

Jonathan Murray, *Discomfort and Joy: The Cinema of Bill Forsyth*.

Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011, 260 pp.

Reviewed by Brian Hoyle, Dundee University

While it may come as a surprise, *Discomfort and Joy* is the first book-length study of the work of Bill Forsyth. For this reason alone Jonathan Murray's monograph makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on Scottish cinema. However, one of the many things that this very fine work made me consider was the critical neglect that Scotland's finest filmmakers have suffered. To date, there has also only been one study of Scottish cinema's other leading director of the 1970s and 1980s, Bill Douglas. The same is true of their American-born forebear, Alexander Mackendrick. On one level it seems it is hard to account for this neglect. Few, if indeed any film critics would argue that any of these directors were unworthy of academic attention. However, Murray offers a very plausible theory. He argues that that Forsyth's (and by extension Mackendrick's and Douglas's) centrality to Scottish film culture may in fact be the cause of this neglect and that 'paradoxically, if this filmmaker were not such an important figure for his national film culture, the work he produced might well have been studied more consistently and comprehensively' (p.1). Indeed, the existing critical literature on these three filmmakers has almost predominantly focused on their earlier Scottish films rather than their later international output. For example, Douglas' extraordinarily ambitious final film, *Comrades* (1988) has received only a fraction of the attention that his autobiographical trilogy has. Writings on Mackendrick have also tended to ignore fascinating late works like *Sammy Going South* (1963) and *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965) in favour of his films for Ealing Studios, most notably *Whisky Galore!* (1949). Similarly, critical writing on Forsyth has almost exclusively focused on his first four feature films: *That Sinking Feeling* (1980), *Gregory's Girl* (1981), *Local Hero* (1983) and *Comfort and Joy* (1984). Moreover, as Murray ably demonstrates, that critical writing has almost entirely centred on the representation of Scotland and Scottishness in these films.

Murray's book seeks to redress this imbalance in several ways. Firstly, while he never ignores issues of national identity, he goes beyond them and makes a case for Forsyth as a filmmaker whose concerns and appeal are not merely local, but rather international and universal. For instance, he argues that 'central aspects of *Local Hero* are overlooked when the film is approached within a Scottish cultural studies paradigm alone' (p.88), not least its critique of unchecked capitalism and American cultural imperialism and its environmentalist concerns. Similarly, the chapter on *Comfort and Joy* clearly elucidates an anti-Thatcherite subtext that was missed in several key studies of 1980s British cinema, which often dismissed Forsyth as apolitical. Indeed, reading this book makes one begin to wonder if Forsyth has perhaps been too subtle for his own good. He has also perhaps been too funny and Murray is also keen to stress that Forsyth is not a purely comedic talent. *Comfort and Joy* was billed as a 'serious comedy' in its original production material and Murray argues that this description could be applied to much of Forsyth's early work, rightly pointing out that humour plays a less prominent role in the films after and including *Comfort and Joy*. It may at first seem a bit of a stretch to mention Forsyth in the same breath as Robert Bresson, but by the time one reaches the end of this book this seems no less apt than comparing him to Jacques Tati or Preston Sturges.

Although the first half of the book offers plenty of fresh insights into Forsyth's Scottish films, it is, for this reviewer at least, the extended and sensitive reading of the last four films, the American-made *Housekeeping* (1987), *Breaking In* (1989) and *Being Human* (1994), as well as Forsyth's eventual return to Scotland with *Gregory's 2 Girls* (1999), that makes *Discomfort and Joy* a cause for celebration. The first of these films, *Housekeeping*, is to date Forsyth's only adaptation and Murray both acknowledges the adaptor-director's typically modest claims that if someone 'had the choice of reading the book and seeing the film I would have to say that they should read the book' (p.135), but also clearly disagrees with him. Rather, he sees the film as sophisticated adaptation and a 'co-authored new work' (p.143). Indeed, Murray notes how Forsyth subtly plays with point of view shots to give an alternative perspective to the first person narration of the novel, and how the film builds on the themes established in the earlier films. For instance, Murray usefully examines the mentally unstable nature of the film's protagonist, Ruthie, and her Aunt Sylvie, and

eloquently shows that almost all of Forsyth's films feature fragile characters who find themselves marginalised or alienated from society.

This is certainly the case in Forsyth's second American film, *Breaking In*. The only film that Forsyth made as a director for hire (the original screenplay was by John Sayles but substantially rewritten by Forsyth), it is perhaps rightly considered to be his least personal and most conventional film. Nevertheless, Murray shows that this film is only conventional by Forsyth's own very unconventional standards and that the film tellingly subverts the buddy comedy formula to 'make the link between illegality and individual isolation' (p.175). The sadness and loneliness felt by the two thieves in *Breaking In* is taken to its extreme in Forsyth's final American film, *Being Human*. This is by far the director's most ambitious work and also his least known (at the time of the book's writing it was not available on DVD. It has since appeared on a print-on-demand disc from Warner Brothers). The film, which cost \$23 million (as opposed to the £500 it cost to make *That Sinking Feeling*) has a narrative which spans several millennia as it follows the progress of a single soul, played by Robin Williams, in six different incarnations from the time of the cavemen to the present day. This is not however, a lavish historical spectacle, rather it is an epic about the human condition. What links the vignettes is a sense of sorrow and loss and a deliberately slow pace which mirrors that of everyday life. Unsurprisingly, the studio did not take kindly to such a long, pensive, overtly philosophical film and they eventually forced Forsyth to trim his original cut down to two hours and add a voiceover. It is perhaps equally unsurprising that the film has never found an audience. However, Murray makes it abundantly clear that this film, even in its truncated and compromised form, is not only a deeply personal work for Forsyth, but also a major one which needs to be placed at the centre of any critical study, not on the margins. Finally, Murray turns his attention to *Gregory's 2 Girls*, which despite being made in 1999 is still Forsyth's most recent film. Although it marked a return to Scotland and the title character from *Gregory's Girl*, the film did not meet with the commercial and critical success of its predecessor. This, Murray argues, is because the film is not a direct sequel so much as a subtly revision of the earlier work and Forsyth's other Scottish films. Moreover, the film replaces the youthful exuberance and whimsy of the original with more mature and directly political concerns. Murray

is sensitive to the film's ambitions and if his book does nothing else, it should encourage people to seek out or revisit these films, which deserve as much attention as *Gregory's Girl* and *Local Hero*.

This monograph, which is published by Peter Lang, is something of a no-frills affair, sparsely illustrated with one still from each of the first four Scottish films. (It is possible that stills were not available from the later works.) However, the content is more than worth the price. Each of the book's eight chapters offers a detailed close reading of one of Forsyth's films. These readings combine examinations of the scripts as well as an eloquent deconstruction of mise-en-scène. The book is written in a very clear and approachable style and there is mercifully little jargon or recourse to theory. Indeed, Murray seems to understand that Forsyth's films are complex enough and simply do not require any intellectual window-dressing. This makes his case for Forsyth as a serious artist all the more compelling and it is most refreshing to read a book which has such faith in its subject. However, I do have a couple of (very minor) quibbles with *Discomfort and Joy*. Firstly, I would have liked more attention to be paid to the music in Forsyth's films, which is always used sparingly and intelligently. More importantly, I would have liked Murray to be a little less reluctant to express his opinions on the films. While I get the impression that the author holds some affection for all of Forsyth's works, I would like to know, for instance, if he feels, as I do, that *Housekeeping* is both a masterpiece and one of the most critically undervalued films of the 1980s. Moreover, what is his actual opinion of the hugely ambitious but deeply flawed *Being Human*, or the much maligned *Gregory's 2 Girls*? It would also be interesting to know which of the more celebrated Scottish films Murray finds the most successful. Finally, it would also have been interesting to have included a discussion of some of the unfilmed projects that have occupied Forsyth during the fifteen years since his last feature (although admittedly that is not always possible). Nevertheless, Scottish cinema is full of fascinating unproduced scripts – not least Douglas' *Justified Sinner* and Mackendrick's *Mary Stuart* – and Forsyth no doubt has similarly cherished projects he has not been able to realise. However, no single study of a filmmaker can hope to be definitive, and while there is clearly room for more critical work to be done on Bill Forsyth, it is hard to imagine a better first book on the work of this extraordinary, unfairly marginalised filmmaker.