

Edinburgh goes Breughel

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In the last fortnight, Edinburgh has gone Breughel. The spirit of that well known picture of 'The Hunters in Winter' is now an everyday part of our city where nearly 30 inches of snow has fallen. The place is gloriously filled with light - when it's not snowing, that is. But there's a danger of sudden avalanches from the roofs and the pavements are often like ice rinks. Unless the shop-front's been cleared, salted *and* gritted, you tread cautiously. Earlier today, I saw a girl all but hugging the street wall to feel her way down the very slightest slope. And then there's the icicles. Some tenements are so heavily hung with these long and sharpened stilettos, that the fire brigade is called out to chop and clear. Buses are routinely diverted, but few people complain. On Monday a double-decker went slithering down the mound then toppled over onto its side. And for a short time all Lothian buses were cancelled. Again, there were few complaints. The common sense of the decision was plain to everyone.

With the fall of darkness, around 4 o'clock, things get serious. The decorative glaze of ice starts to grip and pedestrians slide in earnest. A&E is a busy, busy place, and the relocation of Edinburgh's major hospital to the distant outskirts is once again a source of real anger. That aside, we live in a theme park, where snow smothered cars become soft furnishings. And Arthur's Seat and the Meadows have been taken by snowmen and their igloos. Where families, with the day off work and school, goes sledging together. Police report a dramatic drop in crimes of random violence. 'Because of the cold?' I ask. No, people just seem to be being more decent to each. And it's true. Despite all the risk to life and limb, the cancelled bread deliveries in supermarkets, and the sub zero temperatures, I've hardly heard a voice raised in anger. On the contrary, I've never seen so many complete strangers offering each other a helping hand. Often quite literally.

At night, a kind of after-hours tolerance takes over as pedestrians stroll home in the middle of the road, and cars edge around them without a hoot of complaint. We're nearly two weeks into Breughel-land and the army's now been called in to clear the streets in a 'war against weather'. Edinburgh's native son, David Hume, believed that each one of us was naturally gifted with human benevolence. Will our newly recovered decency outlast this act of liberation? Will more of hard times make us even kindlier citizens? Well, I'd like to think so. But in the meantime, I am more than happy to enjoy our light filled days and our snow tumbled darkness.