

Society's inaugural pub crawl visits haunts of MacClaren-Ross

# Sohemians raise a glass to the spirits of Soho

by JONATHAN ALLEN

THE old haunts of Julian Maclaren-Ross – writer, actor, Soho dandy – were visited on the inaugural pub crawl of a new society dedicated to all things Soho.

Members of the Sohemian Society – established to ‘challenge the banality of modern life’ – consider Ross, perhaps the most louche and decadent member of the 1940s’ literary boho scene, to be their spiritual leader.

The trip to pubs scattered throughout Soho and Fitzrovia last Thursday night was a fine tribute to his memory.

About 15 characters, including Sohemian founders Marc Glendenning and Ian Farrow, along with Mark Seddo, editor of Tribune magazine and a devotee of Soho, convened at the French House, in Dean Street.

There they were introduced to Ross’s old 1940s associates, artist Jack Daniel and his quiet physician friend Jimmy Winston.

Jack was full of wicked stories; Jimmy was happy chuckling into his wine.

Finishing their drinks, the group headed on to the Wheatsheaf Pub in Rathbone Place – Ross’s preferred hangout.

It has changed little since his time, retaining its fusty, old coaching inn atmosphere. Upstairs, Paul Willetts read extracts from his recent biography on Ross, ‘Fear and Loathing in Fitzrovia’.

Born plain old Jimmy



Marc Glendenning, left, with Paul Willetts, centre, and Ian Farrow in the Wheatsheaf pub

Ross in South Norwood, Julian Maclaren-Ross was a triumph of self-invention.

He fostered an image part Oscar Wilde, part Hollywood heavy, and in doing so became the embodiment of 1940s’ London’s raffish bohemianism.

Rarely seen without his dark glasses and cigarette-holder, he was at the centre of this milieu – he worked alongside Dylan Thomas as a jobbing screenwriter and wrote TV scripts for

which he was never proud, yet supplied him with ready funds to buy Younger’s especially strong scotch ale.

But he never achieved the same level of fame as his contemporaries, dying at the age of 52, suffering from a heart attack after years of alcohol and drug abuse in Soho.

His finest book – Of Love and Hunger – only came back into print last year, as a Penguin Modern Classic.

Willetts said: “Every-

one should read it. It’s a great book and the unacknowledged root of the ‘chatty’ vernacular so in vogue these days. What Nick Hornby is doing is nothing new.”

Willetts continued: “Ross had a massive influence on dozens of modern writers and there is something of a reappraisal. Pinter read him on the radio and I hope there is a more general recognition what a great writer he was.”

Jack Daniel applauded the rekindled interest in

Ross, but had some reservations: “It’s the women who are always forgotten in these histories. Take Eileen Fox (a local character). What a girl! If she was out late and needed the fare home, she’d look for



Julian Maclaren-Ross

someone she liked and raise her skirt and reveal she wasn’t wearing any knickers. That gets you 10 shillings.”

But the Sohemians are to challenge this perception with their next meeting in the New Year.

Ian Farrow said: “Female wrestling – a deeply misunderstood sport – is already down to be covered in the future. We hope to have an exhibition match.”

But can a line be drawn between Julian Maclaren-Ross, 1940s literary boho, with 21st century women wrestlers?”

Ian replied: “I think there is a definite link, yes. But this is something we’ll be debating at future meetings.”

For more information about the Sohemian Society ring Marc Glendenning on 020 7586 9926.

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