

Images of Soho

JULIAN Maclaren-Ross is not remembered by many today, but he should be. He was one of Britain's foremost 20th century literary talents.

His work offers a wonderful insight into the Britain of the 1930s and '40s executed in an avant-garde style that combined factual material with fictional devices. It is direct and uncluttered.

Graham Greene and John Bejeman, among many others, were fans, the latter claiming that Maclaren-Ross possessed genius.

However, because of his commitment to extreme bohemian activities, he did not produce the same volume of output, or consistency of quality, as better-remembered authors who were his contemporaries.

His working day usually commenced only in the early hours of the morning following a return from a hard day's drinking in the bars of London's West End. As his biographer puts it, "he was a mediocre caretaker of his own immense talent."

However, the tide has started to turn. A movement has been gathering momentum over the past two years intent on bringing Maclaren-Ross back to literary life and to the attention of a new generation.

The campaign was kick-started by Paul Willett's much-praised *Fear and Loathing in Fitzrovia*: the Bizarre life of Writer, Actor and Dandy Julian Maclaren-Ross (Dewi Lewis).

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Lewis) is also now available. Some detractors have cruelly claimed that Maclaren-Ross's cult following owes more to his flamboyant personality than his actual literary ability.

Unfair, but, certainly, he cut fascinating figure, striding around the streets of central London in trademark aviator dark shades, cigarette-holder jutting out

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of tightly clenched mouth, nonchalantly swinging a malacca cane, clad in a camel-hair coat, suit, carnation, black shirt, cravat or silk tie. The cane came in handy on numerous occasions when being attacked by drunks believing him to be "queer."

As DJ Taylor put it, at the above mentioned event, Maclaren-Ross was obsessed with maintaining his 'personal myth' and this he did with considerable dedication.

This resulted in Anthony Powell and others basing fictional characters of their own on JMR.

In *A Dance to the Music of Time*, he is cast as the writer X Trapnel. This self-induced "myth" had first started to take shape as a youth being brought up in France, where his unconventional parents (father Cuban/Scots, mother Anglo/Indian) had moved in 1921.

As a teenager, he developed a foppish look based on his hero Oscar Wilde, later augmented with reference to US gangster characters depicted in pulp crime fiction and movies of the time. This somewhat incongruous identity JMR was to remain true to for the rest of his life.

ARTS VIEW

MARC GLENDENING takes a look at the growing cult surrounding the life and works of eccentric London writer Julian Maclaren-Ross.

houses, pubs, tea shops and the seemingly respectable lower-middle-class homes that the principal character enters to provide demonstrations of the cleaning prowess of the latest Hoover model.

The undertone of human tragedy conveyed by this book is carried off with great humour and lightness of touch. An example of this is the description of the tea party the firm's regional managers held on the last Friday of every month at a Brighton hotel to boost the resolve and morale of their sales force.

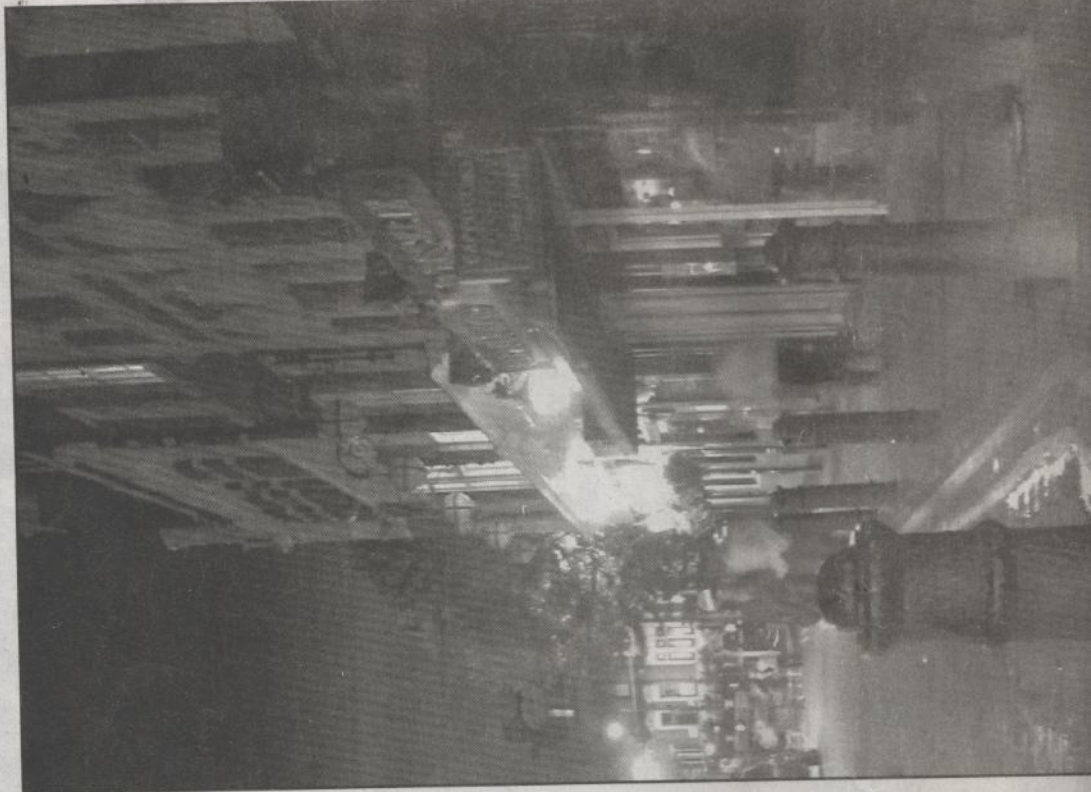
Before the desperately hungry "Hoovermen" can make a charge for the plates full of cakes that await them,

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they are first forced to sing bizarre company songs accompanied by a Captain Mainwaring-type character playing the piano.

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Last month, the Sohemian Society organised an event entitled *Our Man in Soho* before a capacity crowd at a local theatre to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the writer's untimely death.

The cultural commentator Jonathan Meades, Orwell biographer DJ Taylor and *The Independent's* agony aunt Virginia Ironside read extracts from the recently published *Collected Memoirs* (Black Spring Press). In addition, a collection of his *Selected Stories* (Dewi

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On returning to Britain in the 1930s, he was not prepared to conform obediently to the suffocating and highly stratified class structure of the time. He sought to earn his living by a combination of writing and, pre-war, by taking low-paid, piecemeal work.

In one of his financially desperate periods, he attempted to sell vacuum cleaners door to door in southern coastal towns.

This resulted in *Of Love and Hunger* set in the run-up to war. It offers a vivid insight into the then world of boarding

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Hamilton, as the recent article in the *Morning Star* by John Branston pointed out, was likewise a master chronicler and dissector of Britain's social anatomy from the same period.

He frequented the same petit bourgeois landscape as JMR, but his stories conveyed an altogether more explicitly sinister atmosphere.

The related spectres of fascism and psychopathy are never far away in Hamilton's writing, whereas, for Maclaren-Ross, though a Labour Party supporter, politics was not as explicit or

significant a theme.

His work was altogether lighter and more optimistic in tone and content. Despite their differences, both writers transport the reader right back to a different, yet not entirely unrecognisable, Britain and its distinctive characters, environments, mores, patterns of speech and social system.

Following his discharge from the army in 1943, JMR gravitated to his spiritual home of Soho. Over the next 22 years of his life, he could be found virtually every night in his favourite pub, The Wheatsheaf on Rathbone Place in Fitzrovia.

This became the unofficial base of London's literati, including Maclaren-Ross's friends Dylan Thomas and Graham Greene, plus painters such as Nina Hammet, John Minton, Colquhoun and MacBride.

However, drinking in The Wheatsheaf and a lam until 5am working day were the only constants in his chaotic life. Despite intermittent literary success and acting appearances in BBC radio plays that he had written, his life post-war became an increasingly exhausting succession of changes of abode, frequently involving farcical escapes through back windows to avoid landlords, debt collectors, bailiffs, and solicitors.

In the late 1950s, he was often reduced to sleeping rough — his favourite alternative places of residence being the old Euston station and Turkish baths in Russell Square.

Needless to say, these experiences provided rich artistic inspiration. The extraordinary quantities of alcohol and drugs that he was consuming were also beginning to take their toll on his already fragile mental state.

The refusal of George Orwell's widow Sonia to reciprocate Maclaren-Ross's sexual obsession resulted in him directing a campaign of abuse against her, often in the early hours outside her Percy Street flat.

He became convinced that a certain "Mr Hyde" — him again — was in control of his actions. Maclaren-Ross died aged 52 in November 1964. It was a highly appropriate death. He had just finished consuming an entire bottle of brandy to celebrate news of a new com-

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mission.

Maclaren-Ross deserves the new audience that is emerging for his work.

He was a very talented writer and his life, perhaps more than anybody else's, conjures up a rich series of Soho related images — a smouldering cigarette in a dimly lit dubious alley, loud and louche individuals engaging in badinage in a crowded pub, the sound of jazz wafting up from a cellar bar and a man wearing dark glasses marching resolutely through the night to catch the last Tube train home.

● *Marc Glendening is campaign director of the Democracy Movement and secretary of the Sohemian Society.*

ON THE INTERNET
www.sohemians.com

