

Author makes his mark in Switzerland

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THE first time that Belfast-born author Bernard MacLavery met his reading public, the reception was not quite what he'd bargained for.

Seated behind a desk just inside a Belfast store and ready to sign copies of his first collection of short stories, he was approached by two women who promptly opened their shopping bags. They thought he was a security guard.

Despite that minor setback, MacLavery, 41, has risen quite remarkably in the literary world since 1978. To date he's had five books published, including two best-selling novels – "Lamb" and "Cal".

The subject of a BBC documentary, MacLavery is now completing the screenplay for a TV film of "Cal", to be produced by Channel Four. It's a love story enmeshed in the troubled situation of Northern Ireland.

MacLavery has been promoting his work in Switzerland this summer. Apart from being the first guest of the newly-created Society for the Advancement of English Literature in Switzerland (SAELS), he also signed copies of his books at the Francke book shop in Berne.

Before he became a full-time writer, MacLavery had worked for 10 years as a medical laboratory technician at Belfast's Queen's University. Tired of that,

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By Robert Brookes

he studied English at the same university.

After three years of teaching at an Edinburgh comprehensive school, he took up a teaching post on the Scottish "whisky island" of Islay where he now lives with his wife, Madeline, and their four children.

MacLavery recalls that his early attempts at writing were pretty bad.

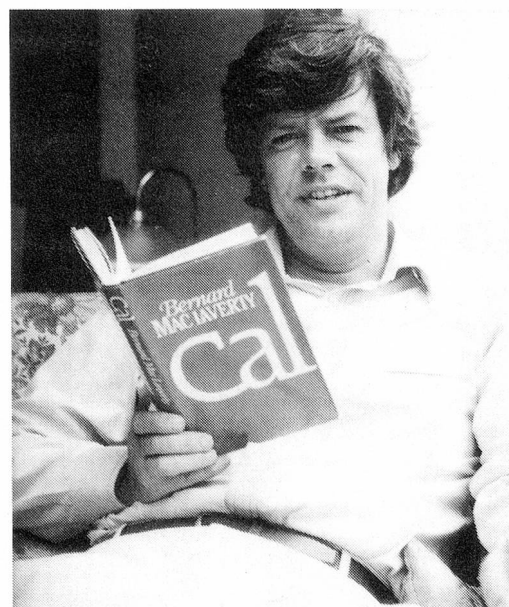
"I remember about a year after leaving school I wrote some dreadful stories and continued to do so for the next 10 years.

"And then I decided perhaps I ought to write about my own life. Until then I'd been trying to copy other writers like Kafka and D.H. Lawrence", he said.

He remembers collecting rejection slips from every good magazine in the world, a collection he still keeps in a drawer.

MacLavery feels his childhood in Northern Ireland has had a total influence on his writing.

"I think most writers will have to admit that their childhood is probably the richest part of their lives. Before you're 12, you go



Bernard MacLavery

around with all your antennae out.

"You're sensitive, you're aware, but the one thing you're not aware of is being aware. It's only in later life that you realise this", he said.

Although MacLavery is now a successful author, he's very much a realist when it comes to the future.

"No matter what you've done in the past, the next time you sit down to write you're always faced with failure. It's like tightrope walking", he said.

However pessimistic or realistic that might sound, Bernard MacLavery is right now walking on that literary tightrope with great confidence.

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seeing life as essentially easy, not believing in emulation anywhere outside of sports, considering everybody as de facto equal – had instilled, in a fraction of particularly vulnerable young people, very wrong ideas about life in general. With such ideas, they could not expect to integrate in life normally.

Miss Hersch agreed that the youth who demonstrated formed only a small minority and that, perhaps, they had been deprived as children of the security that is essential for the normal growth into adulthood.

In this context she noted that

the commission had virtually overlooked the role of the mother in the formation of attitudes to life.

One of the specific developments of our times, which is likely to have a bearing on youth, is that mothers now go to work.

They do not devote their children rearing years to their children alone, but entrust them to minders and later place them in nursery schools and only see them back from work.

Miss Hersch's main suggestion was to encourage, by somehow modifying the present economic and cultural trend to the

contrary, mothers to stay at home at least for the first years of their children's lives.

Jeanne Hersch certainly didn't believe that giving young people a centre where they could do exactly what they chose and flout the law would be of any use. It would only confirm the disorientation of those concerned by offering them an institution with even less structure and purpose than present day society as diagnosed by Miss Hersch.

On the other hand, centres which already exist, enabling youth to fulfil their artistic and

creative potential, would be quite another matter. Miss Hersch stressed the importance of returning to the defence of eternal values in education at home, at school and by the media.

If one attempted to describe Jeanne Hersch's approach in a nutshell, one would say that it was a call to the return of traditional values that have proved themselves while at the same time remaining aware of the need to adapt them to the times.

Above all, it was an approach based on realism and on an appreciation of what life is all about.