

WINDSWEPT & INTERESTING

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Also by Billy Connolly

Tall Tales and Wee Stories

BILLY
CONNOLLY
WINDSWEPT &
INTERESTING
MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

TWO
ROADS

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WINDSWEPT & INTERESTING

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

I DIDN'T KNOW I was Windswept and Interesting until somebody told me. It was a friend of mine – the folk singer Archie Fisher – who was startlingly exotic himself in the sixties. He'd just come back from Kashmir and was all billowy shirt and Indian beads. I had long hair and a beard and was swishing around in electric-blue velvet flares. He said, 'Look at you – all *windswept and interesting!*' I just said, 'Exactly!' After that, I simply had to maintain my reputation.

It's not difficult to become Windswept and Interesting – you just have to *BE* it. Then people will notice that you are. And once they've accepted it – and pronounced that you are – you're all set.

Windswept and Interesting people recognise each other. I was in Boston once, appearing on the *Good Morning Massachusetts* TV show. There was a drag queen on air before me, singing 'I Am Who I Am'. It was nine o'clock in the morning, but she was covered in sequins and jewels. Huge hair, startling make-up. As

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she came offstage, her gaze met mine. I was wearing oxblood corduroy trousers, reindeer boots with curled-up pointed toes, a frilly polka-dotted satin shirt and a big gold hoop earring in one ear. As she brushed past me, she whispered in my ear: 'Savage gypsy lover!!'

See? She knew, and I knew.

Being Windswept and Interesting is not just about what you wear. It's also your behaviour, speech, your environment, and an attitude of mind. It's perpetually classy – but it's not of a particular class. It transcends class.

It's not about money either. For example, Windswept and Interesting people don't wear new clothes. Quite the opposite. They select unusual pieces – maybe a thrift shop item like a junior musician's coat from a long-forgotten Scottish regiment or Mexican charro trousers as worn by mariachi bands. Not everyone appreciates our garb. When I was on location in New Zealand during the filming of *The Last Samurai*, I was sitting outside a cafe on one of my days off and Ed Zwick, the director, came walking along the road. I was wearing red suede Mary Jane shoes with long turquoise socks, knee-length breeches and my orange 'Jesus Is My Homeboy' T-shirt. Ed stared at me with a twisted smile. 'Billy,' he said, 'who gets you ready in the morning?'

We W & I's love style . . . but we abhor fashion. We decorate our homes any way we damn well please. If you came into this room I'm in now, you'd see that it's the abode of a Windswept and Interesting man. It's eclectic and a wee bit disorganised. I'm surrounded by things I like – musical instruments with battered cases, lots of books, banjo magazines going back many years, and a rattan writing desk on which sit sketchbooks and drawing instruments. On my wooden bedposts sit several panama hats

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decorated with flowers, assorted scarves, beads, bandanas and a Bob Marley shoulder bag. I sit in a leather chair that can wheech me upside down (to relieve my back). On the walls are a Celtic banner, a Mexican Day of the Dead mask, a large Tibetan mirror, a Japanese kimono and French mirror sconces with flameless candles. There are two wooden ceiling fans, Indian cushions and curtains, a gentleman's wooden valet, boxes of fishing flies, a piece of sculpture by a New Zealand artist, a pair of red boxing gloves, a wooden Inuit box, a collection of fountain pens, dogs' water bowls, TV, broken DVD player, Academy DVDs I have yet to watch, and a remote control I can't fucking operate.

'Sounds a right mess, Billy . . .' I hear you say, 'and a tad pretentious.' Pretentious? MOI?!! I say it's a stylish mix of objects – some practical, some useless – curated by a man of taste and fuck-you-ness. And yes, indeed it is messy . . . because I like it that way. That's just how we W & I's roll. You don't like it? Fuck off.

Once I'd realised that I was Windswept and Interesting it became my new religion. It was such a delightful contrast to the dour and disapproving attitudes I'd grown up with. Instead of cowering under the yoke of 'Thou shalt NOT!', I found a new mantra: 'Fuck the begrudgers!' It felt brilliant. I was no longer obliged to behave with even a smidge of decorum. Over the years I've discovered the Secret Truths of W & I, such as: 'Hell is not for sinners; it's for beige-wearers', and 'Blessed are those who yodel – for they shall never be troubled by offers of work'. I even found the Key to W & I Enlightenment: 'You can misbehave all you like – provided you leave them wanting more.'

Sometimes people ask me: 'Billy . . . I, too, would like to become Windswept and Interesting! How can I achieve it?' And I reply: 'I'm afraid you've blown it by *wanting* to be it.' You have

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to be *accepted* as Windswept and Interesting by *other* Windswept and Interesting people – once it *arrives* in you. And when that happens you get to write your own rules.

Here are a few of mine:

**YOU HAVE TO GENUINELY NOT GIVE A FUCK
FOR WHAT ANY OTHER LIVING HUMAN
BEING THINKS OF YOU.**

**SAY THE FIRST THING THAT COMES INTO YOUR MIND
AND DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN
TO YOU AS A RESULT.**

**SEEK THE COMPANY OF PEOPLE WHO, WHEN
LEFT ALONE IN A ROOM WITH A TEA COSY,
WILL ALWAYS TRY IT ON.**

**NEVER TURN DOWN THE OPPORTUNITY
TO SHOUT 'FUCK THE BEGRUDGERS!'
AT THE TOP OF YOUR VOICE.**

AND TELL YOUR STORY YOUR OWN DAMN WAY . . .

1

DO WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

BE WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

**IF OTHERS DISAPPROVE TELL THEM
TO REARRANGE THESE WORDS
TO MAKE A POPULAR PHRASE:
YOURSELF, FUCK, GO**

I LIKE BEING naked in public. I discovered this made me happy when I was only four years old. It wasn't so much the willy-pointing – more a lovely sense of naked freedom. A woman who used to babysit me from time to time told me I was a real handful – wild and funny – and that I used to take my clothes off as often as possible. I remember that feeling of nakedness; the joy of it has never left me. As an adult I've danced naked all over the world – even in the Arctic Circle. Over a hundred million viewers have seen my willy. Not many people can say that.

It's peculiar being me. Few things make me as happy as being naked. I'm not sure what my definition of happiness is. I used to think it was a daddy with a beach ball playing with his kids. But in recent years I've mainly come to think of it as what it's not. Things that please other people don't entertain me. I fucking hate talent shows, most reality shows, and those popular movies full of explosions, with unlikely heroes saving the world. On the other hand, I love watching TV evangelists. They're such grandiose con artists, urging people to send money they can't afford. 'Pop an envelope in

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the mail and you're bound to have a windfall!' Pricks. Capitalising on loneliness. Makes me angry, but I can't tear myself away.

My wife Pamela says I'm angry about so many things I don't leave much room to be happy. She put a board with the words *'Today I will be as happy as a bird with a French fry'* on the wall opposite my toilet so I am reminded every time I take a piss. But that just makes me angrier.

I feel happy just as I'm about to go to sleep, when I'm comfortable in my bed. Just at that final point before sleep I feel great. I've always imagined that would be the feeling you get before you die. And it makes me happy being around my children and my grandchildren. Yeah. Because I can see they're not like me. They're more complete in themselves. I like that in them and I'm a wee bit jealous.

Football makes me happy. When my football team Celtic wins I do a wee dance in my heart. As you've no doubt heard, in Glasgow we have two very famous football teams: Rangers and Celtic. And never the twain shall meet. When they're playing each other, the supporters of Celtic go to one end, and the supporters of Rangers go to the other end. They shout at each other for ninety minutes, and then they all go home. It can get quite heavy: 'Ah, ya Orange bastard!'

'Aaaagh!'

'Have some o' that, ya Fenian bastard!'

'Ooooph!'

I like to hear the crowd singing. Have you heard Welsh people singing their anthem before a rugby match starts? It's so moving. All those voices together, singing that lovely melody. That makes me happy.

You might think that being a Windswept and Interesting

Do what makes you happy

showbiz personality I would love myself a lot. I suspect happiness is having a liking for yourself and having a joy in being with yourself, and I'm not sure I have it.

I think I might have been happy before my mother left. Until I was four, I had this feeling – and I'm sure she got the same feeling – of two creatures joined by the same material. Before she left, I was like a naked animal. Crawling around with sticky things in my hands. Sweets and buns. I was happy before I was four.

I can still smell the inside of my pram . . . plasticky, like hot rubber. And I remember the taste of the sweets. I don't remember eating anything else except the boiled sweets – those liquorice ones – in gaudy colours. Black and purple and pink. And a kind of buttery one. My stage clothes ended up looking the same – stripy, loud.

I remember being in other people's houses as a wee boy. There was a man called Cumberland who lived across from us in Dover Street. He had a big family – eight girls, and the youngest was a boy. We used to spend a lot of time in his place with all his children. I loved it. They had an easy chair that was covered in corduroy and I used to sit in it the wrong way round – I would have my back where your bum should be and my legs where your back should be, so I was kind of upside down. Mr Cumberland would take a penny and run it across the corduroy sideways, making a noise like a motorbike. I thought that was brilliant and I asked him to do it again and again. I remember being delightfully happy there, in my own wee world.

I get that same feeling now when I'm fishing. And when I

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eat a biscuit. There's something wonderful about a biscuit. It lifts you off the floor. My favourite is the digestive. It's the king of biscuits. It's not filled with cream or jam or dripping with stuff. In the biscuit world it's kind of plain, but it really suits being beside a cup of tea. I like the jammie dodger too, a round biscuit, sandwiched with jam, and the Abernethy – a big, ugly biscuit that was flaky and dry and great for dipping in tea.

Biscuits make most people happy, don't they? It's amazing the number of big, muscly men who work in hard, heavy industries who will fall to their knees at the offer of a cup of tea and a biscuit. And I'm sure the Queen likes to have a digestive and a cup of tea the same as a coal miner does. When you get that into your head then you get Britain. After you've had a hard day working as a housekeeper, in the factory or the library or civil service, to settle down with a cup of tea and a digestive – the whole country is thankful for that. And it stays with you for your whole life. You never lose your love for the digestive. You never hear anybody saying: 'I used to love the digestive but now I can't be bothered.'

After I became a comedian, I met people who knew the Cumberlands and said they were pissed off at my talking about them onstage. I liked to tell the story about the time my sister Florence and I were playing in the street on a Friday night.

Mr Cumberland came home from his work, had his tea, then told his wife: 'I'm away for a pint.' But his wife said, 'You get those children off the street and into bed first before you go for any bloody pint!'

'Okay, okay, give me peace!'

And he staggered out of the house. 'Right, how many weans have I got? . . . Nine!' So, he goes into the street looking for kids. 'Right, you, you, you, you, and you . . .'

Do what makes you happy

He rounded up the first nine children he came across, two of whom were me and my sister! We were washed and put to bed. I was there, tucked in with all the others, looking around, going: 'Waaaaah!' My sister's trying to calm me: 'We're all right. I've been in here before!' 'Waaaaah!' Meanwhile, my mother's going berserk! She came back late, and we weren't there – so she's out looking for us with a policeman because she thinks we're off in a kitbag with some pervert! The only reason they found us is that they spied two wee Cumberlands crying in the street. 'Waaaaah! We can't get in the house! The bed's full!' So they took them in, and we were kicked out: 'Waaaaah!'

People loved that story when I told it onstage – but I really wouldn't want to upset the Cumberland family, because I'm very grateful for the strong parental presence I sensed in that house. It felt safe.

I was born in a flat in a tenement building at 65 Dover Street in Anderston, near the centre of Glasgow. Tenement blocks were all over the city then; they had become the most popular kind of housing since the nineteenth century. They were solid sandstone apartment buildings with four storeys and a staircase in the middle. They had a narrow close – entrance hall – leading to a small back courtyard where people did their washing. Some Glasgow tenements were considered posh, but in my street they were overcrowded and deteriorating to the point of becoming slums.

Dover Street was noisy. Coalmen would rumble past with their horses and carts, while rag and bone men would get your attention with military bugle calls: '*doo di doo, doo di doo diddly*'

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umpum . . . Chimney sweeps wheeled their hand-barrows inside the close and yelled '*sweeeeeeeep*' so it echoed upstairs. Children would play football on the street, using a lamp post as the goal-post. Upstairs, women would sit on the windowsill or hang out of the windows, chatting to each other or shouting at children in the street: 'What've I told you about throwing stones . . . ?' Drunks would stumble into our back courtyard and give impromptu singing concerts. If these had merit, residents would throw down pennies. But if the singer was giving everyone a headache someone would first heat the pennies over the stove using a pair of pliers. 'There ya go, ya winey bastard!!! Take yer wailing elsewhere . . .!!!' '*Ach Oucha OUCHHHH!!!*'

We lived on the third floor of our tenement, and there was a smelly communal toilet on the landing. Our little two-roomed flat was a bit gloomy. I just remember an alcove bed, a kitchen table, and a sideboard with a drawer that was my crib when I was a baby. There was no bathroom, and no hot water; Florence washed both of us standing up in the kitchen. All this may sound a bit awful, but it wasn't. There was a warmth about tenements, because of the people who lived in them. They were colourful, vertical villages. Sure, they were considered slums. People say, 'Oh, the *deprivation!* Oh my . . .' Nonsense! When you're a wee boy it's not like that. It felt great to have all these nice neighbours. And we had a big wooden toilet seat . . . luxury! You didn't lose the use of your legs reading the Sunday paper.

Maybe it's my age, but it seems I can't walk when I've been on the lavvy. '*Heeelp!*' The only other time I've felt like that was after I'd had a drink in America, called a 'Zombie'. Have you ever had a Zombie? You get drunk from the bottom up. You're perfectly lucid, talking away – until you need to go to the toilet. But then you find out your legs are pissed! 'Excuse me, I'll just

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go to the toilet . . .' *Crash!* You're on the floor, and you can't get up.

I was born on the kitchen floor on the twenty-fourth of November 1942, during World War Two. That's the only date you're getting in this book, because my birthday's the only one I can remember. A few years ago, I forgot Pamela's birthday and had to get it tattooed on my arm, but I still missed it the next year because I forgot to look. Anyway, when I was born my dad was away fighting in the air force in Burma and India. I don't remember my mother being there much. Maybe she worked – I don't know. She was an attractive teenager – like a British film starlet – with wavy dark hair and a smiley face. Everybody I met later who knew her said she was funny, and so volatile she could start a fire in an empty room.

I don't remember her hugging me, although I remember her smell. It was Florence who looked after me. She bathed me, fed me, dressed me. Tried to keep me out of trouble. Florence was only eighteen months older than I was. It never occurred to us that she was far too young to be in that position, with no adult around for hours on end. Our mother would leave us alone with an open, blazing fire. One night Florence fell into burning ashes and permanently damaged one eye.

I was sickly – always sniffing. I had pneumonia three times before I turned four. But I felt jolly when Florence was next to me. We slept together in the alcove bed in the kitchen, and she used to teach me songs:

*I see the moon, the moon sees me.
Under the shade of the old oak tree.
Please let the light that shines on me
Shine on the one I love.*

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It was a wartime song she heard on the radio. There were Scottish songs too:

*Come o'er the stream Charlie
Stream Charlie Stream Charlie
Come o'er the stream Charlie
And dine wi' MacLean
And tho your heart's weary
We'll make your heart cheery
And . . .*

da di di diddy de diddy dee dee . . . I forgot the rest . . .

At night, Florence used to shine a hand mirror on the wall, making a circle of light. She chased me with it 'til I screeched like a parrot.

The most profound memory I have from 65 Dover Street was the time when I woke early and went to look for my mother. I opened the door to her bedroom and saw a stranger – a shirtless man, sitting in a chair, putting on his socks. I realised my mother was in bed, but I couldn't see her because she was behind the door. This guy just put his foot on my forehead and gently pushed me out the door, then closed it. I found out later his name was Willie Adams, my mother's lover. Shortly afterwards, she left us.

I think I'll have a pizza tonight. Pizza makes me happy. Food of the gods. I don't live in New York any more but I was there

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last year and had a slice of pizza every single night. I like my pizza the way I like my biscuits – kinda plain. My favourite is margherita – the plainest of the plain. It makes you fat. I can't control my weight and eat the things I like, so I eat the things I like. It's a W & I thing.

