

## *Gorbals is not Paradise (1946)*

Harry McShane

It is a hundred years since Gorbals was annexed to Glasgow, but it looks as if 1946 will pass without a celebration of the event. That is as it should be; the progress made does not call for the lighting of a single bonfire.

The great scientific and technical advancement of the last hundred years is not reflected in the conditions of the people of Gorbals. There is nothing in the appearance of the district that would indicate progress. It might be possible to paint a beautiful picture of Gorbals, providing the painter kept as far away from the district as possible. The less he saw of the real Gorbals, the better the picture.

A stranger could easily be deceived on hearing the street names in a part of the district. We have Cavendish, Bedford, Cumberland, Oxford, Portland, Salisbury, Norfolk, Surrey and Warwick Streets. In addition, we have Carlton Place, named after a mansion once owned by the Prince of Wales. These aristocratic names are accounted for by the fact that the district was owned by a greedy old fellow, Laurie, who named the district Laurieston, after himself, and the streets after his favourite dukes and earls.

There is nothing aristocratic about this closely packed working-class district with almost 10,000 houses, the vast majority of which are of one or two apartments. The streets are dark and miserable, and poverty is evident at every turn. It is questionable if there is another district in the whole of Britain with so much squalor and misery as exists in Gorbals. In Gorbals there are diseases which seldom afflict the aristocracy. Tuberculosis is more prevalent than gout. The bad sanitary conditions, the absence of trees and grass, the lack of recreational facilities, all make it only too clear that the amenities afforded the Gorbals people fall short of those enjoyed by the aristocracy.

There is little of an elevating character in the appearance of the place. Rows of tenements stand on each side of the miserable looking streets. Here and there, the streets are partly covered in by railway bridges over which, from time to time, trains rumble noisily along. There is a growing number of gaps caused by demolition of tenement buildings, just in time to prevent them falling on the inhabitants.

### *Gorbals in the limelight*

Now and then the light of publicity is thrown on Gorbals. Sometimes the more seamy side of life is brought to the forefront, and the general public, in other parts of the country, are given the impression that the people of Gorbals are on a lower moral level than people elsewhere. Some time ago, a book appeared in which Glasgow was painted in a very bad light on the basis of alleged happenings in Gorbals.

A well-known opera company has staged a ballet which conveys a wrong impression of Gorbals. The people of Gorbals would resent the suggestion that the sort of thing depicted in the ballet reflects life in the district.

Recently, a newspaper made a fuss over what they described as vandalism in a Gorbals cemetery. The children of Gorbals did not have a bit of grass to play on, and, being children, they seized the opportunity presented to them when the railings were removed from the

cemetery in Rutherglen Road. The newspapers saw vandalism where ordinary people saw children greedy for a decent place to play.

The people buried in that old cemetery would not object to children playing over their graves. It is not generally known that the cemetery was purchased by the inhabitants of Gorbals in 1715, with money raised by a voluntary tax. They were, evidently, a thoughtful and sociable people, willing to co-operate for a good purpose.

Those who would charge the children with desecration should know that, in 1882, Glasgow Corporation, in order to widen Rutherglen Road, purchased lairs at a cost of £680, removed the remains, and reinterred them in Cathcart and Craigton Cemeteries, at a total cost of £385. This was necessary; but we should not strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. The damage done to the tombstones by the children is regrettable, but the failure to provide the children with proper playground places a share of the responsibility on other shoulders.

Gorbals gets the limelight for the wrong things. A little limelight on the failure of the Corporation to improve the conditions of the people would be more to the point, and would perhaps bring better results.

### *The people of Gorbals*

The people of Gorbals differ very little from people elsewhere. The overwhelming majority of them have to work for their living; and, since Gorbals is not an industrial area, a large number of them have to travel some distance to their places of work. Gorbals is where they eat, sleep, live and die.

The skilled workers, as in most congested areas, are in a minority. In times of trade depression the district is badly hit by unemployment, though a considerable proportion manage to secure steady employment.

Some of the people are in receipt of Public Assistance, and, since the vast majority of able-bodied unemployed in need of relief have now to apply to the Assistance Board, it can be said that most of those on Public Assistance have applied because of ill-health.

There is also a considerable number of shopkeepers and persons engaged in business concerns of moderate size. Very few of them are much better off than the average skilled worker.

It is true to say that living conditions vary, and the houses in the district provide varying degrees of comfort. Facilities for entertainment and recreation being limited, many families content themselves with what little pleasure can be provided at their firesides. For any other entertainment, worthy of the name, the majority of the people find it necessary to leave the district.

Despite these depressing conditions, the people of Gorbals are as good as can be found anywhere. It would be futile to deny that a certain amount of demoralisation exists, particularly among those who have succumbed to the bad conditions, but it would be a slander on the Gorbals people to suggest that demoralisation is widespread throughout the district.

There is undoubtedly a considerable amount of apathy, and this is accounted for by the fact that promises made by various candidates have not been fulfilled. Conditions have become worse despite many promises that they would be improved.

### *The slaughter of infants*

Scotland is notorious for the high death rate among children under one year of age. The worst city in Scotland for infant mortality is Glasgow, and one of the worst districts in Glasgow is Gorbals. Of the thirty-eight wards in the city, Gorbals is either at the top, or second from the top, when, each year, the figures relating to infant mortality are made known.

The latest available figures are for 1945, when the number of children who died in Gorbals before reaching their birthday was 119.

Taking the ten years, 1936 and 1945 inclusive, we get a total of 1,420 children born in Gorbals who died within one year after birth. Here are figures for each of the years:

1936	186
1937	162
1938	130
1939	125
1940	148
1941	177
1942	113
1943	136
1944	124
1945	119
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Total	1420

It will be seen that the figure varies from year to year, but it is always a high figure. It is an established fact that the high death rate is due either to bad housing or poverty, and that in some cases it is a combination of both. There can be other causes for deaths among children, but where the blame is traced to carelessness of parents it can in most cases be shown that the parents themselves are victims of the bad conditions. The greatest factor leading to the high death rate in Gorbals is housing. About that there is no doubt.

### *Those who survive*

Even when the child has reached and passed its first critical birthday, it is not guaranteed a healthy and joyful childhood. It will, in many cases, require to live in an overcrowded room, and that room will probably be in some old tenement which should have been demolished many years ago. The house may even be rat-infested.

What chance have the children got in a place like Gorbals? The schools where they spend a great part of their lives are far from suitable. At least one of them is infested by rats. There is, of course, the Hutcheson's Boys' Grammar School, but that being a fee-paying school, few, if any, Gorbals children go there.

The school should be a clean attractive place designed to take the mind of the child away from the miserable streets and houses of the district. The next step in education, so far as Gorbals is concerned, should be to build decent schools.

Where do the children play? There is a number of playgrounds for the younger children. They are hard coarse playgrounds surrounded by tenements. There is one at the junction of Pollokshaws Road and Cathcart Road. No matter where the child lives, it must cross

tramlines to get to this playground. The point we emphasise here is that the children are not provided for. Our City Fathers are neglecting the city children. We will continue to have the problem of juvenile delinquency until such time as we take the proper steps to prevent it. New schools and playing facilities should be provided for the children.

### *Housing in Gorbals*

Let us look at the housing conditions in Gorbals. The fact that most of the houses are over a hundred years old condemns them as unsuitable in the light of modern requirements.

It is when you appreciate just to what extent they are behind the times that you begin to see how urgent the question of housing really is. The outside lavatories serving, in some cases, seven families, the presence of rats and other vermin, the wet walls and many other evils, drive home the urgency.

The fact that a rat is found in a child's cot in a house in Crown Street; or the fact that a man and woman and five children are living in a single-apartment house in Erroll Street, with rats and snails in the house; or the further fact that there is a tenement in Lawmoor Street with eight feet of water in the basement, and water coming in through the attic, and rats passing the children on the stairs, should be sufficient to spur us into action on the matter.

Nothing has been done to improve Gorbals by the Corporation. Their crowning effort in regard to housing took place before any of us were born, when they stuck a little tenement in Muirhead Street between a railway wall and an old brewery. There are no housing plans for Gorbals. The old houses are, apparently, to be allowed to stand as long as possible, and only if they become an immediate danger will tenants be removed. Houses knocked down remain gaps. There is a report to the effect that one of the gaps will likely be filled by the erection of a dance hall. This is on a site which many thought would be used for housing in the future.

In desperation, many victims of the housing shortage have taken over old shops and endeavoured to convert them into housing accommodation. The effort in the majority of cases is futile. In one case an old rag store was let as a house. There is another in which a money-grabber let out a bathroom for sleeping accommodation. This is a deplorable situation which must have the attention of the Corporation.

The indifference of some of the Corporation members is seen in the fact that exceptionally good houses at the top of Hope Street, owned by the Corporation, have been leased to a furniture firm for a period of twenty years for storage purposes. Other Corporation-owned houses in Gallowgate and Trongate have been similarly let.

Houses are decaying, but the Corporation is slow to act. It has become almost impossible to have an unfit house condemned. Persons living in unfit houses are now among the 'non-urgent' cases. Slum clearance has become a thing of the past. This means that, unless we can force a change in policy, the majority of the people of Gorbals will end their days in their present houses.

This is fine for the factor, but it is very bad for the tenants. Much more could have been done in the pre-war period. It is estimated that the Corporation Housing Committee could have built thirty thousand more houses between the wars. Just before the outbreak of the

war, the output kept going down year by year.

Since the end of the war the Housing Committee has resisted every proposal to speed up house building. They had to be forced to extend their building activities, and even now there is a great reluctance to break with the past. House building is still too slow. The slow progress is covered up by resurrecting, from time to time, the same old housing programme. The nearer it gets to the November elections, the more we will hear of this programme.

In this connection, the role played by the Communist Party in pressing the Corporation is recognised by all who have watched developments in recent years. At one particular period the Communist Party was alone in the fight for the conversion of suitable shops into housing accommodation and for the erection of temporary houses. The Communist Party made public, for the first time, the facts in regard to subletting in Glasgow, and in Gorbals, in particular. The Communist plan to erect 100,000 houses in five years has never been discussed by the Corporation. Repeated efforts to get a hearing by the Corporation have been turned down.

The refusal by leading members of the Corporation to listen to anyone outside their own circle is responsible for their utter failure to meet the needs of the people.

#### *Dirty money*

Connected with the subject of housing is the question of subletting. This does not refer to a person letting a spare room or rooms, but to the racket which has been started in many parts of Glasgow, including Gorbals.

Some of the most disreputable persons imaginable are reaping fortunes out of the misery of those families who have no homes of their own and who are compelled to take whatever accommodation they can get. House factors are using persons as 'principal tenants' to take responsibility for letting the houses out room by room. Since they deal only with the principal tenant they can conceal the fact that they are getting more than the ordinary rents for the houses. This enables them to escape many liabilities which they would otherwise require to face.

Sometimes persons who specialise in this kind of business get control of property which they use to the full for their own personal aggrandisement. Often, it is combined with money-lending and other means of making easy money.

The 'principal tenants' control the electricity. In some cases they take out the fuses at a particular time and leave the sub-tenants in darkness.

There are abuses in connection with gas and other services, all of which are used to enrich an unscrupulous section of the community. The Rents Tribunal, when appealed to, can fix rents; but in no other way is protection given to these sub-tenants. This demoralising business is going on under our very noses, but nothing is done to stop it. Legislation is necessary, but in the meantime steps can be taken by the Corporation in regard to the services under their control. Requisitioning would also be an effective check on the racketeers.

### *Paying the piper*

When Gorbals was annexed to Glasgow, a surplus of £600 was handed over to the Magistrates of Glasgow. This surplus had accumulated in the hands of the Gorbals Statute Labour Trust after having cleared a debt of £1, 000 incurred by an earlier Trust. The Magistrates of Glasgow immediately doubled the assessment of Gorbals although the streets of the district were in an excellent state of repair.

'Senex', writing in the *Glasgow Herald* at the time, said: 'Of course the whole assessment thus laid upon the barony of Gorbals is appropriated to recausewaying the streets of Glasgow proper with fine dressed granite stones.'

This has little or nothing to do with the present situation, but it is a fact that today, a hundred years later, while amenities are provided in many parts of Glasgow, no improvement has taken place in Gorbals although the people of Gorbals, like the people elsewhere, pay their full share of rates.

A householder in Gorbals, who perhaps has paid rates for thirty or forty years, does not share in the amenities he paid for. There is not a tree nor a plot of grass in the district. There is no bowling green in Gorbals. Decent schools are conspicuous by their absence. There is no public hall. More serious than all that, the houses built at public expense have brought no comfort to the Gorbals people because the houses were not built in sufficient numbers.

Many shopkeepers in the district have had a raw deal because the factors have dodged paying their share of rates and have placed a heavier burden on the shoulders of the tenants. Tenants are paying owners' rates in addition to occupiers' rates. Because of the illegality of this, the Corporation does not recognise the change and has raised the assessment so that the tenants are paying, in addition, rates on rates.

When this new burden was imposed on tenants of business premises the Corporation refused to discuss the matter. Only when the Corporation was asked to pay owners' rates for property they had rented from private landlords was the matter discussed. The Corporation then gave in. The Communist Party tried to get something done about it but the property owners got away with it.

It is inevitable that rates will rise as amenities are increased, but where are the amenities in Gorbals?

### *Glasgow plan*

Glasgow Corporation has a fifty-years' plan which, of course, most of us will never see completed even if the Corporation carried it through. The first report was submitted in March, 1945, but not one part of it has yet been approved. If carried out it will mean that other proposals, such as the erection of a bridge at Finnieston, will be thrown to one side. The Corporation works that way.

The second planning report deals with housing and in this connection proposes to erect 207,000 houses. This report would be welcomed enthusiastically if it visualised a more rapid building of the necessary homes. Mr Bruce, the City Engineer, who has drawn up the plan, does not think we can reach an output of more than 10,000 houses per year. He does not say

when he expects even that figure to be reached.

More serious is the fact that the Housing Committee members do not think that the 10,000 will ever be reached and Mr Bruce does not know whether his plan will ever be approved by the Corporation. The members of the Housing Committee smile cynically when anyone talks of building houses speedily and whatever they may say they will only move if pushed.

Plans for Glasgow as a whole would affect Gorbals. The City Engineer's proposal to connect Cumberland Street with Scotland Street is one of them. The removal of the railway bridges would follow if the railway stations were moved away from the centre of the city. Proposals in regard to Glasgow transport would also make a difference to Gorbals.

The changes must start with Housing and every possible step must be taken to bring about improvements as quickly as possible.

A plan of the new Gorbals should be prepared without delay and a start made on demolition and rebuilding. Use should be made of existing gaps. In addition to houses, open spaces together with community centres and other facilities should be provided. The schools, where the children spend so much of their lives, should receive special attention.

Housing is in the forefront and in this regard our standard should be higher when deciding whether a house is fit or unfit. Every house of the single-apartment or room-and-kitchen type is unfit. Every house without a bathroom is unfit. Every house without a separate lavatory is unfit. Judged by that standard how many houses, in Gorbals, would be left standing? There are many houses unsuitable on insanitary grounds which should be demolished speedily and the families living in them should not be regarded as 'non-urgent' cases one day longer.

We are told the cost of land is prohibitive, but already a good deal of land in Gorbals is owned by the Corporation. The financial return from property to the Corporation is higher than for any other ward in Glasgow. In addition, a good deal of house property is changing hands, and although much of it is on Corporation land, speculators are allowed to purchase the property with a view to getting their pound of flesh later. The Corporation could prevent this by purchasing the property themselves when it is being auctioned. Of course, there will be cases in which this is not advisable.

Let the fight on housing start now. The Housing Committee is reluctant to act where bad houses are concerned and the tenants are denied the advantages of the Rent Restrictions Acts because of this. The sanitary authorities must either give the necessary certificates or close the houses. We must insist on this.

The fight to remove the slums must be connected up with the Communist Party demand that house-building be speeded up and 100,000 houses built in five years.

### *Communist Aims*

Much has been said about the aims of the Communists with a view to misleading the people. Even people in Gorbals, who have known some of the local members of the Communist Party for many years, have been confused on the question of what the Communists stand for. Some ridiculous allegations are made against them.

For example, it is said that the Communists would destroy religion. The Communists, on the contrary, are the strongest advocates of freedom for people of all religions. The right to worship should be allowed equally to all denominations.

The Communists are said to be paid agents of Moscow. Their interest in Soviet Russia is based on the fact that the people of that country are endeavouring to build a new society on a socialist basis.

The Communists are charged with wanting to take away personal belongings. This is not true. They advocate the common ownership of the means of production so that no man will be in a position to exploit another.

The Communists want to build a new system of society without unemployment, war and preventable disease. They are not content to deplore the evils of capitalism - they aim at ending capitalism.

The future of the human race depends on making the greatest use of all man's scientific and technical achievements but this is not possible under a system run in the interests of a few. Only socialism can bring that about.

Man can rise to a higher moral and cultural level. He can change his environment and in doing so change himself. The Communists whose interests are bound up with the interest of the people, stand for the greatest change in history, but the people must join in to bring that change about.

#### *First steps in Gorbals*

The Communists, while seeing the need for a fundamental change, never shut their eyes to the job immediately in front of them. The Gorbals branch of the Communist Party asks the people in the districts to unite on the following issues in a campaign which should start immediately:

1. The issue of certificates by the sanitary authority for repairs to be done in houses which need repairs. Condemnation of unfit houses. A start to be made by building houses on ground available.
2. Improvement and extension of public wash-houses. Open a day nursery for children. Replace the worst schools by new up-to-date schools immediately. Improve and extend children's playgrounds.
3. Build a public hall. Lay out a proper open space where old people and others can sit in comfort. Erect a decent hut for old men to gather and pass their time. Provide a recreation centre for young people.

These steps should be part of a plan. No time should be lost in making a start. House-building should come before all else but it is possible to provide the other facilities and build houses at the same time. If these proposals are carried through, Gorbals will be paradise compared to what it is to-day.

We should aim at doing all this within five years. It can and will be done if we clear away the existing apathy and fight as right-thinking men and women should fight when their

future welfare is at stake.