

Realisation

Andrew Conway

26 December 2006; 27 December 2008

I have written this document mostly for my own benefit in order to make sense of my complex feelings on a most bewildering series of events. In time, others may come to read this and so I am minded to round out the story for their benefit.

I would describe myself as a scientific consultant, though my original training was in physics. I have held a variety of posts through my long career, some in the public sector and some in the private sector, but these days I restrict myself to consultancy work, selecting only cases that have some interest to me.

Detective Superintendent Will Farklass, an old friend of mine, asked me to sit in on a series of police interviews, knowing that I would be greatly interested in the case. It is important to note that I only ever sat on the ‘other’ side of the one-way glass. I had no input into the actual interview itself, apart from asking the police officers to include questions to clarify one or two points from previous interview sessions.

The police interviews began late on Thursday the 28th of December 2006, though I was not present until just after noon the following day. The recordings of the first evening of interviews were made available to me, but the same ground was covered in much more detail later on. I vividly remember sitting there, watching passively, almost voyeuristically as Alistair sobbed and wept his way through the interviews. He sweated profusely as he insisted on wearing a big, red scarf, similar to the one with which his sister had been strangled. I couldn’t help but pity that young man.

Following the interviews I spent some time visiting Alistair’s friends and family. This yielded little useful information in itself, but it did mean that I spent time in the area in which the remarkable events took place and led to my own first hand experiences.

I was asked to write a formal report based on my notes, possibly to be used as evidence if the case came to trial (though at the time of writing this looks highly unlikely). That report detailed the facts and contained some information on related science, but excluded any speculation on my part and all details of my own ‘unbelievable’ first hand experience.

Alistair MacFarlane, known as ‘Ali’ to his friends, was a fairly typical nineteen year old. He lived with his mother and two elder brothers in the Glenavon

high rise flats in Maryhill, a working class district in the northern outskirts of the city of Glasgow.

The family had been ripped apart by a recent tragedy: Alison, Alistair's younger sister, had been murdered. The police had not arrested anyone, but popular opinion had identified her live-in boyfriend as the likely murderer. The family was quick to condemn him and the two elder brothers swore they would kill him. Even the long estranged father surfaced in the media, expressing similar intentions.

Alistair was not unknown to the local police. He was a member of a local gang, or 'young team', and had once been cautioned in relation to minor vandalism. He was unemployed and had received very little benefit from school, having obtained no formal qualifications at all. Although he gave the first impression of being an inarticulate 'ned', I gradually appreciated that he was quite intelligent and that he spent some considerable time thinking about various aspects of his life.

He clearly loved his younger sister, in his own way, but could not find a way to deal with the grief. The hate exuded by his mother and elder brothers served to isolate him at a time when he sorely needed family comfort. Whereas his mother and elder brothers would get drunk (or worse) and spend the evening shouting threatening abuse outside the flat of Alison's boyfriend, Alistair just kept himself to himself.

It was therefore a huge shock to everyone when Alistair was arrested for the vicious attack on Alison's boyfriend. On the evening of Christmas Eve 2006, Alistair had smashed down the door of his flat and beaten him savagely with a metal pole, breaking several bones and fracturing his skull.

On the morning of Christmas Eve 2006, at about 11 am, Alistair was stood looking out of a window in the communal corridor on the top floor of his block of flats. He lived many floors below, but often came to the top floor when he wanted to be alone. I visited the location not long after the police interviews finished and found the view from the windows to be fantastic, offering a unique panorama over the hills to the north of the city. Despite its somewhat dubious location in Glasgow, I might be tempted to use that view to transform a bad mood into a melancholy one.

As he stood at the window he noticed a light coming from a patch of undergrowth. At first he thought it was a reflection from a crisp packet, glass bottle or some other piece of litter. For whatever reason, it seemed to attract his attention. distracting him from his grief.

From this observation and the timing of the event, it is clear to me that the light could not have been a reflection. Firstly, met office records show that the Sun was completely obscured by cloud on that day. Secondly, even if a local gap in the cloud had allowed the rays of the Sun through, the tower block would have prevented any light falling on any part of that field. Indeed, on the afternoon when I visited the field it was covered in a thick frost despite the weather being clear for the previous 48 hours.

For whatever reason, Alistair's interest was sufficiently aroused that he went down the stairs and out to the field to investigate. The field was no more than

a few hundred metres from the base of the tower block, but access to it was difficult because the ground was very uneven and thick with undergrowth.

Alistair claimed that he saw the light almost continuously as he approached it, except when he got very close to it. His surprisingly detailed and precise description again rules out a reflection which would have only been visible from one particular direction. Also, it suggests that the light had a fairly narrow beam directed at the Glenavon flats (SSW).

After searching for a few minutes, he found the source of the light: a small, transparent box made of plastic or glass, about 2 foot by 1 foot and 1 foot in height. It was clean and its surface appeared unmarked, giving the impression that it had only recently been placed there.

The box contained only a small sphere, less than an inch in diameter, that was apparently suspended without any obvious support in the centre of the box. Viewed from most directions the sphere appeared to emit little or no light. However, if he placed his head between the sphere and the block of flats from which he had first seen it, then he was quite dazzled by the intensity of the light. It seems likely from his description that the sphere emitted light in the opposite direction too.

Although it did not look heavy, he was unable to lift the box and could not see any obvious way in which it was secured to the ground. The box did not emit any sound that he could hear, despite the area being near silent at that time of day.

His next action would not have been mine. He began kicking, stamping and jumping on the box in an attempt to break it open. When this failed he tried throwing bricks and stones at it, but to no avail. He then attacked it with a short metal pole that he found nearby but this too failed to damage it. Using a little more of his intelligence, he tried to use the pole to lever the box off the ground. This merely resulted in excavating a bit of the frozen soil beneath it and eventually bent the pole. After he had given up his attacks on the box he noticed that it remained completely unscathed, without even a scratch on any of its surfaces.

At this point he sat down facing the box with his back to the flats, but in such a way that he was not dazzled by the full intensity of the light. He stared into it for a few moments and said he felt drawn to look into the light. He likened the feeling to that of gazing into a fire, only far more intense. It was at this point that the experience seemed to depart from the real world.

He spoke of flashing lights and swarming shapes and colours. Images flashed by, like that of scenery flashing by the window of a fast train. He saw fields, houses, churches and trees. He described glimpsing a great many objects, but all were inanimate: he saw no people or animals.

Alistair's ability to describe rapidly deteriorated at this point. He suffered outbursts of anger, and frequently slammed his clenched fists on the table and kicked the table over several times. The interview was then suspended when he attempted to attack one of the officers.

We still have no clear idea of his movements that afternoon, though a witness said they did see someone fitting Alistair's description on the rough ground

between 3 and 4 pm (by which time it was getting dark). The witness reported seeing him just sitting there and assumed he was just some “junkie”.

It is quite possible that he has some memory of this period, but we all felt that further questioning must be postponed. As it turned out, we never did get to question him any further.

I spent some time in the area trying to understand Alistair’s circumstances by speaking to friends and family. This was a most unrewarding experience and only served to depress me at the pathetic circumstances in which some people live. I wouldn’t describe it as poverty in the monetary sense, nobody was hungry or homeless. In fact most folk had large TVs, cars and spent a considerable amount on cigarettes and alcohol.

On each visit I went to the same viewpoint from which Alistair had seen the light. I stared out at the rough ground, hunting for even the tiniest glimmer from the tangle of undergrowth. On this third visit I did see something, not the light, but a tiny patch of ground that looked as if it had recently been cleared.

I hurried down the stairs (the lift wasn’t working) and stumbled out over the uneven ground. After searching for about 15 minutes, I found the patch of ground I had seen from the window. The surrounding area was covered with brown, broken stems and dead grass, all coated in a thick, white frost. But this small patch of ground had no frost on it and was completely free of vegetation. Its size corresponded to the box that Alistair had described.

I knelt down and stared closely at the unfrozen soil. It appeared to be good quality soil that had recently been turned over with a fork or spade. I reached out my hand to touch it. I felt a tingling sensation in my finger tips and in reflex withdrew my hand. I found a short stick nearby and used that to poke at the soil. This produced a very curious effect, the stick appeared bent, as if refracted by water. But there was no water, only air. On closer inspection, I could see that the stick was slightly translucent when placed in the space above the soil. I placed other objects on the soil and observed various strange effects and noted that the colours of the objects appeared to become washed out. This was most noticeable with a bright, red deflated football, but what was more startling was that the ball became slightly reinflated when I place in on the soil.

I became so preoccupied with my experiments that I hadn’t noticed the arrival of a small group of boys. They were clearly unaware of the various curiosities I was investigating, but were amused by my apparently eccentric behaviour. One of them pushed me from behind, sending me face first into the soil.

Even though the push was relatively gentle and soil quite soft, for a moment I felt somewhat startled and dizzy. With one hand still on the soil, I pushed myself up and wiped some soil from my eyes and blinked. The world around me seemed grey and drained of colour, but there was no mist or fog - everything seemed clear and sharp. It was warm and I could see the washed out Sun high in the sky.

I looked about me. The view seemed completely unfamiliar. The undergrowth was gone and instead I was surrounded by soil, fences and small huts. The looming masses of the Glenavon flats were gone and so was the sea of houses and flats of the Summerston estate which had occupied the ground below me. Instead there were just fields and a few dilapidated buildings. My eye was drawn to a motley collection of large sheds. Several railway tracks ran into these sheds and many wagons stood idle in sidings. I saw a man walk into one of the smaller structures within which a large wheel was turning.

The only thing I thought I recognised was the railway line that ran on an embankment between the Glenavon flats and the Summerston estate. But I wasn't sure: Summerston station wasn't there and I could see another railway track branching off to the north that was not there before. There was a sweet, smokey smell to the air and I suddenly became aware of the sound of birdsong - it felt like a summer's day.

I'm not sure how long I had to take in this view - perhaps only a minute or two, or may be just a few seconds. However long it was, I was jolted back to reality when I felt a sharp pain around my ankles. Being on all fours, I looked over my shoulder and to my utter surprise and horror, I could not see my feet or indeed anything beyond the small of my back. In an almost involuntary movement I rolled myself over to the side and in that moment everything around me changed once more.

After regaining my senses, I found myself lying on my back looking up at the faces of four or five boys who were clearly finding this highly amusing. It became clear that they weren't going to limit themselves to verbal abuse and one of them gave me a sharp kick in the side. I responded by grabbing his ankle and with a sharp pull he too was soon on his back.

Despite my age, and perhaps due to the welcome arrival of adrenaline, I was swiftly on my feet and had had soon felled another boy with a well aimed left hook. The suddenness of my response caused the other boys to flee and the two on the ground (one of which was actually a girl) had soon scabbled to their feet and disappeared down towards the train tracks. I stood there for a moment drawing long, heavy breaths. I then made my way back to the car.

A short time later, I was sat with a hot cup of coffee in Will Farklass's small office at Maryhill police station. He had listened to my account with some bemusement and no doubt a great deal of skepticism. Nevertheless, he listened attentively and heard my story out without interjecting once. I described everything, just as I had seen it, including the strange vision of the altered landscape.

When I finished speaking, he stared at me for a short while and then stood up and placed his finger upon the map on his wall and asked if that was where I had been. On confirming this, he reached across his desk to a shelf and pulled out a tattered book with an orange cover. He flicked through it and then placed it on the desk in front of me, opened at page 20.

I looked at it, unsure at first what I was looking at. I traced out Maryhill Road with my finger until I came to the railway track which I followed until I

found my finger resting on a blank bit of the page where the streets just petered out and Glasgow came to an end. My eye was then drawn to a triangular shaped area with one side formed by a section of the railway line. In the middle of this were the words Garscube Colliery. It was at that moment that I realised what I was looking at now and what I had seen earlier: the past.

I must have sat dumb struck in that chair for some time not really listening as Will made various suggestions. I only really came back to my sense when he asked me a direct question: would I recognise those boys and girls again? He thought that there was no point pursuing them for the assault, but it might help corroborate my story. I soon realised that Will was hunting for what he called a more “rational” explanation of what I had seen, though he was very diplomatic. I thanked him for his time and went home, where I spent a long evening in front of the fire, lost in thought.

The following morning, at roughly the same time as I had been there the day before, I met Will in the Glenavon car park. We walked out onto the rough ground in the direction of that curious patch of soil. Try as I might, I could not find it again. We even ascended to the top of the flats but we could see nothing but overgrown ground below us. The only thing we managed to find was the red, deflated football, but in itself this proved nothing.

As we walked down the many flights of steps, Will and I returned to talking about Alistair. He was now considered unfit for interview and had been taken to hospital for psychiatric treatment. Will told me that in all his career he had never seen anything quite like Alistair’s descent into utter madness and that, as Will emphatically stated, was saying something.

In the two years since these curious incidents I have thoroughly researched the history of that part of Glasgow. Unfortunately, there exists very little information on it as it is, and was, a quite unremarkable place. The most interesting information I gleaned came from maps from the National Library of Scotland which showed much of what I had seen in that brief vision. It showed Garscube Colliery and the various branch lines and sidings that I had seen and an expanse of fields through which passed a small, nameless burn (though I understand the local children called it the wee stinky burn!). This is all gone now, replaced by a shabby shopping complex with a big supermarket nestling inside a housing estate.

In addition to the maps, I found aerial photographs of the area in the archives of the Royal Commission for Historic and Ancient Monuments of Scotland (RCHAMS). These showed the area in startling detail, far more than I had briefly seen with my own eyes. It also showed the land above the railway line covered in a patchwork of allotments. It was quite clear to me that the vantage point of my experience was somewhere inside this area. I ordered enlarged copies of these photographs and spent hours peering into them with a magnifying glass hoping to identify a distinctive feature - perhaps a hut - that I might have seen in my vision that might precisely pinpoint my location.

Alistair never did regain his sanity and after Will Farklass retired, no one was left to care about it. Will and I talked about it over a drink a few times, but never with the intent of pursuing any further investigation. And so, over time, my obsession with it became latent, receding to the back of my mind. However, it did leave me with a passionate interest in local history.

Many months afterwards, whilst I was idly browsing through an online database containing various facts and figures about coal mines in and around Glasgow, I spotted the name Alistair MacFarlane: he was the manager of the Garscube Colliery at the time of a widely reported mining disaster in December 1853. At this point, I was little more than amused by the coincidence but my interested was enough to carry on reading about the colliery and even to go in search of records and newspaper articles about it in the Mitchell Library.

The first mine at Garscube Colliery was sunk in about 1850, and was operated by a private company until the early twentieth century when it was closed for a number of years. It was reopened and passed into public ownership in 1947 when the UK coal industry was nationalised. Despite reaching its peak production in 1963, it was closed in 1966 and abandoned for good the following year. At the time of its closure it was the only coal mine operating inside Glasgow.

I was browsing the 1948 survey of coal mines when, to my utter surprise, I found that the chairman of the company that owned the colliery immediately prior to nationalisation was one A. MacFarlane. Mere intrigue now became fascination. Unfortunately I could find no more information about this chairman and wasn't even able to determine what the 'A' stood for, nor was I able to establish any connection between that MacFarlane and the Alistair MacFarlane who was the manager back in 1853.

I was beginning to give up hope when I came across a newspaper photograph from a 1966 Glasgow Herald article that reported the closure of the mine. It showed a group of forlorn looking miners standing wearily at the gates to the colliery holding placards. To one side of them was an old man in a smart suit, looking quite out of place. The article identified this man as one Alistair MacFarlane, its one-time proprietor who was now vehemently campaigning against the closure of the mine. The article went on to explain that this protest was largely sentimental, as the mine was clearly no longer financially viable and even if it were, its former proprietor no longer had any shareholding in it and so apparently had nothing to gain by keeping it open.

I puzzled over this strange article for some time and looked closely at the fuzzy picture of Alistair MacFarlane, wondering if he had any connection to the colliery's first manager or his namesake who went mad two Christmases ago. I consulted various records on the current MacFarlane family, but could find no mention of an Alistair in any previous generation of the family.

I was about to dismiss the recurrence of the name as a curious coincidence when I happened upon a website listing the names of miners and the dates at which they worked at various Scottish coal mines. It seemed to be a sort of "miners reunited" site, where miners can get back in touch with the men they worked with many years before. The majority of miners were now dead and only two miners who worked at the Garscube Colliery were listed as still being

alive and both of them worked there until its final closure in 1966: John Wilson and Archibald McQueen.

Via the website, I left messages for them to get in touch with me, remaining suitably vague about my reasons. After receiving no response after a couple of weeks, I turned to the phone book and started with the easier of the two names. My conversation with Mrs McQueen was brief: she told me matter-of-factly that Archie had died six months ago. She knew nothing of the website, but I said that I would update it, which I duly did.

The fourth John Wilson that I telephoned affirmed in a reassuringly gruff voice that he had indeed worked in the colliery. I explained that I was researching its history and he agreed to meet me at lunchtime the following day at his local pub, The First and Last, so-called because it was the last pub you visited on leaving the city and the first stop when you arrived, didn't compare well to the pubs I frequented in the West End of the city, but it had a certain charm about it.

What follows is the transcript from my recording of our meeting.

SP: When did you work at Garscube Colliery?

JW: From June 1951 to 1967 when it closed.

SP: What was your job at the mine?

JW: When I started I worked the coal-cutter, like what I did at Killoch colliery. It wasnae nice work. After I hurt my back I worked on the surface minding the lifting gear.

SP: How did you feel when the mine closed?

JW: Sad. Naebady had much work for us miners and we all knew there was more coal doon there, but it couldnae be helped.

SP: Did you protest against the closure?

JW: Aye, didnae do any good. Got my coupon in the Herald...(laughs)

SP: Is that you in these pictures? (I show him the Herald article.)

JW: Right enough, that's the one - that's me there. (JW identifies the man second from the left in the photo as himself.)

SP: Do you know who that gentleman in the suit is?

JW: Aye, that's Alistair MacFarlane. He wiz a funny bugger.

SP: How so?

JW: He wiz always hanging about the mine, but he didnae do anything but tell stories. Right weird stories.

SP: What kind of stories?

JW: Well, for one thing, he said he used to own it!

SP: But he did, didn't he? It says so here. (I point to a highlighted sentence in the Herald article.)

JW: Well, right enough then, mebe he did, but he talked as if it were still his mine. He said he'd been manager of it too, which naebady there could mind.

SP: You mean no-one remembered him being the owner or the manager?

JW: Aye, that's right. But it was just right weird that he used hang about there - he must have been loaded. Why hang about an old mine dressed in a suit?

SP: So you must have talked to him yourself?

JW: Aye, he wiz always there at the top of the lift, asking us questions as we fin shed our shift. We didnae like talking to him much - like I said, a funny bugger. Talked funny too.

SP: Did he have a posh accent?

JW: No posh, but no like a Glasga accent, well no like us miners. He talked kinda through his nose. (JW speaks in a very nasal, Glaswegian accent for the last few words, then starts coughing.)

SP: What questions did he ask?

JW: All sorts... did you see any funny lights... did you see anyone doon there who wasnae a miner... did you see this or that? We just ignored him after a bit.

SP: Did he ever go in the mine?

JW: He must've once, he knew it well enough. But he wouldnae go in all dressed up in a suit, would he? He did seem scared of the mine though... looked doon the lift shaft most evenings, shaking his head... funny bugger.

SP: Why do you think he campaigned against its closure?

JW: Dunno. We didnae really want his help, but we couldnae say no cos he gave us a wee bit of money. He kept talking aboot there being more than just coal doon the mine, or some nonsense like that. He wanted to buy the mine but couldnae.

SP: Why not?

JW: Council wanted to build on it and didnae want a coal mine there and anyway, the coal board would never've sold it to him. He was very angry aboot it. He was shouting and greeting like a wain sometimes.

SP: Do you know what he did after Garscube Colliery closed?

JW: He killed himself a few days later. He was found deed at that big train bridge, you know the one over the Kelvin near the old train station doon there. My mate saw him with his own eyes - hanging there over the river - one end of his big red scarf tied to the railings and the other roond his neck. Funny bugger.