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James B. Caird

Gaelic Elements in the Work of Neil Gunn



Neil Gunn's family originated in the Braemore district at the foot of the mountain called Morven on the borders of Caithness and Sutherland. The Gunns were of mixed Norse and Gaelic stock, a mixture that characterised this whole area, as Gunn points out in his *Highland River*, where he is describing Dunbeath, the fishing village where he was born and spent his most formative years:--"on one side of the harbour mouth the place name was Gaelic, on the other side it was Norse. Where the lower valley broadened out to flat fertile land, the name was Norse, but the braes behind were Gaelic." Later in the same paragraph he refers to a third racial influence that was to play an important part in his thinking about history and in his fiction, that of the Picts. The Pictish element is particularly prominent in *Sun Circle*, a novel set in the north-east Highlands in the ninth century A.D. There are three main groups in the story--the Picts, the Goidhelic Celts, and the Norsemen, with, in the background, even older, mysterious dark peoples. Part of Gunn's theme is the conflict between Christianity and the pagan religion of the Celts, and, parallel with this, that between Celtic patrilinear and Pictish matrilinear forms of succession. The novel is concerned, too, with the growing power of the Celts over the Picts that was to culminate in the absorption of Pictland into Gaelic Alba and the

virtual elimination of the Pictish language. Gunn tends to equate the Norse strain with masculinity and with the sea, and the Gaelic, or rather Gallo-Pictish, strain with the land, with the sheltered inland straths, and with the feminine principle. Not that he ignored the heroic aspect of Gaelic legend, for there are frequent references in the novels, especially in *Young Art* and *Old Hector* and in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* to the exploits of Cuchulain and of Finn MacCoul.

Until comparatively recently Gaelic was spoken in the southern part of Caithness, where Dunbeath is situated. Gunn's father and some of the members of the crew of his fishing-boat were Gaelic speakers, but Gunn himself, as he admits in his travel book, *Off in a Boat* (where he refers to his "sparse Gaelic") had only a smattering of the language. Nevertheless, his knowledge of Scottish Gaelic was superior to the command of Irish of Yeats, whose early work is saturated in Celtic legend. He had a certain familiarity both with the classics of Scottish Gaelic poetry--in *Off in a Boat* he refers to the Book of the Dean of Lismore and to the work of Mary Macleod--and with traditional stories, rhymes, incantations and proverbs. He draws on more than one occasion on Campbell's *Tales of the West Highlands* and on Alexander Carmichael's great collection of rhymes and incantations, *Carmina Gadelica*.

He was sensitively aware of the impact of Gaelic speech patterns on the English spoken by some Highlanders. In *Butcher's Broom* he remarks--"a man or woman might say in greeting 'It's the fine day that's in it,' as though he were setting the day in the hollow of the world so that they might with courteous detachment regard it." Throughout the novels both in narrative and in his rendering of speech, both Gaelic and English, there are traces of the influence of Gaelic idiom, as in "the edge of the dark," "the mouth of the evening," "the size of the leaps a wildcat made in the snow and it after grouse and hares," "if the cow had died on him it would have been the price of him," "hunger is not on me," "there was no sea in it at all," and "the four brown quarters of the world." Kurt Wittig, in his essay, *Neil Gunn's Animistic Vision*,¹ makes an interesting comment on Gunn's practice of flashing images together, a characteristic he maintains of Gaelic speech and writing. Gunn himself says of his Gaelic-speaking forebears: "where in English we have only the one word, 'man,' and a few adjectives to differentiate all the kinds of men, they had scores of exact words in their language, each of which evoked a different kind of man. In this matter they were much more complex than we are."² In *Butcher's Broom* he says: "in truth it is an immensely old tongue, and a thousand years before Mairit was richer in its knowledge, wider in its

range and was given to metaphysics and affairs of state." Now, shut up in the glens, "it has developed its instinct for human value."³ Even in a casual comment like this Gunn is acutely conscious of the Celtic past, of a priceless civilisation that has been almost entirely eroded. Indeed the theme of much of his fiction is the continual erosion of that civilisation, the destruction of its humane values. Hence perhaps David Craig's sneer about Gunn's "backward-looking agrarian provincialism."

In conversation with me shortly before his death, Gunn spoke approvingly of the Gaelic-inflected English prose style of Neil Munro and of the Fionn MacColla of *The Albannach*. At the same time he realised the danger of mannerism, of the Celtic-twilight style of writing of Fiona Macleod and others--a style into which he seldom lapsed. C. M. Grieve ("Hugh MacDiarmid"), in an essay on Neil Gunn, published as early as 1926, when Gunn had produced only one novel, *The Grey Coast*, referred to the danger the Celtic Twilight held for him.⁴ In his short-story, "Half-Light" (from the collection *Hidden Doors*), Gunn refers to a work of Fiona Macleod's and talks about "a virile development that would be a most realistic counterblast to the Fiona Macleod twilights." Iain Mackay, the schoolmaster in "Half-Light," remarks--"Fiona Macleod. There will ever be a grain of bitterness in my acknowledgement of him, or of Yeats, or of any of the modern Celtic-Twilighters, an irritable impatience of their pale fancies, their posturing sonorities and follies.... Yet on a certain side they are 'getting' me, and sometimes a phrase, a thought, has a positively uncanny mesmeric power over my very flesh." That Gunn himself resisted these temptations is manifest in such works as "The Drinking Well," which is concerned among other things with the harder and more realistic aspects of sheep-farming and in that heroic epic of the fishing industry, *The Silver Darlings*.

Gunn shows a similar sensitive appreciation of Gaelic song and pipe music. (Macrimmon's great pibroch *The Lament for the Children* is introduced with striking effect into *Butcher's Broom*.) The almost intolerable effect on its hearers of Gaelic song "that transcends purely musical or intellectual values," is described in several of the novels. In *Butcher's Broom* he says: "the sheer unconditional nature of this music has nothing to do with thought or intellect but only with absolutes like beauty or terror." In the same novel, in his description of the pre-Clearance ceilidh he introduces not only song but stories, verses, and riddles (derived for the most part from Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*). Some of these, particularly the verses about the canary, are rather obtrusive and contrived, as if he had brought them in simply to

illustrate the idyllic simplicity of the lives of the dwellers in the strath and to give authentic colouring to the story. In *The Silver Darlings*, when Finn is storm-stayed in North Uist, he attends a ceilidh where song, dancing, fiddling, story-telling--traditional Highland entertainment--are introduced much more naturally and unobtrusively. The first name of one of the story-tellers is the same as Finn's, "which was likewise Finn MacCoul's, the great hero of the noble Fians," about whose exploits he spoke at length. (Indeed such story-tellers, capable of reciting a continuous heroic tale for three nights in succession, survived in the Uists well into the present century and were recorded by that great collector, Calum Maclean.) Gunn's giving the name "Finn" to his hero is deliberate. Fand, the wife of the professor in *The Well at the World's End* is another example of Gunn's subtle and indirect reference to Celtic legend. Fairy lore (similar to what I myself have heard in the islands of the Outer Hebrides) is introduced too. Again the powerful effect of traditional Gaelic song is emphasised. Gunn refers to "the awful inexorable simplicity of the singing."

Nearly all of Gunn's twenty novels are set in the Highlands (although part of the action of *The Drinking Well* takes place in Edinburgh, and of *The Serpent* and *Wild Geese Overhead* in Glasgow). They are incomparable evocations of Highland landscape and seascape and convey a sense of the mythical and historical past blending with and affecting the present, mainly through the consciousness of sensitive individuals like Kenn in *Highland River*, the archaeologist in *The Silver Bough*, and the professor of History in *The Well at the World's End*, that strange book where megalithic, Pictish and contemporary elements coalesce in an amazing way. Perhaps, however, the two novels that are most obviously and consciously influenced by Celtic mythology and lore are *Young Art* and *Old Hector* and *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*. *Young Art* and *Old Hector* is an idyllic picture of childhood in a Highland setting. *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, its sequel, is a kind of dream allegory, incorporating Gunn's views on the mechanical dehumanised totalitarian state, to which he appears to set up as an alternative, the humane values of the old Gaelic way of life, personal dignity, hospitality, loyalty, kindness, and gentle humour.

In these two novels Gunn draws extensively on his knowledge of Celtic myth and heroic story, and on such works as Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* and various collections of proverbs and riddles. In the Author's Note to *Young Art* and *Old Hector* he states--"the two traditional stories told within 'Machinery' and 'What is Good Conduct' may be found

in Campbell's *Tales of the West Highlands* to which acknowledgements are gladly made." The story in the chapter, "Machinery," entitled "The Girl and the Dead Man," is told by old Martha. The attitude of the men to old Martha is typically Highland: they treat her with consideration and seek her company because she is the repository of traditional lore (Not unlike the attitude of the community in *Butcher's Broom* to Dark Mairi, who, belonging to the ancient family of Bethune--traditional healers--was also learned in herbs and simples. But she inspired a certain fear as well as respect.). Gunn's debt to Campbell is obvious in the riddle posed to Art by Old Hector:

I went to the wood and I sought it not;
I sat on a hill and I found it not;
And because I found it not I took it home with me.

(The answer is "a thorn").⁵

There are many references both to Finn MacCoul and to Cu-chulain in both books. At one point, Hector and Art argue about which was the greater hero. The story of the salmon of wisdom that ate the hazel-nuts of knowledge (a favourite symbol of Gunn's and one that recurs in many of his novels) and that in its turn was tasted by Finn MacCoul, who thereby attained wisdom, is referred to on more than one occasion. Indeed at the opening of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* it was into the Hazel pool (symbolic of knowledge) that Art and Hector fell in pursuit of the salmon. For Gunn water was a mysterious element (as we see in *The Drinking Well* and *The Well at the World's End*--also the transformation it undergoes to become whisky [uisge beatha, the water of life]), on which Gunn was a recognised authority, and which also plays a significant part in his novels. With reference to the hazel-nuts, Nora Chadwick, in her book *The Celts*, remarks: "The source of all wisdom and knowledge is the well of Segais, at the source of the Boyne; those who ate of the hazel-nuts which grew beside it, or drank the 'imbas' (inspiration) from them became inspired with the seer's gift of poetry and prophecy."⁶ Again in the same book she points out that in the old Irish tale, *Echtrae Conli*, salmon are described as eating the hazel-nuts as they fall from the trees. Fairy lore and superstition also play their part, especially in *Young Art and Old Hector*, particularly in the chapter entitled "The First and the Second Childhood," with its account of the Hill of the Fairies. This chapter, with its linking of past and present generations through the influence of a place, has a certain amount in com-

mon with Sorley MacLean's impressive and mysterious poem, "Hallaig."

In *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* both Art and Hector seem to acquire a new dimension, to evolve, through trial and tribulation, to a greater depth, maturity and spiritual strength. In Hector are embodied the traditional qualities of the old Gaelic peasantry--courage, humour, endurance, and, above all, loyalty. The theme of loyalty, of keeping trust with the members of the family or community, plays an important part in Gunn's work. It is central to *The Drinking Well* and to *Butcher's Broom*. Indeed, the tragedy in *Butcher's Broom* springs from the betrayal of loyalty by the clan chiefs, by their refusal, for sordid personal reasons, to abide by the terms of an age-old unwritten contract with the members of the clan. In *The Drinking Well* Iain Cattanach endures disgrace and misrepresentation in Edinburgh because he will not betray the interests of the community from which he has sprung. In *The Lost Glen* the hero, a student who has returned in ill-merited disgrace to his parents' home in a Highland clachan, is eventually driven to murder because of his defence of the Gaelic way of life and his detestation of the forces that threaten to disrupt it. It is not surprising that this kind of loyalty should figure prominently in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* which is, in a sense, an apologia for the Gaelic way of life. In the chapter, "The Third Disappearance," a kind of psycho-analytical inquisitor, in the service of this strange, twisted parody of a Celtic paradise, is trying to break down Old Hector and to establish control of his mind. He is, however, baffled when he comes up against the stumbling-block of loyalty: "the exact degree of the primitive in this loyalty was difficult to assess, fascinating to disentangle, for in this old Highland stock it was almost instinctively active."

Of Art, Andrew Noble in his essay "Fable of Freedom" on *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* says: "Part of Art's legend is, of course, obviously derived from Celtic mythology. The book is developed from *Young Art and Old Hector*, and Art is both Cuchulain with his great hounds and Arthur, the king who will return when the land is most in need of him."⁷ Indeed Gunn plays with the different meanings of Art's name--"Arthur" or the "Art Man" or "artist," whose very existence challenges the assumptions on which a dictatorial society is based, and who must, therefore, be suppressed. (We are reminded of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: Stephen, the first martyr, and Dedalus, the artificer or artist of ancient Crete.) Art's several escapes from and ultimate triumph over the administrators of the Green Isle parallel Cuchulain's struggles with the three sons of Nechta.⁸ Like Cuchulain, too, he appears to be physically

transformed in the heat of battle. Cuchulain's hair stands on end, his mouth is distended and the warrior's light arises from the crown of his head. Similarly, Art's leaps from legendary and, though he is only eight, people think he is twelve or thirteen.

In the setting of his novels, in their themes, in the values they incorporate, in the manner in which they are expressed, Gunn's novels bear the imprint of the region that nursed him and in which he spent most of his working life. As he remarked, perhaps overgenerously, of Highland life in *Off in a Boat*, the main elements are "melody, poetry, instinctive good manners, and that gift for spontaneous gaiety in a natural communal life." He was able to link the life of this region, through observation of its people, through scrutiny of its landscapes, through personal intuition and through wide reading in archaeology, history, and folklore to its sources in the old Celtic world of Britain and Europe.

Inverness

NOTES

¹ Neil M. Gunn, *the Man and the Writer*, ed. by Alexander Scott and Douglas Gifford (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 316-43.

² *Highland River*, (Edinburgh, 1938), p. 311.

³ *Butcher's Broom*, (Edinburgh, 1934), p. 14.

⁴ *The Scottish Educational Journal*, April 1926, republished in *Hugh MacDiarmid Contemporary Studies* (Edinburgh, 1976).

⁵ See J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Paisley, 1890), Vol. II,

⁶ Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 173.

⁷ Neil M. Gunn, *The Man and the Writer* (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 202.

⁸ Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (Feltham, 1970), p. 105.