

Another run for the 'prostitutes' padre'

Claire McGlasson's novels fictionalise contentious figures from early-20th-century Christianity. She talks about them to Sarah Meyrick

IN HER new novel, *The Misadventures of Margaret Finch*, the author Claire McGlasson tells the story of a young woman who finds herself in Blackpool in the 1930s, a recruit of the relatively new Mass-Observation project. Her job was to work undercover, recording people's conversations and behaviour, as part of a national scheme, which ran from 1937 until the mid-1960s, designed to build a picture of life in Britain.

In the story, Margaret encounters the Revd Harold Davidson, formerly Rector of Stiffkey, in Norfolk, who is down on his luck and trying to scratch a living through increasingly bizarre appearances as a showman. These culminate — catastrophically — in an extraordinary stunt involving the recreation of Daniel in the lions' den.

Davidson, nicknamed "the prostitutes' padre", is, of course, a historical figure (1875-1937) who combined his parish duties with an enthusiastic ministry to women of "easy virtue" in Soho — and was unfrocked after a notorious public trial (Books, 29 December 2007).

His case was the subject of national scandal and speculation; views on his behaviour remain divided today. Was he unjustly accused, and innocent of wrongdoing, or an exploiter of the vulnerable? His epitaph at Stiffkey reads: "He was loved by the villagers who recognised his humanity and forgave him his transgressions."

This is not the first novel to be written about Davidson; there have also been musicals, a play, and a film. What was it that caught Ms McGlasson's interest?

She says that she came across the Stiffkey story in the course of her work for ITV News, for series, *Hidden Histories*. "When you've worked the same patch for many years, as I have, finding something that you've never heard of before can be quite challenging," she says.

Davidson's story was extraordinary: an instance of the fact that is stranger than fiction. "I knew there was something there," she says. But it wasn't until she went up to Blackpool — "a big part of my family history: the book is dedicated to my grandparents, who spent their summer holidays there" — and started going through the archives at the museum and reading about the side-shows that were such a feature of Blackpool summer holidays that the idea really took shape.

"I came across Mass-Observation, which I'd heard about for its later

work, and the diaries that people kept, but I had no idea of this sort of undercover operation and how it started," she says.

THE premise of the novel is that Margaret stumbles across Davidson in the course of her research and employs her powers of observation in an attempt to discover the truth about him. "I didn't want to write just about Davidson," Ms McGlasson says. "I was more interested in the women around him."

Why does the fictional Margaret become quite so fixated on Davidson? "I think he was very charismatic . . . certainly his parishioners, from what I have read, loved him. I think he also takes an interest in her, in a way that she's not used to."

Margaret is drawn as a character "who desperately wants to believe in an absolute truth", the author says. "She wants to [believe that] there's a right and a wrong and a true and a false. And he's a bit of an enigma to her. I think she also thinks that she can help him . . . He's in quite a precarious position by the time he's in Blackpool."

So, does Ms McGlasson herself cast Davidson as villain or hero? "I want readers to make up their own minds," she says. "I know what I think, but I don't want to pre-empt that." She hopes that readers will finish the book before turning to the internet ("the problem with writing about a real person from history").

What is the appeal of blending fact and fiction? "I think that it comes largely from my work as a journalist, probably. For me, when I watch or read something, and it says 'inspired by a true story', I just find it much more interesting and compelling."

There is, however, an ethical challenge. "I think that when we're writing about real people, we have to be comfortable with sitting within our

own boundaries," she says. "I wanted everything that I wrote to grow from something I'd read. . . I want it to grow from the truth."

Ms McGlasson wrote the book during lockdown. "But some of the ideas grew from my reporting of Brexit," she says. She was fired up by her observation that people from deprived areas of the of the country were dismissed during the Brexit debate.

"Their voices were silenced rather than engaged with," she says. "Undoubtedly, in my view, there were some pretty hateful views expressed during Brexit, which I found personally objectionable. But I think the broad-brush dismissal of genuine concerns about the funding of public services and so on left a silence which, ironically, allowed right-wing voices to be amplified."

"The 'othering' of groups of people based on class is something I feel very strongly about. Poverty does not necessarily equate to ignorance."

This was reflected in the framing of the Mass-Observation project, which is explored in the novel. "Tom Harrisson, one of the founders, said he'd studied the cannibals of Borneo and now wanted to study the cannibals of Britain. . . There's this idea that [working-class] people can be mocked or ignored."

The best historical fiction holds a mirror up to the past, she says. "We think that class used to be a problem, but it's still very prevalent; and we think that this obsession with celebrity and the cult of personality is [something we experience] only now; but if you look back at Davidson you realise that he was infamous. . . That's where I was coming from."

THIS book, *The Misadventures of Margaret Finch*, is Ms McGlasson's second novel. Her first, *The Rapture*, was also inspired by history and has



a religious theme. It tells the story of the Panacea Society, a group of women who moved to Bedford in the 1920s, believing that their leader, Octavia, was the Daughter of God and the Messiah (Features, 27 July 2011).

"Octavia" was, in fact, the widow of a vicar, and formerly known as Mabel Barltrop, who came to believe that she had the power to bring an end to the world's suffering. Her followers began to flock to the town, buying neighbouring houses so that they could knock down garden walls to create a communal space, which, they claimed, was the site of the Garden of Eden.

The Panacea Society believed that women would bring salvation, after the loss of their husbands, brothers, and sons in the First World War. The route to a better future lay partly in a box sealed by the prophetess Joanna

Southcott more than a century earlier; she had specified that it could be opened only at a gathering of the 24 bishops of the Church of England. (The bishops were not inclined to co-operate.)

"The women of the Panacea Society were infamous, just as Davidson was," Ms McGlasson says. "They became the punchline of a joke. They were ridiculed, but they sought this publicity themselves, hiring billboards and printing pamphlets."

It would be easy to ridicule the Society's members, she says. "But I was much more interested in why they would be in that situation, and why they would stay in a situation like that, how that happens."

"I don't think the facts always tell the full story. It's the gap between how someone sees their life and how

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Harold Davidson at a pyjama party in his rectory, in an undated photograph taken before 1932

From the Church Times of 15 July 1932:

HIS conduct was, to say the least, throughout foolish and eccentric. Yet there can be no doubt that he was originally moved by a high Christian impulse, and that he is still regarded by many as a champion of the outcast and the wretched.

However necessary the proceedings may have been, the spirit in which they were conducted has shocked the public conscience. The secret inquiry agents, the characters of some of the unnecessary witnesses, above all, the photograph, made the trial both undignified and unChristian.

We are reluctant to criticize Chancellor North, who, owing to the way in which the case was placed before him, was faced with a number of questions of fact which, unlike an ordinary criminal judge, he could not leave to a jury, but had to decide himself. . . [But] A word of real sympathy by the Judge for the ideal which, at least in the beginning of his career, Mr. Davidson had set before himself, would have raised the Church in the opinion of the masses.