

Writing in the Margins: Writer in Residence: Kirstin Innes
Archival Breezes (# 1)

THE
*Agnes
Owens*
ARCHIVE



On Tippex, hopeless cases, and writing in the margins: my first blog from my residency at The Alasdair Gray and Agnes Owens Archives.

Kirstin Innes
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I was copyediting a book last week when an entry in the glossary jumped out at me:

Archival breeze

A term drawn from Arlette Farge, and used here to describe fleeting moments of connection or insight that arise unexpectedly when working with archival material.¹

For the past few months, as writers in residence, [Heather Parry](#) and I have been allowed to lose ourselves in [The Alasdair Gray Archive](#) and its less obtrusive sister-satellite, [The Agnes Owens Archive](#). Taking in the breezes, as and when they flutter up. I've allowed myself to follow thoughts through work, letters and jotted-down ideas of two artists who were friends and at times collaborators, but who worked and created vastly differently.

It's a strange and lovely privilege, this sort of freeform wandering, breeze-hopping. As I burrow deeper into their work, I'm beginning to assume – dangerously – that I know or understand them both in some way. I don't and won't ever. But the 'moments of connection or insight' linking them, and my thoughts, keep popping up. Breezes and breezes.

A breeze: I start noticing quickly that there are repeated motifs clinging on across both Agnes' and Alasdair's bodies of work throughout the decades. Alasdair uses the same faces and illustrations, in keeping with that useful post-war sensibility which informed his recycling and reusing of found objects and materials when he couldn't afford paper to draw on. This philosophy also filters through into his writing: as he says to his biographer [Rodge Glass](#) during the interviews for *A Secretary's Biography* (p. 32), "If you have written a good sentence already, why change it?"

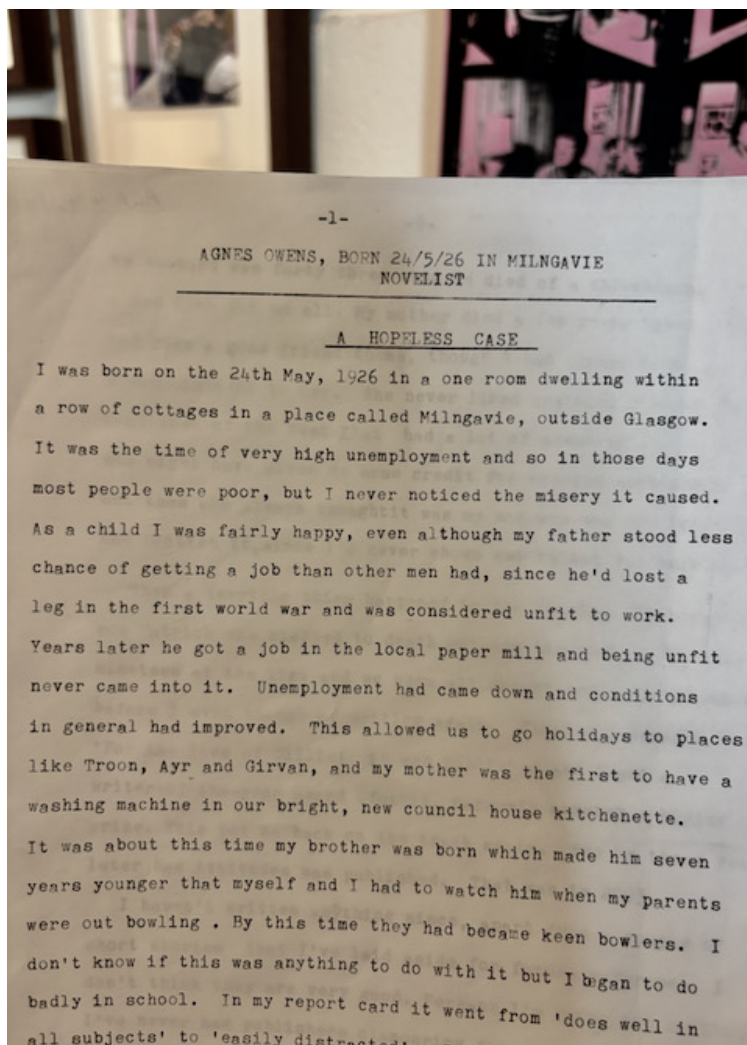
Waste not, want not. Agnes reuses character archetypes that have rung particularly true to her; she also uses very similar framing devices in two novels which were published very closely together, *A Working Mother* and *For*

¹ Mhari McMullen's forthcoming, *Finishing The Edges: Fringe and the Paisley Shawl* (2027), citing Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (2015).

The Love of Willie, trying out the form for each book in turn. There are other things that stick to Agnes, too. She can't, across the whole of her writing career, seem to shake the phrase 'a hopeless case'. It dogs her over and over, from the first story she ever wrote. I find it everywhere as I go through the boxes in her Archive. Fragments of poetry, several different stories, even one of her attempts at autobiography, all titled 'A Hopeless Case'.

It seems, as I trace back through her papers and cuttings of her interviews, to have been attached to her by a Latin teacher when she was fifteen, as he walked round the class assigning the children their future roles in the world - this girl would be a wealthy man's wife, this girl a secretary.

When he got to Agnes, he seems to have shrugged her off: 'ach, you're just a hopeless case'. A crushing dismissal of a working class teenager and her future, and she never, ever let it go. In brief revenge fictions she writes from the point of view of a prize-winning author with a book about to be made into a film revisiting that teacher, or about a policeman dooming a small boy who has got into trouble: hopeless case. It is always flung carelessly by adults in power at those (often children) without.



The first paragraph of *A Hopeless Case*, an unpublished autobiography by Agnes Owens, from The Agnes Owens Archive (reference number AGA.4.4.18.1.8)

Alasdair is everywhere, all over the Archive, in the boxes, on the walls, writing frenzied notes in the margins of the books in his library I pull out to flick through, trying to follow the gorgeous big swirl of influences that lead to the worlds he renders in his novels. He is also all over his novels, can't help himself, at once Duncan Thaw and Lanark and their strange god-figure author.

A breeze: Alasdair writing about his late friend Alan Fletcher in the introduction to the catalogue of the 1986 Scottish Artists Retrospective Show:

“Alan Fletcher was the freest soul I ever met, and impressed me so mightily that a diminished version of him has been a main character in all the novels I ever wrote. He had to be diminished, or he would have stolen attention from my main characters, who were versions of me.”

Agnes doesn't do self-portraits in her published fiction, at least not in the gleeful, joyous, near-incessant way Alasdair does. If she is in here, she is well-hidden behind her characters (most of the time). The journalist Chitra Ramaswamy, who was here at this desk before me, interviewed Agnes for *The Scotsman* when her *Collected Stories* came out, and then quoted her in both [the obituary she wrote for the same paper](#), and in *Rich Things*, the first publication by The Alasdair Gray Archive. This is Agnes talking about how she felt after her son Patrick was stabbed to death when he was nineteen:

“It took all your time to get through the day. You weren't ill, no, and you never became ill, but you would have loved to have died.”

It seems significant that she needed to use third person to express this.

Agnes writes about people in the margins, because she is aware there is not such a distance to fall. There but for the grace of god – but it's not god's grace, just a few flimsy, insecure boundaries. She is so much more aware of their liminality than Alasdair, who was always buoyed up by a sense that he could/should/would be making art, that the world would have to accept that. Agnes did not have anything near this confidence; for a start, her world was so much more domesticated than Alasdair's, her creative life fitted in and around the margins of raising children, keeping house, making ends meet, the everyday occupation of caring for others' intimate needs, none of which seems to have particularly troubled Alasdair or diverted him from the life of his mind. In *A Secretary's Biography* (p. 19), Glass observes that Alasdair “grew up, from a very early age, assuming there was nothing he couldn't do.”

A breeze: I read through early drafts of what will go on to be finished works. The differences in their approaches to the process of creation are

leading me to draw conclusions. I don't know how accurate these conclusions are to either writer, but I will present them anyway.

Alasdair, in his younger days, writes by hand. Notes all over the margins of his books. Drawings and attempts at poems sketched in the spaces of an old company accounting ledger he found in a skip, around someone else's calculations; every bit of free space taken up. I find the first drafts, which must be from the early 1960s, of poems which will go on to be published in *Old Negatives* in 1989. He doesn't cross out words; he just repeats the errant line or stanza until it finds its rhythm. I draw assumptions of surety, confidence, that fit this little story I'm building for myself. The desk that I sit at, underneath shelves stacked with archive boxes of Agnes's letters, press cuttings, early drafts and unpublished writing, faces a long pen and ink drawing done by Alasdair for the cover of Agnes's first book, *Gentlemen of the West*; if I look up from my notebook I stare straight into his Tippex-corrections, applied straight to the picture.



*The desk I usually work from in The Agnes Owens Archive, under Agnes' watchful eye (and typewriter) and Alasdair's Tippex-laden original drawing for the cover of *Gentlemen Of The West* (reference number AGA.3.1.48)*

A breeze sends me to a bookshelf by the window, looking out over the canal from the fifth floor, where I pick up a book called *Loving Alasdair*, written by his friend May Hooper, and happen to find what she wrote about Alasdair's refusal to use a word processor to write with (p. 231):

"It struck me that maybe there was something in that easiness of changing things that made him reject the whole technology. Tippex and scoring out were much more untidy and cumbersome as methods of deletion and alteration, and in a way, constrained the brain to know what it wanted in the first place. And to stick with it. Did digital text processing threaten the creative flow?"

Agnes doesn't handwrite often. It's not where the stories find their first form, at least. She types. I have been thinking a lot about what the typewriter meant to Agnes; her typewriter is sitting on a shelf just over my shoulder as I write this. Typing was a learned skill - she had a qualification in it; her mother insisted she attend typing college when she left school, as she recounts over and over in her stilted drafts of autobiographical writing in the Archive.

Touch-typing is a strange learned process, whereby the fingers learn to hammer a series of complex patterns in milliseconds to translate thought into motion into written word. When Agnes' brain and hands worked together like that at first it meant a skill she had been instructed in for 'betterment', then it became her work, her non-domestic life as a typist and secretary, then it became the way that she wrote creatively, expressed all the facets of her non-domestic life.

I'm doing it now, while thinking about the classroom I learned it in (first year of high school, Business Studies, where we also watched a cartoon showing us that cavemen began to trade red pebbles for food). Because I'm actively contemplating the act of typing, I'm making more mistakes than usual, when the process is allowed to happen subconsciously.

Agnes doesn't often make mistakes, in her typed-out sheets. Her fingers follow her instructions precisely, then she takes her pen to the lines. Then she retypes.

Another breeze: I am poring through these relics of writers' lives and I start thinking about the Muriel Spark short story, 'The House of the Famous Poet', which was inspired by an evening during the war when the new friend who invited her to stay in her employer's empty house for a night turned out to be Louis MacNeice's au pair. Spark has depicted this moment often in her fiction and autobiographical writing, of wandering round the house touching books and tracing writing made all the more significant once she'd discovered

the identity of the hands that had put them there. Is this what I'm doing, I wonder, as I trace Agnes' pen scoring out her own words on a typed sheet, feel the unusual weight of a piece of paper Alasdair has laden with Tippex.



Two views of the recreation of Alasdair Gray's working library in The Alasdair Gray Archive: spot the Dalek, and the Gray(s).

I am talking to Heather about their houses (the Archive is in places a recreation of Alasdair's house; we are sitting in his working library, amidst his volumes of Brontes and Greek tragedies, chess board still mid-game and a toy Dalek nestled up to Francis Bacon's *Essays*). She points out that in newspaper profiles Alasdair is always described within in his surroundings: the vividness of that flat (a place I have never been to) very clear to me, the loving detail with which interviewers recreate the chaos surrounding their chaotic genius. It reminds me of the anger I felt the first time I read the cuttings in the Press folder in the Agnes Owens Archive: broadsheet writers (almost all women) loved to describe their exotic safari trips to Agnes' council home in a Balloch estate. But Agnes is always diminished by her surroundings in these accounts. Look at the room she writes in, they gasp, the ironing board folded up beside the typewriter (Agnes did not have a room of her own). You wouldn't think a writer would live here, almost all of them exclaim.

I look up the Muriel Spark story, trying to find it online to read in that moment, and instead find [a Rachel Cusk story](#) inspired by Spark's story published last year in the *New Yorker*, which leads me to listen to [a podcast interview with Rachel Cusk](#) as I leave the archive and walk along the canal to the city centre. She is talking about her book *Parade*, which studies female art pushed into margins, the way that women deprioritise their creative work over their caring work, or that creative work by women is deprioritised compared to their male counterparts.

When I left the Archive after my first day in there in January, I wrote this very quickly on the walk along the canal:

The unslickening of the world as I flick old paper, trace pen tracks
smell correction fluid that hardened decades before I was born

The layering of life on life, everything reused, nothing wasted

Discarded handwritten accounts from 1953 repurposed, any white space
filled, sketched over, diarised

Then come back to my life in the now and my phone updates itself to
something called "Liquid Glass".