



Urban Pastoral

The Colin MacInnes Omnibus: City of Spades, Absolute Beginners, Mr Love and Justice
Allison and Busby £6.95

Colin MacInnes was born in London in 1914, and lived there for the 30 years before his death in 1976. More than that, he came from a family of established writers, artists and *literati*. His mother, the popular novelist Angela Thirkell, was herself the daughter of William Morris's friend and biographer, J W Mackail, and the granddaughter of the painter Edward Burne-Jones. Kipling was a cousin. So, for that matter, was Stanley Baldwin.

Encumbered with such a start in life, most fledgling literary talents might have been expected to sink into respectable mediocrity without a ripple. But MacInnes was saved from Oxbridge, Bloomsbury and the Great Tradition by the happy chance of spending the formative years of schooling and adolescence - thanks to his mother's second marriage - in Australia. And when he returned to England after the war, he brought with him the freshness of eye and style, if not of an 'absolute beginner', at least of an alert and sceptical outsider, as well as a timbre of response to postwar Britain which, while often sharp and disenchanting, avoids both the bilious portentousness and the underlying sentimentality and complacency of his contemporary, home-grown 'Angries'.

In another sense, too, MacInnes was an 'outsider'. Openly homosexual before Wolfenden (in an era, that is, when on top of the traditional British hatred, ridicule and contempt, gay men faced also the constant threat of blackmail, prison and

public humiliation), he dealt with sexual difference and preference with a relaxed and good-humoured candour found rarely enough in the fiction of the 80s, never mind the 50s. *Absolute Beginners*, probably the best-known of his 'London novels', was published in 1959. In this book, in its predecessor *City of Spades* (1957) and in the more tightly-structured, less anecdotal *Mr Love and Justice* (1960), he discovered a striking kind of urban pastoral, a sort of 20th century Beggars' Opera, peopled by characters at once innocent and knowing, hard-boiled and vulnerable, and recorded it with a stylised colloquiality described by MacInnes himself as 'a language that was almost entirely an invented one; though true, as far as I could make it, to the minds and spirits of the characters I was describing'.

As this suggests, the intention was far from documentary. MacInnes called the three novels 'poetic evocations of a human situation, with undertones of social criticism'. He was, clearly enough, no 'classic realist', and the common comparison with Orwell is wide of the mark. But it does not follow from this that the three novels are not of great historical and social interest and significance, not only for their refreshing treatment of sexuality and their unpatronising engagement with the lives of young people ('absolute beginners') but also, above all, for their prophetic focus on the central ideological fact of postwar English society: its racism. In all three novels, black characters ('spades' in 50s' slang) both play an important role in their own right and serve as a kind of ideological and moral reference-point for the society as a whole. The inconsequentially picaresque narrative of *Absolute Beginners* is given depth and structure by the narrator's incredulously appalled recognition of the pervasiveness of racial malevolence, from the casual street violence of Ed the Ted and the rhetorical incitements of Speakers' Corner crackpots, to the editorials of posh papers and the entire institutional culture of the 'ruling elders'.

This recognition drives the protagonists to escape: Johnny Fortune, the Nigerian student back to Lagos in *City of Spades*; the teenage narrator of *Absolute Beginners* to South America (though, in fact, he gets no further than the airport). This may look a bit like the 'magic solutions' often resorted to by romantic novelists to resolve the intractable problems in which their

characters are enmeshed. But, just as his novels are not 'realist' in the traditional sense, so his endings remain open, interrogative. Johnny, returning to Nigeria, still calls London 'my city', and we cannot doubt that he will be back. *Beginners* ends with a gesture of humorous and embattled solidarity, not escapism or despair. These are novels of disillusion, of innocence lost and betrayed, of a world of promises turning cold and sour: pastoral fading into a harsher, more familiar reality. They are also funny, inventive, hopeful, above all friendly. In *Absolute Beginners* there is a character who is described as 'witty, or I should say sharp-tongued, but most of all. . . really very friendly: I mean, he really *does like* people, which a lot of people think they do, but which it seems, as a matter of fact, is really very rare'; and this is not a bad description of MacInnes's writing itself. All three novels for £6.95 is a bargain, and should not be missed.

Tony Davies