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Lewis Grassic Gibbon: Exploring the Future, Uncovering the Morning Star

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The major achievement of Lewis Grassic Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell, 1901-35) is the trilogy of novels *Sunset Song* (1932), *Cloud Howe* (1933) and *Grey Granite* (1934), first published in a collected edition as *A Scots Quair* in 1946, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and eleven years after his death. He was born at the beginning of the 20th century and grew up in the Mearns of Kincardineshire, where the vast rolling farmlands stretch towards the North Sea and the cycle of the seasons and the conservative rhythms of farm work grounded his sense of the earth as the final source of elemental value, an inhuman authority against which humanity aspires. It will always claim us in the end. It will never really let us leave. And yet, human purpose drives imagination towards a better world, despite all oppressions.

Wilfred Owen's perennial question, faced with the human waste of the First World War: "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" nowhere has deeper resonance than in Gibbon's trilogy. *Sunset Song* takes us from the beginning of the 20th century to the end of that war, in the farming country he knew intimately. By the end of the novel, all the main male characters have been killed, and the minister's elegiac sermon concludes the book with the eternal judgement all wars ask us to make, again and again: "*They died for a world that is past, these men, but they did not die for this, that we seem to inherit.*" In other words, the value of their lives, if we remember them, preserves a critical edge, cutting across the value of the lives we lead now, in the present tense.

Gibbon insisted that the music of the traditional song "The Flowers of the Forest" should be printed in the closing pages of his book. The characters at the standing stone listen to it played on the pipes, and it's worth dwelling on its significance here. It is an elegy for the dead, an old pipe tune that exists in more than one version. A traditional song is associated with it. An early version is on *Whip My Towdie: Popular Music from Renaissance Scotland* (CD CMF 005) and the more familiar tune on *O Lustie May* (CMF 003), both performed by Coronach. In the 18th century, Jean Elliot (1727-1805) wrote verses for it which remain with us. The melody is sometimes still played at funerals as a lament. In fact, it is only rarely that the tune can be heard outwith actual occasions of mourning, for it is not to be performed for

entertainment and pipers generally shy away or refuse outright to play it except on such occasions. It was carefully and appropriately adapted into the closing movement of a fine string quartet by the distinguished composer John Blackwood McEwan (1868-1948), his Quartet No.7, written during the First World War, entitled “Threnody” and dated 1916 (available on CD from Chandos, CHAN 9926). When Grassie Gibbon describes the end of an entire way of life and the consequences of the horrors of the First World War at the close of his novel, he’s calling up a spirit of lament and mourning that runs through history. This is why he insisted that the words and music of the song be printed in the novel itself. Both McEwan and Gibbon were thinking of the Great War, but the moment the song refers to is the slaughter at Flodden in 1513. The five hundredth anniversary double-CD, *The Flowers of the Forest: Songs and Music of Flodden* (CDTRAX1513) includes a stunning performance of the song by Dick Gaughan.

Sunset Song was planned as the first part of a trilogy and it’s essential to understand it within this structure. The central character, Chris Guthrie, survives to move to a small town in Cloud Howe and then to the city, in Grey Granite, but she is increasingly decentred and her son, Ewan, materialist, socialist, ruthlessly dedicated to making a better world and breaking the class system forever, begins to take centre-stage. But he is not made heroic, and his utterly callous behaviour to the young woman we think he will marry leaves us disenchanted with him, but also, more seriously, challenged to ask ourselves questions about wishful expectations in a world of cruelty and injustice. Gibbon offers hope in the struggle for a better world and that hope is commemorated in the words on his tombstone in Arbuthnott Kirkyard: “For I will give you the morning star...” Yet if this hope returns with each day’s dawn, it can never be trusted as having been achieved: it always demands further participation, regenerated effort, the pathos of the epic effort, engagement in a world that remains elemental, inhuman, and gathers us all back to it in the end.

Gibbon’s design in the trilogy was self-consciously to take his readers through Scottish life, first in the rural countryside, then into the world of a small town, and then to an industrial city, and to move through history, from mythical times at the beginning, through the first thirty years of the 20th century as the trilogy progresses. The ending of Grey Granite, in the early 1930s, is left open: readers, it insists, must now take the story forward. The trilogy is an immensely artful achievement. It has been deeply loved by generations internationally since its first publication. Over-familiarity (Sunset Song has often been voted the favourite Scottish novel in readers’ polls in newspapers) blunts the point of its political

force, but that force remains. Going forward from *Sunset Song* to the greater human dilemmas and complexities of society and religious belief in *Cloud Howe* (Sorley MacLean once told me this was his favourite novel of the three) and to the apparently more doctrinaire Marxist oppositions of *Grey Granite*, the trilogy continues to ask unanswered questions, still urgent in the 21st century.

Like the trilogy, the three short stories “Clay”, “Smeddum” and “Greenden”, are all written in a Scots linguistic idiom, both in dialogue and narrative. In *Sunset Song*, Chris has to choose between her “English” self and her “Scots” self, the former wanting education, university, a life of her own, away from the yoke of the farm and its locality, the latter loving the land and the people who work it. Chris marries and stays on the land in that novel. In the short story “Clay”, Rachel Galt faces a similar dilemma but has no hesitation in the end: she will leave, as Gibbon did.

Other novels, written under his name James Leslie Mitchell, with narrative and dialogue predominantly in English, include the large-scale heroic story of the revolt of slaves against the Roman Empire, *Spartacus* (1933); an astonishing first novel set mainly in contemporary 1920s London, with the experience of a young woman at its centre, *Stained Radiance* (1930); and a startlingly fresh science fiction novel, named after its main character, another woman, *Gay Hunter* (1934). In almost all his major works, women are the central characters.

He lived under pressure and died young. After leaving school in Scotland, he tried journalism but joined the army, travelled in Egypt and the Middle East, married his childhood sweetheart Rhea and settled in the new town of Welwyn Garden City in England, far from his ancestral home. In the last years of his life, his literary production was immense. His first published book was *Hanno: or, the Future of Exploration* (1928) and he maintained a fascination for science fiction, speculation on the future and social organisation, and on cultural relativism as discovered by explorers of the past. His biography *Niger: The Life of Mungo Park* (1934) achieves the uncanny effect of not allowing the reader foreknowledge of Park’s career: you never really know when death will cut in. Events in Mungo’s life arrive without prediction, and when he meets Walter Scott the vignette is unexpectedly poignant and surprising: “They rode the Peebles hills together, and talked with great affection [...] Mungo seems to have done most of the talking – talk that returned again and again to his quest of the Niger.” Scott interrupts him to ask, ““And you want to go back there again?”” at

which point, “Mungo’s mask went down for a moment. He would rather brave Africa and all its horrors than spend his life in toilsome rides amidst the hills...”

The same conflicted sense of loyalties and questing is possessed by Thea Mayven, in *Stained Radiance*: “Scots, she had never ceased to feel foreign in London, and intrigued by it.” Gibbon elaborates: “In Scotland, on the little farm where she had been born, she had hated the peasant life. In London she remembered it with gladness and with tears, a thing of sunrises and rains and evening scents and the lowing of lone herds across the wine-red moors. Yearly she went to Scotland for a holiday, seeking the sunset and the peewit’s cry. Then she would find her days obsessed with talk of cattle disease and the smells of uncleaned byres and earwigs crawling down her back when she lay in a field [...] She came back from her holiday and her heritage of the earth, homing to London like a lost bird.” But “Then the old songs of the winds and skies of the grey northland would go whispering through her heart again...”

The urgency of his writing sharpened his eyes. Collaborating with his friend Hugh MacDiarmid on *Scottish Scene: or The Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* (1934), a collection of essays, stories, poems, and “newsreels” (assembled quotations from contemporary newspapers), he produced some of his most searing depictions of city life, heartbreakingly perceptive descriptions of the north-east Scottish farming country, and the classic short stories. Essays (“Literary Lights”, on contemporary Scottish writers; “The Wrecker”, on the first Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald; and polemical depictions of the cities of Glasgow and Aberdeen) are coruscating.

In language, the revolution Gibbon effected in the novel has been permanent. The hierarchy of authority had been effectively established in the Enlightenment, writers pruning Scots-language words and phrases, writing in English as far as they could. Scott’s characters speak Scots, or register their Gaelic in English forms, but the language of the narrative is authoritatively English. The ambiguity of authority and reliability in narration, in Scots or English, is central to Hogg, Galt, Stevenson, many others, but in Gibbon’s trilogy it is utterly deconstructed. The narrative itself is delivered in the voices of the characters he is writing about, so the reader enters the streams of their consciousness and steps out again, often in the same sentence, to see the characters pictorially, as in a film, and then again, following their linguistic, conscious perceptions in their own tongue, what he called “the speak of the Mearns”. The vocabulary is predominantly English, posing no problem for an international

English-language readership, but the idiom is unmistakably Scots. Gibbon is being true to his readers throughout the world, trying to convey his stories without interference, honestly, artfully, but at the same time he is being true to the experience of his characters, felt and understood through their own language and idiom.

After Gibbon, and after the Second World War, the authority of English continued to dominate most popular novels in which characters speak Scots, but to writers who understood Gibbon's achievement (consciously or not), a new authority was taken up. This is what gives the writing of James Kelman such distinction and is carried on by others. The degree of self-confidence demonstrated by our contemporaries was partly made possible by Grassic Gibbon's pioneering explorations of what the future might make possible – which in his time must have seemed almost impossible. In literature, this was his great gift, his “stained radiance”: the morning star.

[Boxed off:]

These are the last two paragraphs of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's short story “Clay”, in which Rachel Galt recognises the power and attraction of the land, but decides to abandon it and go to university, for “the life that was hers”, leaving behind forever the farmworld of her father and his ancestors across millennia.

All life – just clay that awoke and strove to return again to its mother's breast. And she thought of the men who had made these rigs and the windy days of their toil and years. The daftness of toil that had been Rob Galt's, that had been that of many men long on the land, though seldom seen now, was it good, was it bad? What power had that been that woke once on this brae and was gone at last from the parks of Pittaulds?

For she knew in that moment that no other would come to tend the ill rigs in the north wind's blow. This was finished and ended, a thing put by, and the whins and the broom creep down once again, and only the peesies wheep and be still when she'd gone to the life that was hers, that was different, and the earth turn sleeping, unquieted no longer, her hungry bairns in her hungry breast where sleep and death and the earth were one.