

#freetopiary: An Occupy Romance

by Peter Burnett

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Review by Mike Russell

With the arrest in 2011 of Jake Davis, a hacktivist from the Shetland Isles, cyber-warfare claimed its first Scottish casualty. Mr Davis, then 18, was charged with five offences, including conspiracy to attack the website of the Serious Organised Crime Agency. Working under the codename Topiary, he was part of the collective known as LulzSec. Among other targets, their hit-list comprised a corporate affiliate of the FBI, and the US Senate. In all, Mr Davis, who managed LulzSec's Twitter account, served 38 days in prison.

In Peter Burnett's *#freetopiary: An Occupy Romance*, from Argyll Publishing imprint Thirsty Books, we have the young cyber-warrior himself, personifying an ideal, aided and abetted by an initially unwilling accomplice. Unlike the main characters in a romance of old, it is bicycles, not horses, that are the preferred means of transport. In Burnett's novella of ideas this low-carbon method of travel is also a means of escaping the witless agents of state power. As a byproduct, cycling also reveals details of the natural world that motorists miss as they zoom past. This is all of a piece with the novella's ancillary themes.

The two young picaros - one greenhorn and one seasoned campaigner - are thrown together because both are accused of having committed the very modern offence of eCrime. The main character, the narrator, is not Topiary, but Alan Stewart (now *there's* a name with literary and historical resonance) who takes a wrong turn on the road to a legitimate career in IT. His eventual soulmate-in-crime, however, is driven by the imperative to resist political and cultural hegemony, maintained in part by the secrecy of Governments and the surveillance industries. This, indeed, was the real Topiary's statement of intent.

Given the recent revelations surrounding GCHQ and Prism *#freetopiary...* is a timely work. Over the course of this slender volume we are taken from the land of Sir Walter Scott to Aberdeen, from the realm of invented tradition to a local manifestation of that earthly power of the 21st Century, Big Oil. Can we Scots awaken from our tartanised consensus reality and listen to what people like Topiary have to say? This is the question Burnett seems to be asking. It's a big subject for a little book. But he pulls it off without ever sounding fatuous or hectoring.

At the core of the narrative is a man whose fate is being decided in a Maryland courtroom. Bradley Manning, the whistleblower whose most famous leak gave us a hawk's-eye impression of the banality of evil (from the cockpit of an Apache helicopter), doesn't appear in person, but his invocation underscores the themes of the book – the right to privacy and the right to access hidden information. And also the right to keep hold of personal data if you don't want it cast to the four winds like any other commodity, far less as actionable intelligence.

The adults in the piece are alienated and hermetic in their habits: idealists who have curdled with age. It is the young, inevitably – those 'whose world is coming' – who realise what's at stake.

#freetopiary... offers the intriguing possibility that the threat posed by cold-eyed machine-perception, and the instrumentalism of judgement by database, is only truly grasped by the young because they have a sharper awareness of it; they were born into this world of ubiquitous computing, and some of them know how to use its technology as weapons. As an adventure/thriller, *#freetopiary: An Occupy Romance*, works. It also fits neatly into the bildungsroman genre. Brevity has implications for context and emotional investment, but, for a journey undertaken at break-neck speed, the focus remains fixed upon the principals and their predicament.

When he cleared out Lulzsec's Twitter account just before his arrest, Jake Davis left a single tweet: You can't arrest an idea. If that's a challenge to authority, Burnett's novella is a call to arms. When you read about what Carrier IQ is up to on your smartphone, that exhortation might sound a little louder.

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