

CHAPTER 2

The Red Megaphone

Jimmie Miller



I remember ... coming in when Jimmie was there with four or five other boys. I listened to him from behind the door – he was laying the law down, stuff he'd read in books. He was about eight.

He stayed up reading till midnight often as a boy. I never made his bed but there was a book under the pillow ... He was only nine when he started to write. I watched him from day to day and knew that he'd be a writer. Writing stories for the school, here and there, and I read them all.

EWAN MACCOLL'S MOTHER BETSY MILLER,
RECORDED BY CHARLES PARKER IN 1962

THE RED MEGAPHONE – JIMMIE MILLER

What made Ewan MacColl tick? Fascinated by and distinctly in awe of him, in 1962 Charles Parker went down to Ewan and Peggy's new home in Beckenham to interview Betsy Miller. Ewan's mother was a tiny but formidable Scot, who was instinctively severe on every other woman in her only child's life, if not on the men. Ostensibly Charles was interviewing her about her own early life for the sixth Radio Ballad, on teenagers, but the recording shows he was also eager to pick her brains about her son's childhood.

The man we know as Ewan MacColl was born Jimmie Miller in Salford, near Manchester, suitably enough on Burns Day, 25 January 1915. He was Betsy and William Miller's third child, but only one other had lived for long, and that 'darling boy' had died before he was three. Betsy had also miscarried twice, so it's no surprise that she was fiercely proud and protective of her only surviving child. The Millers had been born in Scotland into poor working-class families, he in Stirlingshire, she in Auchterarder in Perthshire, from where she'd been sent into domestic service at the age of 12. Will Miller was by trade an iron moulder and developed a recurrent asthma worsened by the often vile conditions in the foundries in which he worked. A horrified Jimmie saw them for himself when as a boy he took in his father's lunch, and he was later to liken the foundry to Dante's Inferno. Sixty years later he wrote 'My Old Man':

My old man was a union man, skilled in the moulding trade;
In the stinking heat of the iron foundry my old man was made.
Down on his knees in the moulding sand,
He wore his trade like a company brand.
One of the Cyclops' smoky band, yes, that was my old man.

Will Miller was a working-class intellectual, a militant union man with much to be outspoken about, and many of his jobs were short-lived as a consequence. Encouraged to come to Lancashire by Betsy's sister, who had moved there, the couple came down from Scotland and settled eventually in a street of grim and grimy back-to-backs in Salford. In the summer of 1912 Will went with some of Betsy's family to Australia for his health, leaving her behind with their first child. He found work in a foundry in the naval dockyard on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour but, before he could call for his family to join him, his inevitable participation in a long-running union dispute saw his entry permit revoked. He was back after less than a year, his short-lived son dead, and Jimmie was born 18 months later. From 1913 until 1925 Will was in work more often than not, but in that year his health deteriorated severely, and as unemployment and his asthma worsened he would find work only sporadically in the time left to him.