Different class

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The most brilliant actor of his generation, Christopher Eccleston transforms pride in his Manchester roots into anger and intensity on screen

The meeting place is a cafe called Chez Nous in a north London location that any estate agent worth his commission could easily describe as Hampstead without blushing, assuming estate agents ever blush. Christopher Eccleston lived in London for 13 years, but returned to his native north-west of England (b. 16 February 1964, Salford) a couple of years ago. At least in part, this was to escape the Hampstead set who quaff in caffs with effete names like Chez Nous.

You can see his point. The Sloane on the phone at the next table makes several calls in quick succession, each one recounting the basic plot of her previous conversation at top volume. Her pal has boyfriend trouble, apparently, and now half of London knows about it. Fortunately she finishes up the ring-round before Eccleston arrives. "Bye, sweetie!" I'm rather relieved that this embodiment of the north-south divide don't get to meet.

If you are the sort of person who judges a man by his choice of breakfast then you will be interested to learn that Eccleston orders tea and toast. Not much of a character insight, granted, but with Christopher Eccleston there is so little to go on that speculation and extrapolation are inevitable. A trawl through previous interviews hardly throws up a wealth of personal details. (Did I mention he was born in Salford?) However it is fair to say that Eccleston is thoroughly, defiantly northern.

He is also, of course, an actor; that much we can all agree on. The question is, what sort of actor. Is he a star? Well, no, not quite though he has played several lead roles. His break came as Derek Bentley in the true story of a miscarriage of justice, Let Him Have It. He gained wider exposure in Shallow Grave, the hip, flip Scottish thriller about three flatmates who dispose of a body that stands between them and a suitcase filled with cash. Eccleston turned in an entertainingly edgy performance as a control freak accountant who goes loopy in the loft, but it was Ewan McGregor who got top billing.

"The most eloquent thing I could say about Shallow Grave is that the best thing was the publicity campaign. It's stylish but pretty empty," Eccleston later said. This was the first sign of a recurring habit of criticising productions he had been involved in. Amongst actors, honesty is not often regarded as the best policy, so does he have a reputation for being difficult? "I'm not difficult to work with," he says. "I think I'm perceived as opinionated. I'm difficult to work with if you haven't done your homework or you're a lying bastard. I've had my run-ins with directors over the years."

Earlier this year Eccleston was hired to play the lead in Strindberg's Miss Julie but pulled out at very short notice for "personal reasons"; now, some months later, the stage show is now back on which is why Eccleston is in London. He still refuses to say exactly what happened,

but it's worth noting that the director has since changed. Reading between the lines, there may have been a run-in. What seems clear is that Eccleston's on-screen intensity is mirrored behind the scenes.

After Shallow Grave, his next major movie role was as the lead in Jude, Michael Winterbottom's adaptation of the Thomas Hardy novel about a village lad bent on self-improvement through the power of books. "Christopher has not been seen as a classic leading man, but he's a revelation on camera with terrific intelligence," said Winterbottom at the time. However it was a pre-Titanic Kate Winslet who attracted most attention, not least by outraging die-Hardy fans with her post-coitally heaving bosom. The film was generally applauded, though one critic described Eccleston's performance as "intense, brooding, unfathomable". He probably took this as a compliment; intense and brooding are what unites all his performances.

Eccleston also played the lead in Heart, an overgrown TV movie about a man who receives a heart transplant and then seeks out the mother of the teenage donor who died in a motorcycle accident. Not a significant film, except that it was written by Jimmy McGovern, the former Brookside scriptwriter who has grown into British television's most singular dramatist. Eccleston's fortunes have been closely linked to those of McGovern, of which more later.

But Eccleston's profile is about to increase. He plays opposite Nicolas Cage in Gone in 60 Seconds, which was produced by action ace Jerry Bruckheimer, whose credits include Top Gun, The Rock and Bad Boys. Almost certainly stuff will be blown up in his new film, and Eccleston joins a long line of English actors who have been called upon to play Hollywood baddies. "I'm a Manchester scally in America," he says. "I'm a car thief that can't drive. Very funny." He pronounces it "foon-eh".

Did he hang out with Cage in Los Angeles, where the movie was shot?
"No, I don't think he wanted to hang out with me." Everything Eccleston says is intended to emphasise his belief that the only important thing an actor does is act. He seems determined to remain a tea-and-toast kinda guy.

Also in the can is a film called The Invisible Circus in which Eccleston plays opposite Cameron Diaz. This is good company to be keeping for an actor who wants a shot at big-time movies, which is questionable. He seems to be happier on telly. Next week, Eccleston pitches up in Clocking Off, a rather strange drama for BBC1 in which six separate stories are linked by the Manchester textiles factory where several of the characters work. Basically it's Tales of the Unexpected meets Coronation Street.

In the second episode, Eccleston plays a commitment-phobic airport worker - he's the guy with the ping-pong bats who parks the planes - with a weakness for air stewardesses. Then, to his amazement, he falls in love with a mother-of-three with a cabin trunk of emotional baggage and a penchant for arson. Looks like time for the old did-you-identify-with-your-character routine. Say, Chris, could you imagine bringing up another man's children?

"I can imagine falling in love in the way that he does. You're hoping for that, aren't you? I

found his boredom and frustration with constant shagging funny. I wish I had his problems!"

Have you ever fallen in love?
"Let's move on ..."

... and you don't have kids?
"No. If I had kids I'd want to be around them. I benefited from my mum and dad being around. I'd want some sort of financial security so that if a kid came along I could say I'm going to be here. If I had kids, the kids would come first. If I couldn't do that there would be something wrong with me."

The fire-starting mum is played by Sarah Lancashire, formerly resident of Coronation Street, who displays a hitherto untapped talent for black comedy. As does Eccleston, who is probably at his least brooding and intense, though by most actors' standards he is still fairly brooding and intense. What would be interesting to discover is where that intensity comes from. In part it's a physical thing; he has an eagle nose and protruding brows which frame eyes that can be made to flash with anger. One stern look from Eccleston would be enough to unnerve most people.

But there must be more to it than that, and I have a theory. More often than not, Eccleston plays characters who are solidly northern, which in screen casting shorthand equates to working class. They are smart, pulled-up-by-their-bootstraps people who have outgrown their roots. The life they have created for themselves conflicts with the working class identity which they wear like a badge of pride.

There was certainly something of Eccleston in Jude or his character in Our Friends in the North, arguably the most important work he has been involved with. In this BBC epic which charted three decades in the decline of municipal socialism in Tyneside, Eccleston played a working class lad who tries to outrun his past and becomes a renowned photo-journalist in the process. People that transcend their class background often have this dynamism, but sometimes also display a fierce pride that can feel like anger. Eccleston appears to have that quality, and it's revealed fleetingly when I ask why he moved back to Manchester.

"I'm the only one from my family for a long time to leave the area," he says. "It's a great job, mine, but you give up things when you do it. I'm close to my brothers and my parents and I'd like to see more of them. [But] I didn't reconnect and all that - I live in a nice suburban area which is very different from the area I was brought up in because that's what I can afford. It would be hypocritical to do anything else, to try to pretend I'm something I'm not. I'm a fully paid-up member of the middle classes now."

But he's not necessarily happy about it. So does Eccleston have a working class chip?
"You take the work you're offered to a certain extent, and they listen to my accent and look at my walk and say, working class," he says. "I think it's a big issue. Growing up, it wasn't in poverty or anything but I wasn't brought up with a romantic view of life. Acting was a way out for me. If I hadn't been doing that I would be digging a ditch in the road in the rain, or working in a factory, which is not a bad thing - my old fella did it, my mum did it. But I was marked by the sense of repetition and the low demands that sort of work put on them, because they were both bright people. That's what made me f*ck off to London."

So acting became a way of changing the course of a life he saw mapped out ahead of him, though it is possible that he is not entirely comfortable with the implications of those changes. Eccleston is particularly drawn to television because he regards it as a populist medium, name-checking Ken Loach's recently rereleased screen adaptation of Kes as a particular inspiration. When he later reveals that a lot of his spare time is spent in training to run marathons for charity, I think "bingo", the loneliness of the long-distance runner. Eccleston seems to be an actor perfectly suited to kitchen sink dramas in an age when demand from that sort of awkward, angry character is declining.

Thus the vital importance of Jimmy McGovern, who has provided Eccleston with his most memorable roles. (McGovern wouldn't necessarily expect to have a say in casting, but has apparently taken to describing characters he wants Eccleston to play as having "big ears and a prominent nose".) The run started with Cracker, in which he played DCI Bilborough, the uptight cop who was offed by a shaven-headed Robert Carlyle at the start of the second series. Ironically Carlyle beat him again with a similar haircut, when both actors went up for the part of the baddie in the last Bond movie. There are obvious parallels in their intense on-screen persona and an apparent difficulty reconciling their working class backgrounds with the cushy bourgeois existence of an actor.

After Cracker, Eccleston went on to take the lead in another McGovern drama for Channel 4 called Hearts and Minds in which he played a teacher who believes passionately in education but is vainly trying to fight the system from within an inner city comprehensive. It was the kind of unfashionable, issue-led TV that hardly gets made any more. That led in turn to Hillsborough, the dramatisation of the aftermath of the disaster in which Eccleston played support group spokesman, Trevor Hicks.

"I'm much more proud of the television area of my work than film because it's a little more important in our cultural life," he says. "What I love about McGovern is that he that he took Cracker - mainstream telly, a police procedural - and injected it with these challenging characters and issues. It was Jimmy giving us what you got in the Seventies in the Nineties, and I love him for that."

McGovern and Eccleston share many of the same old-fashioned northern values, which centre on the importance of family, community and solid socialist belief. They are not trendy views and Eccleston is not a fashionable actor; he frequently seems like a Spartist square peg in the slippery round hole of the entertainment industry. "We're very overpaid and the work is too important to p*ss about with it," he grumbles.

Christopher Eccleston - a working class act
Clocking Off, BBC1, January 23