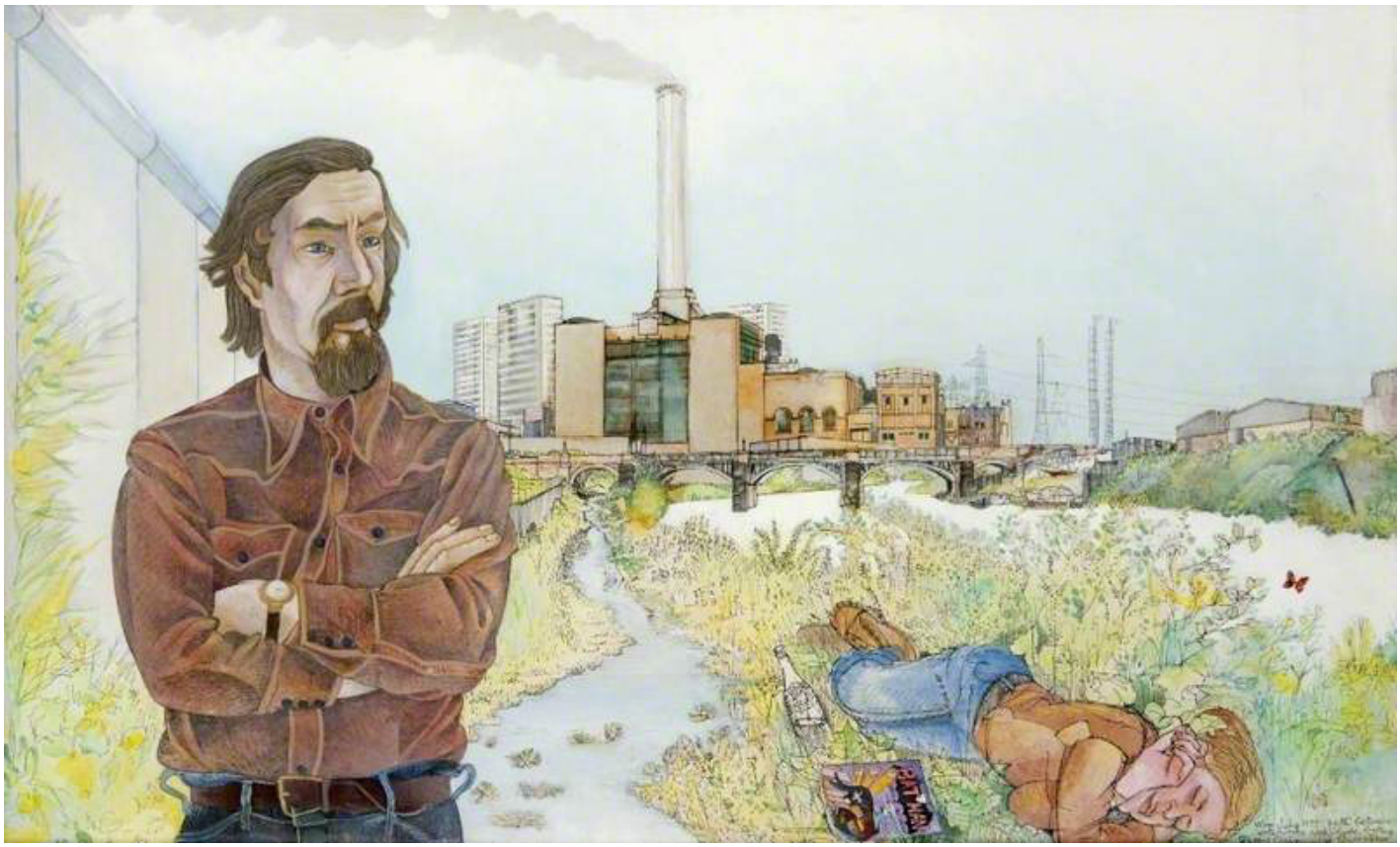

Figure 6. "Archie Hind on the Banks of the Clyde, Dalmarnock Power Station Behind, Alasdair Gray", 1977

In Lanark, the river weaves through the narrative, mirroring the historical shifts of 19th-century Glasgow and intertwining with the protagonist's memories.

We kindly invite you to stroll along the river Clyde and immerse yourself in its poetic, seeing it through Alasdair Gray's eyes. As you trace its banks, let the stories and inspirations that stirred Gray inspire you too, and discover why the river Clyde held such significance for this celebrated Glaswegian artist and writer.

At the time of writing this in 2024, Delin was studying Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Edinburgh. She also assisted in the cataloguing of the main library collection.

Formatted by Teoh Jennings

THE ALASDAIR GRAY ARCHIVE