



# *Miracles from Mayhem*

*The story of May Nicholson*



*By Irene Howat*

**CHRISTIAN FOCUS**





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*For  
Tracey and David, Leanne and Beth  
Alan, Karen and Megan*



*and with thanks to  
Preshal's Board of Directors  
without whom this book  
would not have been written*





## *Foreword* *by The Earl of Dundee*

Some stories have to be written. May Nicholson's is one of them. It is compulsive reading. Yet the enduring impact is the message that you take away with you.

Firstly, there is the witness to the change in May's life. Not least is this provided by a doctor who met her both before and after her conversion. He writes, 'When I knew her previously May was a deeply depressed alcohol addict with no hope and her life was going nowhere. She seemed in utter chaos. Now May was completely and utterly different. The transformation in her life was dramatic and complete – yes, miraculous.' And it is this change that makes her so effective in helping people, as is evident from the account of her works in Paisley, Dundee and Glasgow.

Secondly, reflected in *Miracles from Mayhem* is an affirmation of the Christian gospel. On the theme of repentance from sin and newness of life, one of May's colleagues remarks that when asked about the slash marks on her arms she would reply, 'These are the marks of my old life, but the life I have now is the new one in Jesus.'

Thirdly, and above all, May's story rekindles our own belief in the God of miracles and his ability to enter the mayhem of daily life. 'I will restore to you the years the





locusts have eaten' (Joel 2:25). May Nicholson thanks God for giving back to her all the years that were wasted with drink, drugs and self-harming.

*Miracles in Mayhem* will make you laugh and weep. It will not leave you unmoved. But while it will benefit all its readers, in particular it speaks to those who are in despair. For May's life demonstrates the most uplifting experience of any time and place, the replacement of hopelessness by confidence, love and joy.

**Alexander Dundee**

March 2004





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## *Back to the Beginning*

My old man's a dyer  
He works in Coats' mill  
He gets his pay on a Friday  
And he buys half a gill.  
He goes to church on a Sunday  
A half an hour late  
He pulls the buttons off his shirt  
And puts them in the plate.



That song makes me smile. My dad sang it to me countless times and hundreds of other Paisley dads sang it to their children too. Coats' Mill was big business in the town when I was young and it was one of the major employers. Dad worked long hours and I used to watch at the window for him coming home. Mum would be rushing around to have his tea on the table almost as soon as he came in. It's changed days now. Some of the men I know come home and make the dinner. My dad wouldn't have known where to start!

My story doesn't begin there, of course, and I'd love to trace back my family history to find out more about it. But what I do know explains a lot about my childhood.

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Mum had a tragic background. Her parents came to Paisley from Ireland. Grandpa went away to the First World War and like millions of others he didn't come home again. The last Granny saw of him was when he put on his scratchy new soldier's uniform and marched proudly out to serve king and country. I can imagine how proud she felt as she watched him go, and I'm sure she kept her fears to herself. Granny must have been afraid because she had more than a dozen children and nothing to live on except her soldier husband's pay. When she was left a widow Granny decided to go with the children to New Zealand. But she changed her mind at the very last minute and marched them all away from the ship.



Mum's home was poor, and I mean really poor. As soon as she was able Mum went to work at the mill. I just hate the thought of her working there. Looms were huge clanking brutes of things. The weaver peddled a contraption that lifted the warp threads up and down as the shuttle shot from side to side with the weft. Weavers got into a rhythm as they worked and the one thing that disturbed the rhythm was a thread breaking. Young girls were employed to work below the looms and their job was to watch for threads breaking then to grab them and knot them together again so that the weaver didn't have to slow down or stop. Slowing down and stopping cost time and therefore money, and the overseers soon spotted when that happened and docked the weaver's wage. So these girls, some as young as eight or nine, couldn't let their concentration lapse for a minute or they would get a kick from the weaver or his overseer.





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Just imagine what it was like for a girl like Mum. The noise was unbearable and she soon learned to lip-read. Even though she had a cloth wrapped round her mouth and nose and a scarf round her head the fine dust from the loom went everywhere. There can't have been a millgirl that didn't have dust in her lungs at the end of the day. And it was everywhere else too, all over her clothes, in her hair and ears, trapped under her fingernails. And that was when things were going well. Sometimes a girl needed a kick to tell her that a thread had broken, because even if the weaver screamed at her he wouldn't have been heard, and if she jumped she was in danger of having her hair caught in the loom. Some girls were killed under the looms. It was a dangerous as well as a horrible job. But it had to be done; and my granny needed the money.



There was a school for mill children but it cost a penny to attend. As Granny needed every penny to feed and clothe her children Mum wasn't able to go. A farthing was a lot of money to Granny and a penny for education was too much to pay. I think it made Mum sad that she had very little education for she was a clever and able woman and could have made something of it. The first time Dad took Mum home to meet his family she must have felt as though she was entering a different world. It was probably the first time she held a china cup and saucer. I imagine she was scared stiff she would drop them!

Every Sunday we visited Dad's parents. We went in, sat down and never moved. My brothers and sisters and I watched Granny arrange the cups and saucers and side plates. Side plates! We thought we were visiting

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millionaires! The children weren't allowed to sit at the table and we had to watch the grown-ups having their tea before we had any. I still remember watching a cake, never taking my eyes off it and wishing that nobody would choose that one. And I can still feel the disappointment like a punch in the stomach when somebody did. Dad's mother always had plenty of food on the table but Mum warned us within an inch of our lives not to take more than one thing. Occasionally, on the walk over to our Sunday visit, our hearts sank when Mum told us that we weren't to eat anything at all. When Granny offered us a cake or biscuit we had to grin and say, 'No thank you. I'm not hungry.' Sometimes Mum had a need to show her in-laws that her children weren't hungry, even when we were. There were many nights I went to bed with my stomach rumbling with hunger and Mum's words of wisdom ringing in my ears like cold comfort. 'Away to sleep,' she'd tell us. 'That'll make the morning come quicker and there's bread for the morning.'



I loved my Dad's father. He used to tell us such good stories, stories we wanted to believe but never knew if they were true or not. All these years later I can still hear his voice telling me one of them. 'I was on the top deck of a tram,' he said, 'when this man in a business suit came on and told me I'd stolen his watch! Do you think I'd do a thing like that, May?' I shook my head, and said I didn't. I'd heard the story so often, but that didn't make me want him to hurry it. It was so good. With a sigh of contentment I relaxed on his knee and let him get on with it. 'Well, I told the man that I'd not stolen his watch at





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all. "Yes, you did!" he shouted. "No, I didn't," said I. "Yes, you did!" "I did not!" Then the police arrived on the scene and climbed up the stairs of the tram.' By now I was holding my breath. "You've lost a watch?" the policeman asked, and the businessman admitted that he had. "Well," said the policeman, "we found it in the toilet." The businessman was so embarrassed that he offered to give me £5. 'Did I take it, May?' he would ask. 'No, you didn't take it,' I replied. How I loved this game! 'Then he offered me £20, May, enough to buy a wee flat in a tenement. Did I take it?' 'No, Grandpa, you didn't take it,' said I. 'Then what happened? He offered me £50, enough to buy a beautiful bungalow.' The whole family was listening now, waiting for the punch line. "Done!" I said, and the businessman took out his wallet and started to count the pound notes. "One, two, three, four, five", Grandpa counted slowly and I joined in, my voice rising with excitement when he got to the mid-forties. "'Forty- six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine ...'" Then, out of the blue I heard your granny shouting, "Hoi, Hughie! Come on Hughie, it's time to get up or you'll be late for your work!" It was ages before I worked out that was a joke, and even then I loved when he told me it.

Granny sat like a queen reigning when we visited. When I think back I know she was queen of a very small country as they just had a wee house. But there seemed so much room in it because there were just the two of them. In our home there was nearly a dozen of us and there were no side plates, in fact, sometimes we drank our tea from jam jars. There were enough dishes to go





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round until something was broken then one of us had to wait for someone to finish their meal before he got his. Mum's mother died before I was born but I feel I can remember Granny because Mum spoke a lot about her.

I was born in Ferguslie Park in Paisley in a traditional room and kitchen with a tiny WC on the landing. The room had a built-in bed, complete with curtains to give some privacy. All of us were born in that bed and the biggest luxury we could have was to be sick and cuddled up in the built-in bed. When I was three or four years old we moved to a brand new house in Ferguslie Park, the biggest council housing scheme in Europe at the time. Our new home had two bedrooms, a kitchen and – wonder of wonders – our very own bathroom! It was pure luxury. Mum's brother John, and his wife Lizzie, lived right next door with her seventeen children. And we didn't even have to go outside to see them. Instead we opened a hatch in the hall, hopped down into the darkness, felt our way along to the corresponding hatch in Aunt Lizzie's house, and knocked on it until one of our cousins opened it and let us in. It was like a rat run for the children of both families. Sometimes we frightened the wits out of other neighbours by banging on the underside of their hatches with a brush handle! Apart from that the worst mischief we got into was knocking on peoples' doors and running away before they were answered. Of course, we could only do that when the evenings were dark. At the end of our road was a part of Ferguslie Park that was kept for 'undesirables'. People actually called the area 'The Undesirables'. Council officials did regular checks to see that the people there were looking after their houses. If any of them had ever come into our





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house they would have discovered it spotlessly clean. We were poor but we were clean.

Aunt Lizzie's family next door were our closest friends as well as our relations and we saw a lot of them. Other members of the extended family lived differently from us. In fact, when we went to visit one aunt she put newspapers on the floor to stop us messing up her linoleum. She was the only person we knew who had a television set but we weren't allowed to watch it. But who needed television when we had all our toys to play with? Dad made us stilts out of National Dried Milk tins by punching holes on either side of them and threading string through the holes. We were measured to make sure the string reached up to our hands, then it was knotted inside the tin. With our new toys we thought we were just great as we clomped up and down the street. Then there were our skipping ropes made out of old bits of washing line. Given an old length of rope the fun was endless. We skipped on our own, in twos with a longer rope and in twos with one end tied to a lamppost. And if there was a crowd of us we skipped in turns while two girls 'ca'ed' the ends of the rope.

Dolls were among my favourite toys and I made my own from clothes pegs. Nowadays you can spend good money buying clothes peg doll kits. My mother would have given herself a pain laughing if she'd ever seen one of them. I drew a face on the clothes pegs and either drew hair or stuck on bits of string. Then I made them dresses out of whatever I could get. Even rags were hard to come by because the ragman came round the streets buying rags in exchange for cups. My peg dolls looked





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good in clothes made of paper too. When I was ten or eleven I was given a real doll and I thought heaven had come on earth.

Birthdays weren't celebrated but Christmas certainly was. We hung up our socks and were thrilled with the bits and pieces we found in them the next morning. They always included a tangerine and a silver threepenny piece. And that wasn't all. One year we got a cardboard sweet shop that kept us in fun for months. Another year a cardboard post office complete with paper pound notes and cardboard coins arrived at Christmas. We could not have been better pleased even if the pound notes had been real and the coins made of silver. When the cardboard toys eventually gave up the ghost we had our imaginations to fall back on. Playing 'wee houses' gave us endless pleasure. With pebbles for potatoes, dock seeds for tea, dandelion leaves for vegetables and bits of paper wrapped in twists for sweets we were all the way there for a good afternoon's play. And in summer, when the nights were long and light, we put on concerts in the back greens and performed to audiences from up and down the street.

I love seeing my grandchildren with all their nice toys but I didn't feel deprived when I was a girl because I didn't have any. The thing about being poor in Ferguslie Park in the 1950s was that everyone was just the same as we were. We didn't know we were poor because nobody thought to tell us. And even some famous pop singers of the day must have been poor too. I remember Lonnie Donnigan singing, 'My old man's a dustman; he wears a dustman's hat. He wears "Cor blimey" trousers and he lives in a council flat.' We were like the pop singer; we





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lived in a council flat. It never occurred to me that Lonnie Donnigan's dad might not! Maybe his dad was better off and sometimes bought him sweets. They were an absolute luxury in our house. But down the road there was a man who used to organise races for us, but only when he was drunk. I used to watch for him coming to see if he was unsteady on his feet before running down to meet him. He'd line us up according to our ages, 'Ready, steady, go!' and we were off, pelting down the street as though our lives depended on it. There was a lot at stake because the older winners got a shilling for sweets and the younger ones were given a sixpence. I ran like a hare to win the money but I would never have bought sweets with it. Sixpence or a shilling would put such a smile on Mum's face and that made not buying sweets all worthwhile. The poor man must have wondered where his money had gone when he woke up sober the next morning. Very occasionally Granny gave me a two-shilling piece. When that happened my feet had wings as I careered down road after road back to Ferguslie Park to give Mum a fortune. 'That's God's gift to keep us till pay day', she would say, and even as a girl I could feel her relief.



Dad wasn't always as careful with money, which was why he felt able to buy a greyhound. No doubt he argued that it would keep itself on its winnings at the greyhound races, but all I knew was that the dog seemed to get better food than we did sometimes. And he had a kennel all to himself in the back green. For all our poverty we did have our little luxuries. Mum did the washing in a boiler in the washhouse. The water was heated up for the washing then cooled down for us children. Ah, the luxury of the deep





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warm soapy water. Mind you, it wasn't clean when the first of us went into it and it certainly wasn't clean by the time the last of us climbed out!

Everyone moved into the housing scheme at the same time and none of the families could afford to buy things for their houses. Somebody made the table we had in our kitchen. Nearly all the curtains in the street were the same because the Glenfield Factory made curtain material and one of the employees managed to get enough material to go round. People used to joke that if the manager of the Glenfield Factory showed his face in the street someone had to shout a warning and the curtains would all be taken down. Maybe that wasn't a joke because I don't imagine the material had been paid for. The same system worked with paint. Anything that needed painting was given a coat of ships' paint from the local shipyard, though I doubt the owners knew anything of that either.

Our clothes were all handed down. They must have started off new with someone somewhere, but we didn't know who or where. And with around 30 of us between the two houses there were plenty of people waiting for what you were outgrowing. I remember once I hadn't quite grown into what I had to wear. My older sister, who was 18, was getting married and I needed some smart clothes. Mum borrowed a frock from a girl who was just a bit older than me. Unfortunately, as a thin twelve year old I didn't quite fill the frock, and old laddered nylons were collected from both houses and stuffed into the bits that I didn't do justice to. I can picture it still: a flowered frock nipped in at the waist and trimmed with a wide collar. I thought I was the cat's pyjamas, especially with my little artificial chest!





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Other days were not quite as glamorous, such as the one when a burglar broke into our house and leant against the bed settee in which four of us were sleeping. It collapsed on us and he made a quick getaway. Being caught four in a collapsing bed settee by a burglar wasn't exactly high drama, but it did give us something to laugh about for a while. I still can't imagine what he thought he would find in a house in Ferguslie Park. All he could have stolen in our living-room were the wooden smoker's chair, the bed settee itself or the linoleum off the floor! The only thing of value was a little crystal fruit bowl that Mum loved. I think it might have belonged to her mother and I know it would have broken her heart if anything had happened to it. I only knew it was a fruit bowl because that's what I was told; I never saw any fruit in it. It was more than our lives were worth to touch it.



Saying that makes our home seem so poor, and it was. But Mum was house-proud for all that. Although there wasn't much in the house, what was there was as clean as she could make it. The bigger children in the family used to take us younger ones out to let her do the cleaning, and the floor would be covered with newspapers when we got back so that we didn't walk on it until it was completely dry. Every night Mum did the washing before she went to bed and hung it on the pulley or put it on a clothes horse to dry. Floor washing day wasn't the only time the older children were sent out with the younger ones. Sometimes we were chased just to get us out from under Mum's feet. She must have really needed that space.

Because it was a new housing scheme there were farms not too far away, and that's where we were sent for





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potatoes. After the 'tattie-howkers' had done their job of gathering the potatoes there were still little ones left in the ground. So when the coast was clear we took brown paper carrier bags and set off to find them. Not that the farmer knew, of course. On the way back home the string on the carrier bags cut into our hands but the thought of the meal to come kept us going. Looking back I can see that it was theft, but it was theft born out of desperation. And I don't suppose Mum would have chosen to send us to the shop with a penny to buy broken biscuits if she could have afforded to buy whole ones. They tasted just the same anyway. I especially liked going to the butcher's shop because the man who worked there sometimes gave Mum an extra sausage for me because I had such nice blue eyes, or so he said. My aunt told me later that he gave them because I was so thin. They didn't help fatten me up because any extra sausages that were going went to Dad. At Hallowe'en we earned apples and Mum made them into the most delicious apple sponge, at least it looked big until it was divided up between us. We worked hard for every one of those apples by making ourselves fancy-dress costumes from whatever we could find and going round the doors in the street singing our party pieces or saying poems. Today children think they deserve an apple and some monkey nuts when they've told a joke; we worked hard for ours.

