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Memories of Neil Gunn

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I first met Neil Gunn in his novel *The Serpent*, borrowed from Nottingham Public Library in 1944, when I was twenty-two. The book spoke directly to my condition. Its philosophical anarchism, its Scottishness, its emotional power, its grip on reality and its subtle movement of the mind drove me to seek other novels of his and to read them eagerly.

When I look now at the list of those obtained in 1944 I realise that I came in through a side-door to the feast, since it could be said that not one of these books is "typical" of his output, and not one is of a kind he ever repeated. They were, in this order: *Second Sight* (the reworking of a play), *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (a profound and lucid fable), *The Grey Coast* (an essay in grim realism), and *Sun Circle* (a passionate account of the Viking invasion of Caithness). Of these only *The Green Isle* is now high in general favour; yet the "oddness" and variety of the list is one of the reasons for my abiding fascination with his work.

A year or so later, when living in London, I wrote an article about these books in a little review and sent it to him. His immediate acknowledgement was so courteous, understanding and sincere that I felt curiously indebted to him, as if he had played host to me in a strange country.

In 1946 my wife and I moved to Wester Ross, and the place proved to be forty odd miles from Neil Gunn's house. On a spring day of that year I was taking a bath at the eccentric hour of 3 p.m. when a knock sounded at the door of our bungalow by the lochside, and I paused in the process of dipping my soapy

head in the water to grumble a protest. A minute later Gene called: "John! Can you hurry? Neil Gunn is here to see you."

I felt like a man arrested in the nude, and arrived with dripping hair, a pattern of surprised awkwardness.

Neil Gunn was at that time 54 years old, tall, spare, with a strong-boned face. One eye had long ago been damaged in an accident and would not move in conjunction with the other. He seemed totally unaware of this disability and within ten minutes I was unaware of it too.

He was standing at the window looking out over the water glittering with paths of light. He said: "Daisy and I lived for a month on that hillside at the head of the loch. I remember racing the shadow to the top as the sun set. This is a beautiful spot, right enough."

His manner had a quality which I can best describe as objective friendliness. He was willing to accept disagreeable manifestations without comment. Gradually the edgy defensiveness of a young writer unsure of his ground fell away as the realisation grew that I was not under critical scrutiny but would be appreciated for whatever insights I could offer. By the time he left I knew that the man was as good as his books.

A few weeks later he returned, accompanied this time by John McNair Reid and his wife. Reid was an old friend who had been for many years a journalist in Glasgow, had shown Neil that city and provided him with much of the background material for *Wild Geese Overhead*. He was now a freelance, and I sensed disappointment and melancholy beneath the surface humour. His wife was a practising doctor with that hard cheerfulness common among those who organise the sick.

Not long afterwards we went over to Braefarm House where Neil then lived--a solid stone building nestled into a steep hillside in crofting country a few miles from Dingwall. We arrived on a two-stroke motorcycle, looking like monsters from outer space, and proved a surprise to Daisy. She told me later that from the handwriting of my letters she expected an academic of fifty with pince-nez instead of a young man with motoring goggles and a hat like a tea-cosy. From then on I typed letters; if I didn't she fled the room crying "Spiders! Spiders!"

She made us welcome, anyway, with traditional highland hospitality deepened by gleaming humour and a shy yet open warmth which convinced us immediately that we were her friends for life. After that, throughout our eleven years in Scotland we exchanged visits every few months.

Daisy was always chasing me away from chores with the injunction, "Go and talk to Neil. It does him good." Doing Neil good was her sole concern. In the intervals between books she conspired continually to seed his imagination. "See if you

can't suggest something," she would say.

Conspiracy thickened during washing-up, for this was a ceremony at which Neil never officiated. Sometimes he would hover awhile, putting in a word of commentary, but either Daisy would suggest that he take Gene into the garden or he would himself announce: "I'll just go and see to the fire," and drift away with an elaborately casual air to find a bottle suitable for later use.

Daisy then told me what she thought of his state both physical and spiritual and gave me my instructions. Years later I met two old friends of Neil's who insisted that he was not the man he had been in his youth, because Daisy "mollycoddled" him. I think that notion was due to an inability on their part to understand the nature of the relationship, which achieved a remarkable unity while it allowed the fullest individual flowering and encouraged flights to far countries of the mind.

The Highland tradition tends to value male pursuits and friendships highly and to view with some suspicion any deep and abiding companionship between man and woman as if it were betrayal of the male realm. Women should be loved, respected, treated with courtesy--and left in their own place. If a man does not find this "distance" necessary the Highlander grows uneasy. Neil always took pleasure in the outdoor and intellectual company of men, but Daisy was for him a close friend and companion as well as a wife--someone who shared his perceptions while retaining a clarity of her own.

Certainly during the years in which I knew him Neil had in a sense turned "inward." He had been active in politics during the early years of Scottish Nationalism, he had done his job in the Excise, he had served on a crofting Commission, he had worked with committees and organisations of all kinds, he had spent time fishing and walking, he and Daisy had sailed around the islands in a small boat. All this was fresh in memory and consciousness, and from time to time he yielded to pressure and gave solid, practical assistance to a cause--but he no longer sought activity, and was content. He was a professional writer. Daisy typed his books, and made her comments, which he never ignored.

I remember her expression as she sat smoking while the talk ran on through reaches of the night towards the faint cheeping of the birds. It was a reflective, reserved expression containing not so much indulgence as an appreciative and gentle calm as if she were watching the words fly off among the trees and vanish. There was a dancing stillness about her both restful and refreshing.

Perhaps the best way to give a flavour of their relationship is to quote a few words from letters which refer to Daisy.

> Daisy thoroughly enjoyed herself in Edinburgh. I had to fix the final hook in a wonderful dress. And the way she enjoyed the compliments she got--no good my telling her she ought to have more sense. There it is. I turned to the bottle.
>
> She uttered a verse of poetry this morning in the real Zen manner, crying it from her room to mine:
>
> > Oh, I see a lovely spot in the sky,
> > Yellow, yellow, yellow
> > On the top of the wood.
>
> She doesn't even know that she did it yet, for I just growled back at her not to get up until I got the house warm.
>
> Don't think I told you of the long anxious time after Daisy's operation, when first she got a painful internal infection, then thrombosis in one leg, and then pleurisy...However, as I say, she is beginning to boss again, and has just told me of some poor fellow who got breathless and dizzy, like me, then "did something extra and popped off dead."

Daisy, of course, is "The Gardener" to whom *Highland Pack* is dedicated, and Fand in *The Well at the World's End*. The incident of the "invisible water" in that book is true.

Neil's talk was a dance and a hunt. It wound like Loch Lubnaig and wandered into deepest undergrowth after loping over wild moors, coming to a sudden pause with "What was I talking about?" to which Daisy would promptly reply "Ghosts," or "That time in Caithness with the old man." But although he sometimes misplaced the thread, the thread was always there, and within the landscape of his talk were areas of close analysis, new discovery and a crop of sharp perceptions.

His approach was based on relating abstractions directly to experience and this required the frequent use of stories. Many of the stories I heard often enough, but several of the most significant only once, for he was reluctant to make personal revelations. This reticence was tied so closely with courtesy and with pride that the pride might well be missed by a casual observer.

After the talk and before bed Neil always drifted outside for a breath of moist or moving air, to feel the temper of the evening and assess how the fishermen were faring in it.

My first book was published in 1946 and he wrote a warmly appreciative and gently critical letter. From that time I sent him each book before submitting it to a publisher and his comments were practical, pertinent and the result of careful meditation. He knew that faults in writing are due to faults in the author and so improvement must be a long and arduous discipline. He set himself to improve the writer by offering the most strictly necessary and helpful advice about the work, in the full realisation that advice is often resented.

But whether or not I resented the advice I did my best to heed the practical suggestions. The energy and patience he put into this sifting, pruning and prompting fill me now with an appreciation which I did not necessarily show at the time. The only examples I can give must tend to be general because a record of detailed counsel could only be meaningful after too burdensome a load of explanation.

> Accept the telling of a story about human beings, quite simply, even humbly, and all the rest will be added, including the only originality that matters--the nature of your being and the light it sheds.
>
> When I read your article I know there is something missing...and it is the fundamental emotion, desire, urge which compelled it to be written. If that element were present the thing would be whole.
>
> You'll have to do something with the end. Even its typing shows you were a bit unhappy about it! I refer to Fintry's letter and analysis. You need that bit of analysis, but Fintry would never put it into a letter to Mary. It's very difficult stuff, compressed metaphysics. The kind of chap Fintry is would see this... Either he has got to make the matter much simpler or you would have to get it over in some other way. Let me make a suggestion...
>
> As an angler, Harry would not have his vision of bliss while the fish was being played; they are inexpert fly-fishers, and he would have it in an easy-going moment amid scenery before Bert got into the salmon and woke him up.
>
> No good *talking* about cups being won subsequently. Your audience wants to see a ruddy cup being won.
>
> In the novel, the fundamental thing is the story, in whatever way it's told. This is of prime importance

> *early*...Once the reader knows where he is, you can do and say what you like. If the reader does not quite know who's who, or why they're here or just what it's all about, he gets worried, even irritated, and interest wanes...Meantime you are a trifle ferocious and impatient yourself in some of your writing and you have got to drop it. I suspect it's because you are not quite sure if you are bringing it off and don't want to blether. Forget it. Go simple.
>
> If I had got hold of this before you sent it off I'd have made you tone down your too striking descriptions of nature in the first few pages. They are outstanding...but they demand too much attention, and so affect the smooth, natural introduction of your characters. *Afterwards*, when we know our folk, yes...
>
> Giving advice can be a tiresome business, especially to the recipient. But I am now going to give you some.
>
> You must take it from me that in your writing life the opportunity has now come. So it's very important, because the real opportunity, when missed, rarely comes again...You know how in Ouspensky, Gurdjieff (may his astral body rejoice), after a proper interval, decided to tell each of his group his 'principale feature' or 'chief fault.' Well, let me now tell you yours. It's impatience. This usually leads to irritations, superficial aggressiveness, and such like negative emotions...In writing they worm their way down through upper frustrations to chill the vital warmth in which creation takes place. And you cannot afford to waste this warmth, because you are going to be a writer of significance. So you have...to possess your soul in patience.
>
> The point is (and even Daisy wouldn't call this a theory), a person who has the light in him doesn't have to try to express it...Let him be deliberately concerned with darkness only and the light will find the most subtle ways of entry--between the lines, round the edges of the dark blind or as the glow through it.

His help was not limited to advice. After 1946 there was a long gap during which I failed to place a book, and it was as the result of a letter from Neil to Faber that a novel was accepted in 1950.

When after a year or so we moved into a crofthouse on a

rocky peninsula projecting into the broad mouth of Loch Broom, Neil and Daisy were with us often when the weather allowed, for the place was strong and magical. I remember him pacing in the long summer evenings in front of the house, facing first West towards the islands and the merge of sea and sky, then East towards the gathered mountains, taking deep breaths of air and moonlight.

One night a wild shimmering dance went on for hours in the sky, and our cat grew crazy, rushing up and down a rowan tree in a kind of poetic trance. Neil laughed aloud, referring often afterwards to the cat and the Northern Lights as if the incident had for him some particular atmosphere of significance and delight.

At this time he and Daisy moved too. He wrote in February 1949: "But we have had bad news which has knocked books out of our heads: we have got word to leave Brae. For these last few days we have been far and near on the hunt. Nothing doing...Dots are my full strength at the moment. If I had to look for two houses I'd be writing apocalyptic verse."

The interior of the house they found closely resembled Brae, but its situation they felt to be painfully different. At Braes they could walk up the hill behind the house and away onto the moor described in *The Shadow*, through the woods and fields so frequently pictured in *Highland Pack*. Kincraig, on the other hand, lay squeezed between road and shore beside the firth on the way to Invergordon, and there was nowhere to walk. Heavy lorries thundered past the windows all night.

Neil had given the son of an acquaintance permission to fish his stretch of shore, and the young man flogged it at all hours with unnerving persistence. After watching him for awhile you got the feeling that he was a shadowy warder, and to both Neil and Daisy their year or so in the house was a kind of imprisonment. They moved eagerly to Kerrow near Cannich, a few miles downstream from the craggy glories of Glen Affric.

The house was a large one in a wide strath and lay only a hundred yards from the river, which was crossed by a narrow swaying bridge suspended on wires. This place too proved to have its problems. Daisy began to show signs of illness and Neil as if in sympathy acquired neuralgia of the face. The rich and hedge-walled garden was too big for them easily to maintain, and they slowly became convinced that a farmer neighbour intended to carry on a campaign of harassment because of some dispute about fields and rights of way. At any rate, they found their fences broken by cattle, sheep roaming the garden or pigs loose in the drive. Daisy was bewildered by this hostility and any threat to Daisy made Neil cold and hard. I am convinced that it is an account of this situation which Neil gives at one point in his article "Light":[1]

> Every aspect of the tangle is gone over and over obsessively. Excessive brooding generates fears and hatreds. The case I have in mind had to do with land ownership, rights and stealthy encroachments on property and privacy. It grew intolerable, until the younger man, whose rights were being eroded, reached the point of desperation when he discovered one morning that some of his ground beside a lawn had been ploughed up by the enemy's pigs...Murderous thought and a shot gun go arm in arm, in the twilight, among the birches, along the elms, by the river.
>
> Then in the early hours of one morning, when presumably concentration and meditation could go no farther even in nightmare, thought got choked down and the mind rose up and broke through--into the void: and the void lit up. The light was quiet and the only object visible was the brain of the enemy in the shape of moving plates each about the size of a small story book, but whitish in colour and smooth like damp ice. As the man watched the movement he became aware of every thought in that enemy head. A fine transparency was completely revealing of thought, character, personal idiosyncracy. The understanding was so complete that the man was touched; and he became aware of himself there, too, a self-awareness that was absolute and pleasant while his vision continued to interpenetrate the smooth easy movement of the plates, of the head around them, and somehow of the man himself, now no longer the enemy.

But despite this revelation and its result ("I even got, at times, a certain affection for the crafty old devil") I feel it was that feud and a series of accidents which combined to drive them from Kerrow.

A film company chose Glen Affric for location work, and the script writer, Neil Paterson, called while Gene and I were there. He was filled with warm enthusiasm for life and literature and became a firm, loyal and generous friend for whom Neil had a deep affection. But during the course of the film the son of one of the actors got lost, and the whole crew joined in the search. They found his body drowned in a tumbling stream, and for a time a pall hung over the place.

Worse, one night when Neil and Daisy were returning from Inverness in a snowstorm a drunk man reeled into the road and fell against the car. He died later in hospital. The incident made Daisy ill and shocked them both deeply.

Once they had decided to sell, Neil knew that a good price might depend on the reputation for salmon of his stretch of

river. He tired himself fishing incessantly to compile an impressive log at a time when his health was fading. Often we lived on salmon, eating it every day, until the sight of those rich and noble steaks instead of making the mouth water made the gorge rise.

Another problem was that Neil's interest in the spiritual hunt now dominated his mind and inevitably affected the nature of his books, making them more difficult and elusive. True he had always had what his publishers must have regarded as the distressing habit of interspersing successful books with 'queer' ones, such as *The Lost Glen*, *Second Sight*, and in 1944 *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*.

Neil had written a series of stories for *Chambers' Journal*. Because of the outdoor simplicity of that remarkable magazine he had deliberately chosen as the basic situation the typical highland relationship of an old man in friendly guardianship of a small boy. These stories were published in book form as *Young Art and Old Hector*, in 1942.

After their publication his old friend Naomi Mitchison told him that although she had much enjoyed the book it was escapism and avoided the real issues of the day, such as the desperate plight of the intellect in our time. Neil accepted this as a challenge, and asked himself how the traditional values of the culture which had produced young Art and old Hector would stand up to a society in which the analysing intellect had total control. It was not the apocalyptic hysteria of the Nazis he had in mind--and for this reason the introductory chapter is misleading as well as being unnecessary--but the more seriously grounded doctrine and method of Marxist Communism. He let young Art and old Hector loose and *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* is the result. In my view it is his masterpiece, but nonetheless it was a profoundly unusual book with which to confront an English publisher in 1944. And worse was to come.

The Key to the Chest seemed odd but pardonable, since it could be sold as a kind of intellectual mystery thriller. But not *The Shadow*, published in 1948. The first part of the book comprises the letters of a girl convalescing from a nervous breakdown. They reflect events through the girl's state of mind, and are straightforward provided you accept her emotions. But they were not taken as being straightforward.

The Shadow was the first of Neil's books I read in typescript, it was dedicated to Gene and myself, and I felt in some way identified with its success. So it was a shock when he wrote:

> Faber has found part one of *The Shadow* unreadable, and suggests I should put the book aside for a few months.

> Faber himself, and two other readers, quite independently, "found it almost impossible to get through the first part of the book." He very nicely thinks it might refresh my mind if I meantime gave them a book which would be a "Guide to Scotland."

Then on 15 December 1946:

> I sent Faber a letter, pulling his leg a bit about a distinguished publisher who seemed to revel in "new" poetry, but when a poor old novelist tries something "new" or different, then it was another story...He says "That may sound rather cowardly; but even such a master of his craft as you *can* try his readers higher than they wish to be tried."...So if I don't mind taking the unpopular risk, neither does he, and he will publish the novel as it stands...But then I never started to make money without promptly cutting my feet from under me. Is this what is called masochism or is it just plain stupid? Masochism sounds such a distinguished disease that I'm afraid it must be the other.

From his own point of view the publisher was right, of course; *The Shadow* was not a commercial success. Indeed, many of Neil's books were not only difficult, but in some way flawed; but it is often within these "flawed" books that we find the most penetrating insights.

To do *The Shadow* justice would require a critical essay for which there is no space here, but Neil's own comments on the two men who complicate Nan's life may be of interest, written on 22 October 1946.

> Ranald and Adam are a bit difficult. They move as it were objectively, males across the feminine field of vision. Ranald...represents the analyst in action. I have met many Communists like him...The novel could have assumed Dostoevskian bulk. The point for us is: can we assume so much now that we can dispense with bulk?...
>
> You wonder why Adam cleared out to London. That kind of chap always clears out when he finds that circumstances are enmeshing him. The need to be "free" is always overpowering. He has his vision of life, but it is personal, not social...There is perversion here, in Adam. The balance--sanity--is in the eye of the woman. Getting at the source of life is natural in the woman: Adam hunts it perversely, because our male has become a perverse social animal.

> No book should need explanations...Yet I'm not too sure about filling in the blanks. So I'll let it go. Life does move with a certain amount of mystery and no ego is every wholly logical. There is no end to analysis, as you know.

After *The Shadow* came *The Silver Bough*, which was orthodox enough to disguise the fact that its preoccupations were of the same kind that give rise to the "awkward" books which followed it, *The Well at the World's End* in 1951, and *The Other Landscape* in 1954.

The Well is Neil's only venture into the picaresque. What disturbs publishers and critics is that it seems to imply more than it says and they are not sure what this "more" may be. If taken simply and without preconceptions the book speaks for itself and what it implies may be accepted as "natural." The mystery lies in its luminous quality; it sheds light from between the lines, like a legend. He wrote:

> I wonder how Faber will react to *The Circle* (a book of mine). Better, anyhow, let's trust, than to my *The Well at the World's End*. They suggested I should put it aside, as it would be a failure, and suggested I might try something else...To them, apparently, it's a mass of puzzles.

The book was published despite Faber's reservations, and continues to show vigorous life. It has been reissued since Neil's death and was adapted (like *The Green Isle*) as a radio play. Neil comments on this adaptation:

> The book has no plot; all separate incidents with different people; so I advised against it. But the producer Stewart Conn...went to Alex Reid...to produce a script. Alex took ill in the middle of it and was off work for awhile but now he has delivered the three scripts and Stewart Conn has produced them, all complete. It's the solution of the plotless difficult I got interested in, of continuity. For the only continuity would have to run beneath the surface....

As a matter of fact although the book is episodic, the story is carried on a strong current.

Faber resisted *The Other Landscape* also, and were deeply reluctant to publish *The Atom of Delight* (1956), a book which meant a lot to Neil for a number of reasons.

It was at Daisy's insistence that I pestered him in various obvious and less obvious ways to write this book. His letters for some time had been on these lines:

> Even my pen has forgotten how to squeeze out ink, for not a word have I written in many months. Perhaps I am going through some transition period and have not yet found the new job. I have regretfully eliminated two physical-labour jobs. Reading can't be called a job, I feel; anyway, I have never really taken to it...[2]
>
> I fancy gambling might have been fascinating, against a background of peculiar detachment, but I should have thought of that earlier, and become a successful author with the stocks and shares to move about on the Exchange board, with litanies on dialectical materialism being murmured, off.

In fact he was not well and spent a while in the Northern Infirmary, Inverness, before discharging himself. "I stuck it for a full week and then--yesterday--beat it. The intensive treatment wasn't doing any good, so I said to specialist, I'd like a spell off before he started a new treatment."

What I suggested to him was an autobiography not of outer events but a following of the spiritual undertow of his life, and an examination of the themes which had most deeply concerned him. Sometime in 1954 he wrote:

> The part to which I took very great exception in your letter was that which suggested 1) I should begin to do some work and 2) of all things, wise insights and wisdoms. Apart from destroying my somnolent ease, what on earth do you mean? All I know that way could be set down on two pages. And yet into me you put that gnawing bug. So clarify yourself.

A few weeks later: "Yes, you've set me going so I hope you're in as many difficulties, incredulities, absurdities, nonsensicalities and impossibilities as I am." And then:

> But assuming the thing will have a shape it will be an autobiography, a detective story, a Freudian analysis (of Freud), a spoon for physics, a critical commentary on Yeats, Proust, Wordsworth, Rilke, and Uncle Tom Eliot, a high dive and a long swim into anthropology, poaching, church attendance and sucking eggs, and a way of using these in a sustained, convoluting, forward-and-backward search into the nature of delight.
>
> And now, My God, here's your apparently innocent letter with its talk of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff. There's something deep here and damned. Omens around and totems. Here is a cunning design to make me include Ouspensky also.

> You can't hoodwink me. Very well. I'll send out a tentacle and haul him in...

Faber's distrust of the book was followed by four obtuse reviews in England and a malicious attack by a Scottish critic in *The Cambridge Review* containing such remarks as "No one to whom such fields of speculation matter will waste his time on Mr. Gunn when he can read the classic or even the competent, essays on such subjects." I think it was not so much the malice as the sheer lack of understanding evident in this attack which upset Neil. He was affected because not only had he put a great deal of himself into *The Atom*, but he had overcome a dislike of speaking directly to the reader in order to do so. It is the wish to base ideas firmly on the experiences which gave rise to them, and the determination to make subtle notions clearly understandable, combined with a pride which retreats from direct personal revelation that gives the book its elusiveness. This elusiveness has generated talk of "mysticism," but the word mysticism would be quietly discarded by any reader who accepts the book as simply as possible. Neil had for some time felt himself growing more distant from the increasingly negative and analytical trend in contemporary literature, and from this time on found little impulse to undertake another major effort.

In 1958 he published a reflective, meditative piece in a Scottish literary journal, and wrote:

> But perhaps I am being influenced by what has happened over these articles of mine in *The Saltire Review*. The third one has just been published, and the key paragraph in the centre of it (about waiting for Godot) has been cut out. I cannot help laughing. I think the editor made the cut so that the article would end at the bottom of a page. And as if in stuff of that sort it doesn't matter which paragraph you cut...I'm afraid, John, they all think I'm gaga. I blame myself, for I should have had more sense than to let the editor in for it...Reviewers ignore the stuff or are briefly sarcastic. We had George Blake and his wife to dinner in Glasgow. An old good friend. He told me that he had had to review the (issue containing the) first article--but he did not mention the article. He did not say why. And I made it easier for him by laughing and passing on.

This is not the place to go into the reasons for the bewilderment and disquiet caused by *The Atom of Delight* and *The Saltire Review* articles, and it could be said that through a

long writing life Neil had "had it easy." His second book had been a financial and critical success, several others had been highly acclaimed, he was universally regarded as one of Scotland's major contemporary writers and had made enough money to keep him in reasonable comfort. Yet the fact remains that the deeper his concerns the less successful his books became, until at last he withdrew into silence.

A writer is not hurt by adverse criticism so much as by a lack of perception in his critics. To be praised without understanding is as bad as being attacked without justification. In Neil Gunn's case he is usually praised as a regional novelist of "the simple life." A typical example lies to hand in *Scottish Field* for December 1975 where the reviewer is writing of a *Morning Tide* reissue: "Any writer who, like him, is a dealer in the joys and miracles of the simple life can count on being re-discovered by new generations of readers."

Neil Gunn is not a dealer in anything; he penetrates with profound and sympathetic understanding into the life of the community he knows, revealing the universality of its concerns and the value of its traditions. What does the reviewer mean by "the simple life"? Is life in some way lacking in depth and complexity because it is lived in Wester Ross rather than in London? I should have thought that books like *The Serpent*, *The Key of the Chest*, and *The Other Landscape* would have disposed of that idea. Neil Gunn can "Count on being re-discovered by new generations of readers" not for his portrayal of "the simple life" but because of the authenticity of his vision of life at every level which it is possible for a writer to reach.

But if I left the picture there it would be entirely misleading, because even in his later years when many of his books met with bewilderment or were largely ignored, a strong undercurrent ran in his favour. Kurt Wittig in *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958) singled out Neil Gunn for special attention, Professor Nakamura in Japan wrote a monograph about his work, and in 1961 Neil says in a letter:

> By the way, another literary gent (Francis Hart) has got interested in *The Green Isle*. An American Assistant professor in English Department of University. He really bowled me out. Asked to read a paper..."on modern Utopian literature," he added that "I immediately expressed a desire to concentrate on one of the most profoundly exciting books I have read (three readings haven't shaken this), *The Green Isle*." He enclosed a 20-page typed thesis on the subject.

More, Neil received an honorary doctorate from Edinburgh

and a Neil Gunn Fellowship was established at Stirling.

Nor was Francis Hart the only younger man now expressing enthusiastic admiration for his books. Apart from Neil Paterson, whose efforts on Neil's behalf bore fruit so varied that it would embarrass him to detail it, an impressive array of imaginative talent strove to ensure that Neil's achievements were fully recognised. They include Stewart Conn, George Bruce, Alexander Reid, Finlay J. Macdonald and Ian Grimble.

All these combined at Neil Paterson's instigation, and with old friends like Stanley Cursiter, to give Neil a seventieth birthday party in Edinburgh, which Daisy at least enjoyed, even when every man jack of those present delivered from the depths of his insobriety a speech the import of which he alone could grasp--and a thing which each had vowed solemnly not to do.

In 1960 came the final move, to Dalcraig, Kessock, on the Black Isle, which Neil described like this:

> We've sold Kerrow at a good price...Within two days heard of, and inspected briefly, a house on the Black Isle and got my agents to sign on the dotted line for it, with entry on 15th January. Was Daisy at top doh! For the new house is her dream come true at last. So we cross our fingers against snags. It is neat and compact...sitting in the sun, facing south over the Beauly Firth, about 2 miles by the shore road from Kessock Ferry and Inverness.

And indeed the house had a fresh, free atmosphere with the spread of firth before it, and behind a steep wooded hill which you could climb into crofting country like that of Braes long ago. Clouds often roamed round the Black Isle only to discharge elsewhere, leaving it green and sunny, gazing serenely at the grey or purple distance.

There was about the place a warm, contemplative quality reflected in a letter of 1963:

> Sometimes in a deck chair I listen to all the birds and the wind in the trees, and am with them and out beyond them...sitting on doorstep yesterday forenoon, I saw a huge bumble bee anchor himself to surface of plastered wall, hot with sun. Wonderful to see how his proboscis slowly folded inward into sleep. Clearly he hadn't been home all night and was still heavy and fuddled. Then he stirred and got into a clump of small flowers...and lay cushioned on his belly divinely. But no--no real rest for a poor old fellow...I observed two tiny pink spiders crawling into and out of his armpits. Wasn't it terrible?

The snags lay not in the house but in health. Neither Neil nor Daisy were ever fully fit again. In 1961 he writes, "Lately Daisy has been getting tireder so I fetched the doctor. He took a blood test and she has now started a six weeks' course of injections." In the same year, "We've decided to cancel the Irish trip, so no chance of meeting you across the Irish Sea. I didn't want to take the risk of being a nuisance with this face. When the pain hits it's really nasty...Facial neuralgia of some sort. Failing all else, they can cut the main nerve to face inside skull. But I'm not exactly eager for that!...Daisy stalks me like a warder, lest I start doing my physical labours." He also suffered from a low bloodcount and anaemia.

In 1962 he wrote:

> I got a frightful row a few days ago. When I saw the way clear, I sneaked out to the tool shed, and with woodman's axe, saw and claw-hammer, made my way round the outside hedge to a spot where the wooden uprights had got knocked down during our absence and taken the anti-rabbit fencing with it; my object, to knock the wood away from the fencing for the time being, and so still keep the rabbits out. After a short while I realised I had better try to get back to the house before passing out, but didn't she see me coming like a tottering scarecrow. But, while trying to tell me the kind of idiot I am, she also fed me a dram, and back I came. She refused to listen to my theory that a person with low blood pressure merely passes out for the time being. In fact, I have noticed when it is a case of practical realities, she pays no attention to theories whatsoever.

Neil used to save jobs until we came to stay. I was now working in the English Midlands and this could not be more than two or three times a year, so the days were busy. We chased rabbits, mended fences, clipped hedges, mowed mossy grass, cut down brambles, burned rubbish, repaired netting, dug a pit for burying tins, and weeded where we could.

Once Neil said, "There's a queer fellow at the door wanting me to buy a load of gravel. He says it's haunge. What's haunge? We could do with some gravel." The man proved to be an English gipsy from Norfolk and he meant that the gravel was orange. He seemed to think this a valuable quality for gravel to possess. We spent an afternoon spreading it on the drive.

Neil loved to walk along the road by the shore. If you started towards the west you faced Ben Wyvis and in the far distance the piled mountains of Ross with their gathering of

purple cloud. When you turned east you faced the widening firth and the lights of Inverness twinkling on the water. Cormorants spread their wings on an old jetty, oyster-catchers peeped away among the stones and sometimes a heron stood in lonely contemplation, matching the classic painting which Professor Nakamura had sent from Japan. Neil had marks which he aimed at reaching--the twisted tree, the bend in the road, the boat-house.

With each month that passed it grew more difficult for him to manage that walk, for the climb back to the house through the soughing larches was a stiff one.

We also grew more reluctant to impose on Daisy the burden of visitors. In 1963 she went into hospital for an operation and was ill with a variety of complications after it. Neil said, "I am picking up myself, having the strength of a drowned kitten taken out of the ditch just in time." Each letter was a bulletin on their condition.

Soon after Daisy's return from hospital we took a holiday in Argyll and at the end of it drove north to see them, camping one night on the shore. She sat up in bed, smiling mischievously. "You didn't know how ill I've been, did you? I shouldn't be here, you know, but I seem to be, don't I? Aren't these flowers beautiful? How do you think Neil looks? I wish he was writing something. It would keep his mind off things."

She died in October. I made a dash by car to Crewe and caught a train to reach Dingwall just in time for the funeral, away on the windy top of the hill above the town on a crisp cold autumn day.

I went back to the house with Neil and his brothers and when for a moment they were out of the room he said, "Do you think there is survival after death?"

I said, "The first self goes out like a candle, but if the inner being grows and develops perhaps it may survive. Daisy was all essence, and if anyone survives, she must." The night after I returned home I seemed to hear Daisy laughing gaily as I woke from a dream.

Neil said little of his trouble and loss and tried resolutely to look forward, but it was always with him. He had two loyal daily housekeepers, one after the other, and his brothers were constantly paying visits to keep an eye on him. But he was weak and growing weaker. He found it difficult to concentrate because of the pain in his face, his eyes were continually sore and would not let him read, and he could not often manage his walk along the shore.

In strong reaction to the necessity for writing health bulletins for his friends he said, "Berluddy wars! as Maurice Walsh would say--who also says that if a fellow can hang on until

he's 82 he'll be all right. And he should know."

But Neil didn't quite make it.

Neil Paterson on several occasions whisked him away from the cold air of Scotland to Portugal, or the Balearics or the Canaries. In 1968 he came with us to Cornwall. The trip was a disaster. He suffered facial pains and a foot injury; he found great difficulty in breathing; the weather was damp and airless, thunder rolled continually among the hills, the house lay at the bottom of a deep well thick with green foliage, our youngest son was very sick, and for the first week I had (inadequately) to do the cooking. Eventually we had to call in the local doctor, a forthright Yorkshireman who denounced Neil's medicines, the Health Service and the general condition of man with such vigour that after he left we had to restore our morale with whiskey.

I persuaded Neil to exchange tape recordings on a given theme. He took enthusiastically to the idea, since he found it easier now to talk than to write letters, but the exercise was abortive because our tape-recorder and the one we sent him refused to co-operate.

> What initially bothered me was David's voice, which sounded like a fruity old Colonel on the verge of passing out on port...And then your double bass as if you were just managing to keep solemnly upright and portentous. I thought if I recorded at tail end of you, my voice would rumble up and perhaps disrupt the box of tricks. In the end I risked it, and lo! it was a high piping tenor. Talk--as I do--of magic!
>
> I found a tendency of the tape to go over the top of the last bollard and when that happened your basso-profundo became the high-pitched squeaks of demented parakeets in the jungle.

Despite a long saga of weird adventures with these inventive machines, which eventually forced us to give up the project, I managed by editing to extract from the tapes an "article" by Neil for a little magazine in 1968.

He struck up a friendship with the doctor, which gave him great comfort. Special cake and sandwiches were always prepared for the doctor, first by Isobel and then by Kate, the two housekeepers, and the doctor made sure of arriving at the time necessary to experience them. On occasion the afternoon entertainment of tea moved inperceptibly into the evening entertainment of a dram, while the talk went on uninterrupted.

In his good moments Neil still burst into the old gaiety.

I have a positively bitter objection to feeling groggy without grog. But the heavy words are beginning, so I shan't start tonight, to go through the thicket and dance out on the other side. Think of me trying to dance anyhow! Without thinking I did a step or two to a highland reel on the radio the other night while my bacon was sizzling--and had to sit down. (The body--that the gay psyche had forgotten.) To have some sort of immortal body to match an immortal soul: what a dance would be there!

A lady phoned me last night, introducing herself as Miss or Mrs. Yum-yums, asking me if I would act as judge, at some sort of old folks' gathering...and when I again asked her name she said, Mrs. Yum-yums...I told her I was exhausted and couldn't, anyhow...it was Isobel who solved the riddle of this, saying, "It's that photograph of you in *The Glasgow Herald* over the article about your birthday." In this photo I stand poised, or posed, one hand grasping a branch of flowering viburnum and the other disposing of a walking stick which supports me aft in an elegant manner, thus exhibiting to advantage a well-tailored suiting and a new rather small modish hat.

"Lay attachment to the body aside, realising you are free. To be free is joyous." And that's about the longest piece of prose I can read at one go...Here's a flying shot from my condition:

Without words I am free:
Words choke me.

And then, once, "For fleeting moments I did catch again the writing moods of ancient mornings. It would have been quite magical if someone hadn't been missing."

He planned his days to preserve energy, taking up to bed a tray laid for the morning, and enjoying his breakfast with great deliberation. When we were there we took him up porridge, which he made a great ploy of relishing, uttering loud cries of appreciation as he spooned it in.

But often he could not sleep, under attack from facial neuralgia, and lay awake practising meditation in an effort to outwit the devil. The book beside his bed was *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* and his favourite section the one on "112 ways to open the invisible doors of consciousness." He would read a paragraph before lying down to sleep, and quoted frequently one of the "ways": "Look lovingly upon some object. Do not go onto

another object. Here in the middle of the object--the blessing."

Finally, three examples of his approach to life:

> For Art is where the emotional factor is, the dynamism that shoots the spark across the plug-points and makes the whole contraption go. Man has come to think he has *made* that spark. In fact it is the fundamental stuff of the universe and he has been clever enough to divert it.
>
> The only way to knock time sideways is to take your own time.
>
> One only does anything by doing a bit at a time--because far in is the inner light that sees, and that you know is there, and has meaning, and is our only glimpse of truth.

Speaking personally, which is the only way that is worth speaking, I treasure most deeply this comment which occurs in one of his last letters: "I remember long ago your saying you were waiting for a new book of mine because you were wanting something to read. Only now can I appreciate that you may have meant it, because I know how I should appreciate the *companionship* of a book from you. I don't think it would greatly matter what form the book took, if your mind was in it." And I find most moving and entirely true one small sentence which I hardly noticed when I first read it, and which now grows warm with meaning: "Perhaps all literature does is give you a few friends." Well, surely that's enough.

Leicester

NOTES

[1] "Light." *Point* No. 3 (Summer 1968).

[2] At this time Neil rarely read a book voluntarily, but if you sent him one he would digest it carefully and return his just assessment with shafts of insight. My own most successful offerings were L. H. Myers' *The Near and the Far*, Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and Hubert Benoit's *The Supreme Doctrine*.