Feature

You can't take the girl out of Glasgow

Ellie Harrison was paid £15,000 by Creative Scotland to fund her arts project, The Glasgow Effect, in which she undertook not to leave the city for a year to study the effect on her mental health. Condemned as a dilettante who had parachuted in from the south of England, she has now published a book about her experiences

BY VICKY ALLAN

Ellie Harrison, artist and author of The Glasgow Effect, found herself in the eye of a media storm

Picture: Kirsty Anderson

EVEN knowing what she knows now, Ellie Harrison says she wouldn't have changed anything about the way she presented her controversial art project The Glasgow Effect – not the greasy chips image that launched it and caused such outrage, or even the title itself which rubbed up much of Glasgow and turned her, as she put it back in 2016, "into a middle class punchbag".

She was given funding by Creative Scotland not to leave Glasgow and not to travel over 20 miles an hour for a year to study the impact on her career and mental health. "The one thing," she muses, "that I slightly wish is that the attack hadn't been so personalised. But I know I brought that on myself because I'd made it about a very individual action. So that was inevitable."

We meet at Buchanan bus station. Harrison has arrived on her bike, wearing a fluorescent jacket which makes her look a bit like she might be employed somewhere on the site. It's testimony to how nervous she feels about being the target of mob anger that she is anxious about being photographed in a favourite piece of clothing. There was a time, she recalls, during the early days of the onslaught that she was scared of going outside. "It was just a miracle that I actually managed to hold it together, for about a month ... my whole body was shaking like this for about a month and half... The sense of relief when it was over was just absolutely immense, to not feel like everyone is watching you the whole time. But I brought it all on myself."

Her nervousness, however, isn't stopping her from putting herself out there once more and publishing a book, The Glasgow Effect: A Tale Of Class, Capitalism and Carbon Footprint, on the art project which saw her the centre of a social media, and media, shame-storm. She became the target of a barrage of 8,800 Facebook comments, many of them abusive and misogynistic, some of them drawing attention to her Englishness, or caricaturing her as entitled middle-class, which only ended when she shut down her Facebook page.

Is she scared now? "I guess there is a fear about what publishing my story like this will prompt – but I can't not do it. I'm definitely anxious about it, but I can't not do it." That seems to be part of her nature, an inability to stop herself from doing the thing she part fears. She recalls it was partly what drove the project itself. "I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't not do it once the idea had come to me. I had to write this funding application, and at the same time I was thinking that actually I hate cars and I really wondered if I could not go in a car for a year. Is that possible? All of these ideas were coming together. I was so sick of getting on trains and travelling around. All of these ideas fused together and I had to do it. I had to see what happens."

There is a lot in the book. It feels a bit like it's a story of 'everything I ever read and thought in the time leading up to the Glasgow Effect, during it, and after' – as if detailing all that were what was ultimately needed to explain the project, and to convey its ideas. A chapter titled Thatcher's Children tells the story of her childhood growing up in Ealing, London, the child of two teachers, her mother a Greenham Common protester who campaigned against selective education. There's no doubting this is the work of a lifelong activist dedicated to fighting inequality and neoliberalism. "I wanted to provide a whole context for what I did," she says. "I know I maybe went a little bit far with that, telling my whole life story. But I felt like it's relevant, having been accused of parachuting in."

The person who accused her of that was, memorably, Darren McGarvey, who, in an article at the time, wrote, "It's horrendously crass to parachute someone in on a poverty safari while local authorities are cutting finance to things like music tuition for Scotland's poorest kids."

Our meeting point, in the shadow of the quirky clock-on-legs sculpture at the bus station, in fact, has been chosen chiefly because one of the things that fascinates me the most about Harrison is her public transport geekery, and above all her obsession with the bus system. It was what thrilled me when she talked at the Edinburgh International Book Festival earlier in the year. Reregulating the buses doesn't sound like a grand thing – it's not even as up-there, in terms of glamour, as rail nationalisation. But Harrison manages to make publicly-owned transport, and ideally free bus travel, seem like an inspired answer, or at least an important part of the answer to some of the biggest problems of our times – inequality and the climate crisis. She has even written a show on the subject, Bus Regulation: The Musical, which was performed in Manchester last month, and which she hopes, if she can get the funding, she can put on in Glasgow.

Harrison recalls how during her year of The Glasgow Effect she went to six of the monthly Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) meetings, often wearing a

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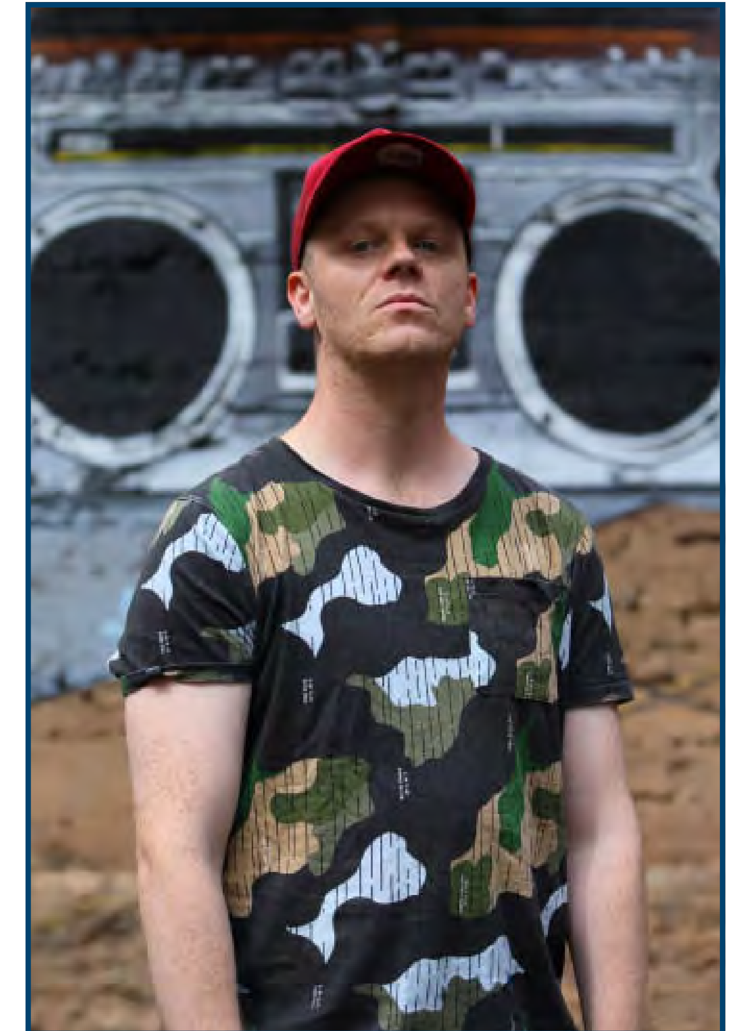
Harrison has long campaigned for better public transport; Darren McGarvey said her Glasgow Effect project was a 'poverty safari'



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T-shirt with the logo F** First Buses, the group she set up as a "venting ground for angry passengers being ripped-off and p****d-off by Glasgow's private bus companies".

"For me that was the art unfolding there in those SPT meetings – and actually there were some comedy moments. For instance, somebody on the board said, 'That young lady at the back. Can she take her T-shirt off?'"

She was always, she adds, the only member of the public there. "One time I counted all the men in the room and there were seventeen men in the room and three women. And of the three women in the room, none were allowed to speak. Because I was an observer, two were secretaries and not on the board. Which is ridiculous because women disproportionately rely on public transport."

Harrison is an advocate of free bus travel as well as public ownership. "Make it free," she says, "which they are doing in hundreds of places across the world, and we would disproportionately benefit women, people on low incomes. For so many a massive barrier in their lives is removed."

F** First Buses, it turns out is one of four public transport campaigning groups she has set up. As it happens, on the day The Glasgow Effect went live on Facebook, she was in London doing an interview for Bring Back British Rail. "When I started doing The Glasgow Effect I kept on organising these demos, as I normally did, and then I got papped. I was at the station doing this demo and I was papped and a newspaper ran a story saying, 'Spotted, Ellie Harrison – she's going to be trying to infiltrate all of these demos from now on, for her project.' I was like, 'I f***ing organised the thing.'"

It's nearly four years since The Glasgow Effect launched, and it feels like we've learned a lot about ourselves. Arguably it worked. Harrison's project did prompt a lot of much-needed debate, on everything from what indeed The Glasgow Effect was (an excess of mortality in all demographics, not just those in poverty, though poverty is a factor in many of Glasgow's early deaths), why it might be happening and what's wrong with the arts funding and education system in Scotland. Commentator Pat Kane even wrote that her year of funding could be seen as a kind of trial of Basic Income.

Her project's concerns with carbon footprint and finding new ways of living for a low emissions future, of change on an individual and, more importantly, at a systems level, have also become more mainstream. "I was in my flat writing and watching Greta Thunberg and that movement unfolding in the world and that was a really amazing thing to witness, and I did feel vindicated."

But it's still hard to feel entirely comfortable with her use of the term "The Glasgow Effect". It still feels as if was only justified by everything that happened afterwards.

Even she part-acknowledges this, when, in her book, she writes, "Had I known everything that I know now about 'the Glasgow effect', then perhaps I wouldn't have had the guts to do what I did. But that would have been a great shame. Instinct and naivety can create powerful art."

Another good, paradoxically, bound up with The Glasgow Effect was that it was part of Darren McGarvey's journey to greater recognition. McGarvey strove to encapsulate what he felt a whole swathe of people were feeling when he wrote an article in which he describe's Harrison's project as a "poverty safari". Even if the phrase didn't fit with what Harrison was doing, it seemed to chime with something we knew happened. Though McGarvey would soon express regrets over having found himself at the "head of an angry mob", and acknowledge her as "an ally", the phrase "poverty safari" gained a currency. Soon it would be the title for his Orwell prize winning book, published originally, like The Glasgow Effect, by Luath.

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Harrison has objected to McGarvey's description of her as "parachuting in". As she puts it in her book, "I had been living here more than seven years, that would make the longest parachute drop in history. How long do you have to live in a place to be permitted to criticise it?"

Those who missed the vitriol can find some of it printed there, shockingly, in her book. She has included a ten-page selection from the 8,800 comments that went up on her Facebook page before she closed it down. In July last year she began rereading them as preparation for writing her book, and immediately found herself sucked into what she calls the "Facebook wormhole", a place she had gone to in 2016 when the comments were first posted. Her chapter on that episode took her just a week to write. "It was all the stuff I had been thinking about for so long, and I was finishing it off in my studio, I had a massive anxiety about going outside. It was like I was right back there. My heart started racing and it felt to me like when I go out everyone is going to want to attack me."

The comments are wide-ranging. They range from unprintable, misogynistic abuse to messages of support. One person writes, "This burds going to have a wider manhunt than Osama had."Another observes, "I feel sorry for the girl now but how disconnected from reality do you have to be to have thought that this was a good idea, and maybe not have predicted how it might be perceived by some people – well, everyone apart from hipsters and art students really. What sort of friends does she have that encouraged her to do this, what sort of bubble do these people live in?"

She still sees what she did, in not leaving Glasgow and not travelling over 20 miles an hour, as "an extreme thing" – in spite of the point made by many that there are plenty of people who, many of them due to poverty, never get the opportunity to leave Glasgow. But, if we're honest, for a large section of the Glaswegian population it would feel extreme.

What upset a lot of people was the £15,000 she was getting as funding from Scotland's national arts body. It's not hard to see why anyone who has ever lived in poverty, or seen its impact, might have been enraged at this, but, it also seems in a world of vast inequalities, a surprising target for this fury. The main point of the £15,000 funding was, effectively, for her to take a break from her job teaching in Dundee and stay in the city. In the book, she details how she broke down her £15,000 into £8,400 living expenses and £6,600 for the projects and campaigns themselves. That's obviously more than some people have, but also not all that very much.

Just as people on benefits have been scapegoated, it seemed like this artist on funding was being scapegoated. Even the Daily Mail, she recalls, contacted her looking for a response, saying that their readers would be angry with the amount of money she was getting. "I thought, what planet are you living on? But then I realised, the smaller the income the greater the scrutiny."

Over 2016, she felt she was the lightning rod for a lot of anger. " I kept thinking, 'There are a lot worse things to be getting angry at than me.' Channel it. Channel it where it can make a difference"

There are hints that the anxiety still lingers. Though she's weathered a storm, she's clearly nervous that a new one might arrive with the publication of this book. "Nobody knows all the details of my life, and they're all in there, full disclosure, because I felt it was all relevant."

When I ask her how the year affected her mental health, she says, "It definitely did affect me during that year. I found myself looking at all of these Facebook comments, looking at people's profiles and really having these violent fantasies about bumping into them on the street. There was all this anger and this question of, how do you channel that? I was mostly able to channel it into positive directions, but it did get really dark at times."

Watching her publish her story feels like witnessing some boxer, not yet recovered from a slug, go back into the ring. I can't help feeling for Harrison. Her book, when you get past all the fascinating political philosophy and debate, is also a story of a series of shocks. Most of them are the kind of everyday shocks that could afflict anyone, almost regardless of class. There's the shock, in 2015, of her first breaking one arm in a skateboarding incident, and then another in a cycling accident. There's the one, in early 2016, where she finds herself at the centre of a social media and media storm. Then there is the shock of a series of losses, one of them her mother who died, suddenly of a brain haemorrhage, only months after she had finished the project.

It seems to me she had to deal with a lot in those few years. "That's what I felt. That's why I have written about this accelerating madness of breaking both my arms and just not having any time to catch up with myself. That's why I thought writing this is probably the only way I'm going to make sense of all of this. I think it worked. But it's one thing to write it, another thing to make it public."

Home, she says, is a recurring theme for her throughout the book. "Just losing my mum made me realise how important it was. I guess it's always the way that we were really close... but I just wanted to celebrate her and I think that's why telling my history is so important. Because she was such an amazing person."

When she talks about her loss her voice strains. Her mother, she recalls, didn't really want her to do The Glasgow Effect, which meant she wouldn't be able to leave the city and visit. "She just wanted to see me. There's a bit in the book where I describe how she said she couldn't understand what the fuss was all about."

But for all the pre-publication nerves, she seems in a good place right now. In her book she describes how she had, prior to and during The Glasgow Effect, a kind of Jekyll and Hyde identity. Her activist self was optimistic about change, her artist identity was a misanthrope. But in her latest work, Bus Regulation: The Musical, she has fused her art and activism in a more positive way. "I wanted to do something really optimistic. Because I acknowledged that there was a lot of darkness in The Glasgow Effect and I wanted to turn that round and make a celebration and something really positive about the future."

■ The Glasgow Effect: A Tale Of Class, Capitalism And Carbon Footprint is published by Luath Press

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