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Douglas Gifford

Scottish Fiction 1975-1977



This article is the continuation of the survey of post-war fiction in Scotland and by Scottish writers which I began in the last issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature*. That first article tried to give a general outline of the movement of Scottish fiction since the war till 1975. It was not an attempt to give definitive judgments on the writers included; rather a very personal attempt to cover a range of material which, to my knowledge, had not been looked at in any comprehensive way. It was also the basis of what was thereafter intended to be an annual survey of the year's output of Scottish fiction. In effect, however, it proved impossible to bring the material in one article to the point of annual survey. This article thus fills the gap between general survey and future annual survey; the next issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature* will deal only with the work of 1978. At the end of the article I have appended a list of books read.

I have not attempted to discuss every "Scottish novel" published within my period. Because of the difficulties of ascertaining what Scottish novels *have* been published, I may have missed some material. I would hope that I have considered everything significant; I have certainly tried conscientiously to read all that I have discovered.

By way of preliminary some final comments must be made about the work of 1975. Some of the outstanding work of the year I discussed in the last article--William McIlvanney's *Docherty*, Elspeth Davie's *The High Tide Talker*, John Quigley's *King's Royal*, and Giles Gordon's *Farewell Fond Dreams*. But there were a number of later significant achievements of that year which were not discussed; and especially one which seems increasingly to be a very interesting first novel, Dominic Cooper's *The Dead of Winter*. It is the story of Alasdair Mor's love of his depopulated West Highland village, and his great battle with the newcomer, An Sionnach ("the Fox"), who brings his intrusive hatred of anything peaceful or communal to bear on Alasdair. Cooper has the ability to simplify, to make essential and spare, without making his scenes and characters simplistic. Alasdair, ugly, awkward, a bit of a natural, *is* his landscape and seascape. His bewilderment and inability to understand the paranoia and warped bestiality of An Sionnach is powerfully evoked, especially since Cooper has taken much trouble to set Alasdair as an organic part of his background. There is much of the skill of Gunn in *Butcher's Broom* here; like Dark Mairi, Alasdair is expressed in metaphors of land and growth. He has her deeper knowledge of season and her inability to function outwith this instinctive life. Like her he is destroyed when there is no longer a place for him to occupy. But unlike Gunn, Cooper writes with an underlying violence smouldering and sinister. From his opening metaphor of the sun's "gun barrel of heat" and his images of the West Atlantic as covered in "a layer of brass" there is a tension threatening the natural peace which is equally well presented. The battle is not just between the two men; it is between Cooper's two ways of looking at life. Cooper's vision is, moreover, finally and savagely dark. Alasdair's destruction and "the Fox's" escape suggest ways of looking at the modern West Highlands and at modern life which are worlds away from those of Gunn or MacKay Brown.

I found this, next to *Docherty*, the most impressive novel of 1975. If I have a criticism it is that Cooper sometimes overwrites in his attempt to express his sense of personal violence--which is interesting since that is exactly what I argued about McIlvanney's fiction too. Both seem to have a problem of control. Cooper at the end seems especially to have this problem, since the reader finds himself wavering between two ways of taking Alasdair's death. There is on the one hand Alasdair destroyed, a victim of the triumph of natural Evil; but on the other the suggestion that Alasdair is finally "going home," that at last the natural has become completely so, at one with his beloved country. The two possibilities left me strongly impressed but confused; lacking that strong clear resonance

which should come from the major and unified work of art.

Four other novels of 1975 impressed me. Naomi Mitchison's irrepressible and continually surprising imagination created her "Brave New World" satire on cloning--(clones being descendants of an individual produced through asexual reproduction having identical constitution)--*Solution 3*. She envisages a simpler world, sexual jealousy and violence banished through the separation of sexes as far as sexual and emotional bonds are concerned. All, as in Gunn's *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, has been meant kindly and well; but such blueprinting of human happiness has the familiar dystopian result. If we cancel out meiosis, the genetic random factor, in our all too human lives, we cease to find the moment of delight, the significance which makes being alive worthwhile. Naomi Mitchison's satire may not have the poetry and philosophical depth of Gunn's novel, but it has its own virtues of hard-headed irony on conditions that we are far too close to already. And two very different satires on different societies were Colin Douglas's *The Houseman's Tale* and the late Matt McGinn's *Fry the Little Fishes*. The first anatomised the world of the young hospital doctor so successfully that it gained the John Rowan Wilson Award for its contribution to "wit, lucidity, and style in the treatment of medical subjects." The standard in this area cannot be astonishingly high; the novel is at best a very traditionally told account of loves, problems, disasters personal and public, in a doctor's life, with occasional mordant sketches of medical types and set pieces included. It is not so far from the Richard Gordon successes, albeit Douglas's wit is more barbed. But it did hold out promise, I felt, in its occasional evidence of a willingness to be ruthlessly detached and honest. Even more of this promise seemed to lie in the rather crudely written but genuinely funny and compassionate account of St. Martin's Catholic reform school, *Fry the Little Fishes*. McGinn's picture is not just anecdotes of Glasgow strung together, as one might have expected; but a surprising balance of harsh description and comic detail, detachment and compassion. It is not a satire on the level of Friel's *Mr. Alfred M. A.*, but it succeeds in its major aim, which is to capture the utter hopelessness of the school's inmates; the impossibility of beating the system, of staying out of St. Martin's--and later, gaol. The dry humour at the back enhances the feeling of sterile, hopeless tragedy. One would have liked to see where McGinn might have gone had he lived to write more fiction. Forbes Bramble gained an Arts Council Award with his first, raw novel about the violent Cameron family in the West Highlands in 1973; his second, *The Strange Case of Deacon Brodie* wasn't so much a let-down as something of a surprise. His picture of Deacon

Brodie is naturalistic, detailed and successful in its evocation of eighteenth-century Edinburgh smell and dirt, with its contrasts of wit and sheer animalism, enlightenment and squalor. The surprise is in the relatively little he makes of the enigmatic figure of Brodie; apart from realising the man as a fairly modern, existential figure, confusingly motivated but finally rather petty than heroic, Bramble chooses to ignore the shadowy, eerie and supernatural possibilities. I've always been surprised that Brodie has remained so unexploited; Stevenson used the idea, but not the man, as did Muriel Spark when she had Jean Brodie acknowledge her ancestry, or when she conceived of Dougal Douglas in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. It's as though, however, the figure himself is *too* challenging--else why didn't Brodie try? Bramble's is a worthy attempt, but curiously flat and limited.

1976 saw, predictably, important new novels and stories by the three writers who, to my mind, dominate recent Scottish fiction: Mackay Brown, McIlvanney, and Crichton Smith.

The Sun's Net, by Brown, seemed at first to be a slightly more random collection of stories than expected from the author of *Greenvoe*; usually Brown's pagan-Christian myth pervades and informs his collections, so that like his individual poems the tales seem parts of a seamless garment, types of an Orkney archetypal Fable centered on St. Magnus's sacrifice in time and St. Magnus's Cathedral in Kirkwall in space. This volume departs from Orkney; action moves to a Baltic pirate-baron's castle, to gibbets in London, to the 1644 wars of Montrose. There is also a major shift in theme; or rather Brown treats his personal myth in darker and more death-laden colours. There is a brooding eeriness in this set of tales which literally haunts the reader, best found in the tale "Brig-o-Dread," but so omnipresent that the title *The Sun's Net* seems for once inappropriate, a rare wrong image from Brown. In "Brig-o-Dread" a murdered man, unaware at first of being dead, presents a strangely-focused view of himself, his disembodied soul, trying to grapple with a world of odd angles and intangibility. Superbly imagined, poetically and compassionately expressed, the soul moves remorselessly back to see, like Hamlet's father, the sordid betrayal, the hypocrisy of friends, the act of murder itself. And Brig of Dread, as the old Ballad and Brown tell us, is of course, the bridge that all dead must cross after they have found their way over the Whinny-Muir, so that "to Purgatory fire thou coms't at last." In death one must face the horror of what one was and wherein one lived, till acceptance comes, and healing flame. Thus another tale tells of an Orkney girl going to London to make peace with the dangling bones of her pirate lover; a soldier, dead, comes home from the Highlands

across water to discover his death and what seems a betrayal, but is accepted by the wiser spirit as a liberation. And death is everywhere, even in the last lovely tribute to Sidney Good-sir Smith. This volume is a prose-poetry of Death, and its theme is Brown's deepening awareness of mortality and a need to find compassionate reconciliation. Even in stories with apparently more humour--that of the disillusioned in love in "Silver," or "The Book of Black Arts," which grimly but sardonically tells the folk-tale of that book which brings Faustian fulfillment, but which has to be sold before death for less than one paid for it--even in these lighter pieces the bewitching telling turns to a darker end. And given, as always with Brown, that necessary suspension of disbelief in his harshly religious myth of the cycle of life within which individuals are as stalks in a timeless planting and harvest, these are superb tales, and the collection a success. I merely and finally comment with surprise on my own willingness to accept so much of Brown's myth as he tells it; for indeed Brown goes even further in his hatred of modern society in this volume; if one reads "Stone, Salt, and Rose" closely, one realises that for Brown the old feudal order is God-ordained and vastly preferable to now. A benevolent patriarch orders all events from execution for sheep-stealing to the marriage of his daughter to a captured English knight; all is completely in order, in an Order completed within a divine harmony. Brown illustrates so clearly the difference between poetry and philosophy.

McIlvanney's *Laidlaw* is on a first reading a Glasgow thriller, featuring a sensitive, middle-forties, philosophy-reading Detective--Inspector Laidlaw. It is the first of a series, is obviously eminently adaptable to television or film; it moves into the territory of Glasgow writer Hugh C. Rae, whose *Skinner* (1965), *Nightpillow* (1967) and *The Marksman* (1971) were--amongst his other novels--thrillers which also worked on a deeper level, with a symbolism and a running metaphor of violence which was not so melodramatised or distorted that it lost a very real sense of what operated under the blander, City-chambered, sup-pressing surface of Glasgow's life. It is interesting and darkly significant that Glasgow of all cities in Britain has best been embodied in recent years in novels of a curiously balanced violent humour, like George Friel's *Mr. Alfred M. A.* (the finest of them all) and *Grace and Miss Partridge*, or Gordon William's *From Scenes Like These*. This is not the *No Mean City* tradition; there is in *Laidlaw* an intelligence and attempt to understand what makes a sexual killer, a violent police force, gang bosses who are folk-heroes, citizens whose responses to life are negative and defiant. *Laidlaw* is a "crime" novel only in the sense that crime and violence are suitable

metaphors to use to write creatively of Glasgow. And to anyone who has studied McIlvanney's other novels it will also be understood that the area of violence is one in which he feels at home; that the suppressed violence of *Remedy is None* or the finally uncontrolled violence of *Docherty* has found a suitable home in *Laidlaw*. Paradoxically, in writing *Laidlaw* McIlvanney has forced himself into a certain objectification of his own tendency to resolve battles, like Conn and Angus's in *Docherty*, purely through physical eruption. *Laidlaw*, when the chips are down, is a brave novel which finishes with Laidlaw protecting and trying to understand the young sex-killer, when all Glasgow wants to put the boot in. There is still a tendency to overwrite a bit, and there may be too much Chandler and too many hard-bitten stereotypes in the novel, but it *is* a significant Glasgow novel--whatever television and film will now do to it.

I intended at this point to discuss Crichton Smith's latest volume of stories; but for once his view of the West Highlands seemed to take second place to a new Scottish writer; although *The Village* by Smith, and *Calum Tod*, by Norman Macdonald, should be taken together.

Calum Tod is the finer of these books. Macdonald here tells his own story, with hurtful honesty. But he does much more. By beginning the story generations before, and with the marriage of a previous Calum, his grandfather, and indeed going beyond him in other stories to Angus, his great-grandfather, Macdonald relates himself to his forebears. This has been done well often in Gaelic and Scottish fiction--one thinks of MacColla's *The Albannach*, Gibbon, Gunn, and the traditional Scottish novel of generations linked with their land and living, where the protagonists from Scott's Jeannie Deans to Neil Paterson's Thirza Gair are both themselves and archetypal representatives of race. But Macdonald with a curious bareness of description, devoid of the mythical implications of Gunn and Gibbon, looks at Lewis, its introverted people, and at its landscape. We gather as we read about Calum in London writing his novel that some of this comes from Macdonald's existential reading, from admiration of Michel Butor. If this is so he makes his own use of such a debt, digesting and combining it with his own needs, so that the bleakness and honesty of *L'étranger*-like approach suits his own alienation from his own people, so that when he's in Australia, or at a party in London, or telling in the first person of his mother's belief in her gift of healing, or telling of his great-grandfather finding his best friend's body--there is a direct economy that tells why such a short book of linked stories should have taken so long and so much travail to write. The last story mentioned,

"Angus," is reminiscent of George Mackay Brown, taking the old man from boyhood fishing to worldwide fishing to home and his boat of old age, the "Tranquil;" but it goes *beyond* Brown in the fact that it's only one piece in a mosaic which is carefully built up, with Calum Tod at its heart.

The first half of the book is the stories about ancestors and origins. The death of a sister, the picture of mother and other relatives, the apparently unrelated copulation of a coalman with the deserted wife of a sailor, seen by young Calum--all these will by the end complete a pattern of light and dark, female and male (as qualities possessed within all of us, male or female), Nordic as against Celt, ego against id; for Calum is trying to find metaphors, correlatives in the past for what he is now. *This* is where he differs so much from what might appear at first to be related work of Brown. Macdonald has no preconceptions or religious aspirations in his quest, no helpful poetry to wrap round his experience. He, at centre of the book, and especially in that "Molly Bloom" soliloquy which is literally the centre-piece of the book, is lost. He knows himself to have come from Lewis, and to have strong, if indescribable, feelings for that place. He knows he has gone away from it because he must, for reasons he does not know. He looks for the answers, wherever the search takes him; and the result is curiously dual, split between part one Lewis and part two London, with all its very different women, articulate and intelligent, its different references--and its lack of *place*.

The resolution is uneasy; but could it be anything else? The simpler and traditional thing would have been to develop certain themes to an epiphany which would have rounded the difficulties off neatly--a moment of realisation like Kenn's at the end of *Highland River*, or Chris Guthrie's perception of the Land. This could have compensated for the questions of race, like

Would he ever be free from the terrible sense of shame that haunted the people of Lewis?

But like Crichton Smith's old woman of *Consider the Lilies*, rebirth to Macdonald is not that simple, and the usual Scottish resolutions, with a collective unconscious re-asserting its bond with natural environments, are not enough. But he has one insight that seems to me to be of that fine kind which, as Mrs. Ramsay saw in *To the Lighthouse*, sees that Art and Life are finally indivisible, and which more "refined" societies like those of the South of England are in danger of losing.

But island living had a vast credit side too, which no incomer could ever come to grips with; life itself was

still seen as a black and white struggle by the people and this gave to all their doings a dignity and a meaning; a depth of thought to their minds. The struggle was no longer with the environment; but then the environment had always taken second place to those things that exist on the hidden side of life.

It's interesting that, alone amongst so many who have tried to say that labour of the land lies at the heart of human dignity, Macdonald actually has gone back to work a croft on Lewis, but hasn't succumbed to the temptation to preach that in this lies his and our salvation.

There are faults; such as not *really* digging into the "six years' silence" of alcoholism he refers to, or his relations with his father, or, more important, a gradual failure of control over the material as the book comes up to the present day. The older, more objectively seen periods are sometimes superb. The later, London scenes are sometimes indulgent self-analysis; as he says, he's ruthless in using all to explain self, in making use of people, so that *he* can emerge whole. Sometimes, though, one feels that wholeness will always elude such selfishness, since by definition "wholeness" involves external experience, including harmony with other people. But I am grateful for a book, however ruthless and selfish, which tells so much about Lewis morbidity, Scottish introspection, and human unhappiness.

Crichton Smith's latest collection of stories, *The Village*, seems by comparison to be strangely naïve for a writer of his achievement. Sometimes one gets the feeling that these very short sketches and tales are what was left when he'd chosen the contents of that excellent selection *The Black and the Red*. The presentation is slapdash, with presenters of tales intruding "as I said" and "Let me say first of all" or "Let me explain" till it becomes as irritating as a repetitive speech defect. Also there's a curious neutrality of teller, apart from the frankly incredible child genius who, at ten, tell us of one of his sickest and "most interesting enterprises," in a language larded with reference to the Greeks. Imagine a ten-year-old from a Lewis village who:

...saw a picture once of Achilles stabbing Hector while his round shield was in the centre of the picture like a wheel. I liked that. You call that symbolism. My father acts surprised when I tell him these new words....

--and who knows that it is his "destiny," with a "victory predestined" to find the metaphysical monster who lies behind the

dealings of the village, and who in order to advance his power in the coming struggle deliberately catches his mother copulating with the local Casanova so that he can blackmail her. It's a melodramatic side that endangers Smith's work, as in the story from *Survival Without Error*, where the jealous schoolmaster arranged things at the prizegiving so that the school Dux would accept a cup with a poisoned needle at its base.

But getting away from that recurrent, irritating quality in Smith's work, I would assert that this is an important collection nevertheless, even allowing that he himself mars that importance through carelessness of presentation and art. The major theme of *The Village* is stated in the first story, "Easter Sunday." Instead of the church being filled with Christian charity and hopefulness, we find a Faulknerian introversion. We see into several minds from minister to pregnant unmarried girl, realise their thoughts are envy-filled. From the minister ("I'm wasting my time here...If only I took more joy in the baptisms") to Mrs. Milne ("If he wants to leave me he can") to Mrs. Gray ("That was the hymn they sang on the Titanic... and they showed a shot of ice cubes in glasses while the ship was sinking...I wish I was in the city, this place is so boring...") we are in a village alienated in its lonely parts, with a picture being built up more fully than Mackay Brown's in *Greenvoe*, of a fundamental *lack*. It's clever and perceptive in theme, if not particularly cleverly presented. It takes some time for the common factor of many of the sketches to dawn, simply because they are awkward, bizarre incidents in themselves. For examples: a woman, lonely and embittered, purges herself by finally killing, brutally and bloodily, a rat in a shed. A child painter is assaulted and ostracised because he paints, rapt with concentration, what the other villagers merely watch (though equally rapt)--the surreal battle of two men with scythes, in the sunlight, almost in slow motion. A hermit who seems to be utterly at peace with himself, since he merely sits, steadily and sufficiently, in his shed, begins to be hated by the villagers, two even going mad through contemplation of his calm. Four generations of a family dedicate themselves to a great building, a dream; again their dream causes them to be hated by the villagers, who feel cheated when the finished house is humbler than their own dreams had imagined. An Englishman who provides a dance hall for the youth of the village sees his hall--and his harmony with the village--destroyed by the deliberate fire of hate-filled ministers and elders.

We see the village manifest itself like a horrible dream in the imagination. It really doesn't matter that its *size* seems, improbably, to wax and wane, since at times it seems a hamlet

and at others it seems to have legions of mad ministers, schoolmasters and lonely old maids. One accepts that Smith sees an archetypal Lewis/West Highland Calvinist, joyless Village, and that in a way these *are* nightmare perceptions, curious parables and prose poems that have in them a horrible truth of a sort. Such a society creates and thrives on scapegoats like the hermit, the painter. The village joy is unnatural, since it is the vampire joy which thrives on destruction rather than creation. So the hermit's place enrages, the honesty of the painter in recording their sadism is abhorrent to them, the ambition of any to create a better house, a place for dancing, is anathema since it turns from solipsism and introspection to dangerous creativity. As they collectively say of the hermit's hut, after he's gone:

Some time, however, the grass will grow over it completely, and we won't remember anything at all about him, thank God.

Even the "thank God" carries with it the irony on a people who, like Holy Willie, disguise their negation with the language of affirmative religion. Such people miss all the chances for delight and development that life has to offer. And so Smith has some of the saddest tales: lonely people or old women who have literally buried themselves in four walls, elusive shapes glimpsed through shadowed windows.

Does it matter that the total effect seems improbable, that one feels that any particular village is not as black and bleak as that? I don't think so. There are glimpses of occasional and happier individuals, like an old crofter whose life is changed because someone paints his door an unheard-of carnal red, which inspires him to think of other ways *he* can change his predestined lot--but the effect of the collection is bleak. And if this is the personal vision of Smith, the condition on which he creates his own village, it is important and valid, since it both disturbs as art and tells us of one extremely sensitive Gael's response to his origins.

If Macdonald and Smith tried, with varying degrees of success, to capture the essence of Gaelic and island life in Scotland, there was also a brave effort to capture the very different texture of life in the Aberdeenshire North-East. In a way the attempt was from the outset ringed with pitfalls into one of which the author fell immediately. David Toulmin's *Blown Seed* has within it some excellent hard, immediate evocation of the cross-grained, love-hate, comic and nasty quality of inland farm and feed life in his Bogside parish of Aberdeenshire--but why did he have to succumb to the obvious and dangerous

temptation, when--as we know from *Hard Shining Corn* (1972)--he has his own point-of-view, his own laconic and understated attitude and expression? His novel begins "Folk in the Bogside would tell you that the MacKinnons came to Lachbeg with the railway"--and before much more than a page has gone by the suspicions that the tone of the sentence have raised are confirmed. First comes the super-image, the over-looking, ageless memorial that too obviously reminds us that all human life is dust on the land:

Bogmyrtle farm lay in the shadow of the Mattock Hill, directly under the white stone deer on its slopes.... The antlered deer survived their short lives like a great sphinx, rejoicing in their births and marriages and mourning at their deaths.... From the day that a bairn first remembered seeing the deer on the slopes of the Mattock, to the day of his death, the deer would still be there.

The temptation was of course to follow Grassic Gibbon, and, as the above quote shows, Toulmin has adopted not only Gibbon's structural and symbolic apparatus (in *Sunset Song*, the Standing Stones which are both symbols of the ancient way of life and punctuation points in the family narrative), but much of his perspective in time and values. The trouble is that Toulmin has, beyond this, nothing of Gibbon's deeper intellectual layer, or of his dark, nostalgic poetry. And the same shallow copying appertains to style; the deer:

was just part of the hill and had always been there for all they knew; and you might as well ask why the sun was in the sky, or the moon for that matter: you left that to the gentry and the folks that understood books, no need to clutter your brain with stite like that.

Toulmin uses Gibbon's "speak" intermittently, and nearly always to the detriment of his own perfectly valid, taut, natural description of country matters. It's a great shame that the shadow of Gibbon haunts *Blown Seed*, for sometimes it's not going too far to say that Toulmin can more truly and convincingly describe his Aberdeenshire, coarse, sensitive and insensitive folk, than Gibbon. At best Toulmin's folk have the truth of Zola's; they exist not to fit a diffusionist theory, but as themselves. At best, the strangely rambling story of Helen Mackinnon's two loves, of her family relations and her wanderings, has an authenticity--in descriptions of berry-picking, in courtships in country and town, in family feuds--that has

the sort of Faulkner baldness and mixture of motivation that Gibbon does not attain. I suspect that Toulmin, sadly, lacks confidence in his own powers, possibly because he came late to creative writing. This would explain the imitation of Gibbon, the fact that novelistic melodrama creeps in (as in the "wild, doomed passion" Helen has for Meldrum Spark the tinker). It would also explain Toulmin's great structural weaknesses; his story follows itself, often moving on the turn of anecdote, lapsing into long pages of static description and recollection, which unpredictably change gear for brisk narrative or change of focus. There are no chapters; only two parts. Part one is five-sevenths exactly, and ends "and there the laughter ends and our story really begins"! The surprising fact is, though, that for all its faults the novel is considerable, and must be placed alongside that handful of important novels of the North-East.

Moving into that hinterland of competent, unpretentious fiction (of which I think Scotland produces more than its fair share) there seemed to me to be six novels worth noting. These fell into two main groupings: on the one hand is the modern and domestic; on the other the historic and epic. In the first group Elizabeth Sutherland's *Hannah Hereafter* surprised me, knowing only her *Seer of Kintail* (1974) and her 1977 similar tale of historic supernaturalism, *The Eye of God* (discussed later). *Hannah Hereafter* reminded me of Sheila MacLeod, or even, at times, of the Doris Lessing of *Descent into Hell*. It's the autobiographical story, told in separate but linked contemplations and flashbacks, of a woman very ill in hospital; ill nigh to death. She has to take stock of her view of father, childhood, sister and children. She has to come to terms with her broken marriage, her possessiveness, her distortions of reality then and now. She rearranges her past memories, in a genuine recreation; and the novel is at times most poignant in its lyric presentation of country childhood, agonised glimpses of the past. Its major success is the presentation of the transmutation of that pain into acceptance. Hannah can paradoxically live with the new truth and die accepting it. The novel is a balance between the beauty and lyricism of Hannah's perceptions and memories and her very real physical and mental pain. It is about the meaning of death--as, in a sardonic way, is Evelyn Cowan's first novel, *Portrait of Alice*.

Alice is similar to Hannah in that both are driven toward suicide through the pressures of early middle age womanhood; but there the similarity stops. The style and tone of *Alice* is never lyrical, but rather painfully comic. The middle-class Jewish community which surrounds, smothers, protects, ignores and causes the breakdown of Alice is seen through her eyes all

the more effectively because every tendency to self-pity is fastened on and discarded with ridicule--even down to Alice's last-page attempt at suicide. This is not to say that the novel lacks feeling; our response to Alice's expression of her traumas is sensitively, even shockingly handled--as with the sudden intrusion into her account of her apparent "cure" at the beginning, when devastatingly we realise that the son she expects momentarily to meet is in fact dead--and a cause of her first breakdown. The success of the book is that Alice's abnormality, her unfaithful husband, her capable but distant daughter--all are finally not abnormal; there is a sane cheerfulness somewhere underneath even the most traumatic events.

And a riotous cheerfulness gallops through the first novel of Alistair Campsie, *By Law Protected*. Here satire is taken to its extreme, with Scottish aristocracy, Scottish Law and lawyers, Scottish soldiers being grotesquely distorted--but always with familiar reality maintained beneath the distortion. The plot hangs round the divorce suit of the Marquis of Strummet, the Most Hon. Bodkin Staquely Vane, of the ancient family of Strummet (whose traditions include treachery at Bannockburn, monstrous family deviants, and, in the Marquis' case, homosexuality and innumerable perversions). He wants divorce because his wife has slept with every man in his private army. Although this, and the book's entire brand of humour, may appear excessive on such a bald statement of plot, there is a Rabelaisian gusto and frequent satiric success throughout, as Campsie sends up Cabinet ministers, newspapers, and social pretension of all kinds. There is, too, something of the esoteric fascination of Sir Thomas Urquhart in the sheer amount of curious and fantastic information about Scotland that he works into his extravaganza. Without the scale and without the richness and occasional poetry of scene, one is reminded of Andrew Sinclair's *Gog*.

Three historical/epic novels deserve mention: the first part of the new trilogy by Nigel Tranter on the rise of the House of Stewart, *Lords of Misrule*, is his usual and workman-like recreation of history; Jessica Stirling's *The Hiring Fair*, which continues the story of her Stalker coalmining family in Ayrshire, with well-researched and digested period and social background; and Hugh Rae turning to what was for him the unusual area of prehistory for his *Harkfast; The Making of the King*. This is obviously only the first volume of a saga, since the young king is far from "made" at the end, but it is an impressive beginning. Harkfast is the Druid priest, taciturn and awesome in his powers, who discovers and guides the young Celtic king. Rae brings his flair for vivid action description and powerful atmosphere very much to bear, and he has also

researched his period thoroughly. Significantly, if one considers this with past work of Eona MacNicol and Marion Campbell, and present-day work of Lorn MacIntyre and Elizabeth Sutherland, one can see a modern school of historical Scottish fiction very different, in its use of the supernatural and of traditional Celtic symbols, from the Tranter-Dunnet type.

Beyond all these kinds of fiction there was of course the short story; a small collection, *Three Glasgow Writers* (with short stories by Alex Hamilton and James Kelman) and the annual Collins *Scottish Short Stories*, I leave till the end of the article to be discussed with short stories of 1975 and 1977.

And finally, for 1976, no account of the progress of Scottish fiction could not mention Muriel Spark's *The Takeover*. Not at all Scottish in content, being set in Italy and around Lake Nemi, this is a major novel and a major development for Muriel Spark. She breaks new ground in her use of legend and myth as background to her satire on the wealthy international set whose aim is to make beautiful figures of themselves, figures devoid of relationship with morality or responsibility. Lake Nemi was where the temple of Diana once stood and within this setting Hubert Mallindaine is literally taking over his friend and former lover Maggie's estate, house and possessions, while setting himself up as a cult figure in the sacred groves. Up to a point one can see that Mallindaine is a figure in the Dougal Douglas and Brodie tradition--inscrutable, ambiguous, possessing a strange power over those around him. Maggie believes him Evil:

...if there is such a thing, Hubert has the evil eye. His name, Mallindaine, is supposed to be derived from an old French form, "malline," which means of course malign, and "Diane" with the "i" and the "a" reversed...they [his ancient family] always worshipped Diana.

This is the projection on a European and Italian canvas of figures and symbols which arose from Spark's Scottish background, and developed, as critic Alan Kennedy noticed in his study of Spark in *The Protean Self* (1974), out of her characteristically Scottish fictional themes. But with this novel it does appear to me that it is no longer really fruitful to consider Spark's work in any Scottish context. Not only does she deepen her previous social mysteries and satires by including the dark undercurrent of "false gods" and her dark mysteries in the sacred groves, but she contrives to make this novel a trenchant exposure of the takeover of traditional Italian and European humanistic values by modern self-seeking, power-obsessed and self-righteous iconoclasts. The shadow of the communist threat

to take over Italy is there also; but even more threatening is the shadow of that final takeover which will not just swamp the ancient glory of Italy, but the West itself. Machiavelli lies behind the novel, behind Maggie and behind all those unscrupulous "friends" and servants who sell each other out; and it is his shadow arising large once more which darkens this major European novel. The novel leaves us with the bitter recognition that our society, like that of Maggie and Hubert, is a power struggle in which the art of gaining power is socially respected far more than any essences or ends, as Kant would have them, in themselves.

1977 produced the mixture of types of fiction that seems to me to be the pattern for the 1970s. There is a group of a half-dozen significant works, fairly clearly working on a different, higher, aesthetic and thematic scale than the approximately two dozen others. This group contains, hardly surprisingly, Crichton Smith and Mackay Brown. But for me the most exciting productions were a book of short stories, a first collection by a young Glasgow writer whose ability has for some years been recognised, but who has taken too long to give us a volume of stories; and a second novel from Dominic Cooper.

Alan Spence's *Its Colours They are Fine* is the best Scottish fiction of this year, clearly so; and arguably the best collection of Scottish short stories outside of those of George Mackay Brown or Fred Urquhart. Not since *Growing Up* by Edward Gaitens (1942) has the short story so celebrated Glasgow; but Spence transcends any Glasgow limitations, so that (and it's fairly obvious he's well aware of his own intentions here) his volume, like Joyce's *Dubliners*, uses Glasgow as starting-point for observations which become universal. The book is not Glasgow's *Dubliners* of course, but I cannot commend it more highly than in saying that it stands strong comparison. Spence's stories in this book are grouped in three parts. I think that the first group, the stories of growing up, of family and Glasgow background, are the most effortless and achieved, with group two--a kind of widening of the lens to give compassionate pictures of older and more varied Glasgow people and situations--very nearly as good, and group three still fine, but somehow a bit too self-indulgent, a bit too revelatory of Spence's religious commitment (he runs the Sri Chinmoy meditation centre in Edinburgh).

Group one contains five stories: "Tinsel," a Govan Christmas preparation from a boy's-eye-view; "Sheaves," Aleck's afternoon in the Mission hall; "The Ferry," two boys making magic as they cross the river at Govan; "Gypsy," Aleck and his friends wonder at the strangeness of the Kelvin Hall show-people and the way their worlds meet but don't mingle at school and in

play; "Silver in the Lamplight," Aleck and friends at a loose end, creating their own escape world as they tie doors together, knock down washing lines, make hatchets out of tin cans on sticks. This may sound familiar to readers of Cliff Hanley's *Dancing in the Streets*, and outlined like this suggest a depressing continuity of *Wee MaGreegor* pseudo-realism which thinly veils Glasgow sentimentality. This, however, is the trap that Spence so clearly and beautifully avoids, mainly through a detachment and an eye for detail that corrects any tendency to indulgence. Take his ability to capture exactly the tone of Glasgow conversation. A family, out walking, see an Afghan hound in Govan. (Even this has a rightness about it; it captures the attempt of Glasgow poor to transform their surroundings in one bold, but obviously doomed, gesture; there *are* such animals, exotic and filthy and untended, roaming Glasgow back streets long after the dream, the whim, has brought them there and evaporated.) Later the boy finds it in a book:

The picture of the Afghan Hound had been taken in a garden on a sunny day. The dog was running and its coat shone in the sun.

"Four draws," said his father. "Ach well, maybe next week..."

"There's that dog, Mammy." He held up the book.

"So it is."

"Funny tae find a dog lik that in Govan," said his father.

"Right enough," said his mother. "Expect some'dy knocked it."

That's fairly typical Spence. The tired hopes (next week's pools...), the sense of private worlds rubbing gently together, like tied boats; the sense of contrasting images, gold and grey, extraordinary and ordinary; and finally, the understanding. "Some'dy knocked it"; said flatly, telling us more about the morality of deprivation than a volume on sociology.

Spence never approves or condemns. He doesn't, on the other hand, merely describe. Instead, he does something above both--and here Joyce shows his influence. Read "Tinsel," and you hear the first pages of *Portrait of the Artist*, with its effect of revelation of character *at that time* through presentation in the subject's terms, images, thought patterns. The boy explores his pockets, and what he finds we see through *his* eyes:

The coin was an old one, from Palestine, and it had a hole in the middle. He'd been given it by his uncle Andy who had been a soldier there. Now he was a policeman in Malaya. He would be home next week for Christmas. Jesus's birthday. Everybody gave presents then so that Jesus would come one day and take them to Heaven. That was where he lived now, but he came from Palestine. Uncle Andy had been to see his house in Bethlehem. At school they sang hymns about it. Come all ye faithful. Little star of Bethlehem.

He scraped at the surface of the bench with his coin...

Beyond this quality of recreation (which I've only found rivalled in Scottish fiction by Gunn and perhaps the Fred Urquhart of "Alicky's Watch") lies another quality found in Joyce, but which isn't borrowed by Spence so much as used as his own, because it is part of his own personal vision. The title of the volume is not, as so often, simply chosen because it is one of the stories therein. These stories--and those of groups two and three--have an overall unity of theme. The book has a poetic unity which the title suggests, and which tale after tale presents in a new light, as though one turned a prism in sunshine. "Tinsel" is about the colour, the inward glow or resonance in the boy's mind; as the cheap glitter turns in the empty room after bedtime, there is a shine elsewhere.

He could see the furniture, the curtain across the bed, his mother and father, the decorations, and through it all, vaguely, the buildings, the night. And hung there, shimmering, in that room he could never enter, the tinsel garland that would never tarnish.

These stories are about that glow, that colour, which is human creation; that pathetic fallacy, that warmth of imagination which in Glasgow is like the ember burning deep under the apparent bleak dross of a well-nigh dead fire. Thus Spence does present the distasteful realism; the urinating in sinks, the boys' violence and ugly nature, the reductive hatred of foreigners, gipsies, or what they can't have. But, says Spence, beneath this, *even here* where we have all been told that real humanity has been despoiled and crushed, the seed springs, the imaginative life quickens. Who knows what strange world is walked by these children of dead ends as they cross a wasteland or howl in the night? In "Ferry," the boys are chucked off by an angry ferryman for coming and going all evening. They are unfortunately stranded on the wrong side of the river, and Spence shows us how their imagination takes this alien insecur-

ity, as they throw away their bow and arrows in desolation.

He threw his split bow and his last arrow into the water and watched them being swirled out by the current. He wondered how far they would be carried. Out past the shipyards, past Greenock and Gourrock to the Firth, past the islands, out past Ireland, out to the Atlantic, out...

Aleck suddenly shivered. The sky was beginning to darken. The river was deep and wide. They were far from home, in an alien land.

"Fuckin Partick," said Joe...

And strangely, for all their disappointment, the colours are still fine. In their imaginings all day they have achieved the miraculous transformation of the ordinary, and even the end is a stimulus to new ways of seeing. The other stories tell of similar discoveries; a whole box of vivid football jerseys in a dusty school cupboard; winter shadows cutting the blue, frozen wasteground near where the "gipsies" camp--shadows dangerous to cross; even a stagnant puddle.

It was a scarlet fever puddle. Aleck's mother said so. He'd had scarlet fever once, and his mother said it was because he'd been playing in a green puddle and said he'd get hammered if he did it again. The puddle was actually a very nice colour, if you looked at it, though to some of Aleck's relations it would be heresy to say such a thing, for green was the Catholic colour, the colour of Celtic...

It comes as a surprise to find religious bigotry in these stories of childhood--not because it's out of place, but because Spence has deliberately shown us how little that poison is there amongst his children. He shows, thus, how it creeps in, turning colour from fine to nasty; and it is part of the marvellously arranged *pace* of these stories that having brought his kids to recognition of the nasty colouring of their parents' world, we move to part two, to adults of all kinds in a sicker, less enchanting and lonelier world. The title story follows: it is about three pals on an Orange walk, filled with the oddest mixture of bigotry and camaraderie, sense of hatred and sense of being on a ploy, a game. In part two Spence tackles the more awkward adult world, and so very nearly achieves great literature. The end of his title story shows, without telling, how the Glasgow bigot mind functions, and why. Here poverty, centuries of conditioning, a need for escape and violent re-

lease are presented with economic understatement, in the words of the three themselves. They, Spence shows, are *not* animals, thugs, dregs; they *need* their colours to be fine, and, like all humanity, if those colours are not naturally there, they must unnaturally be invented, created by an imagination not so much warped as struggling to make the best, to find wonder where wonder has precious little nutrition. And in "Brilliant" Spence takes the final step and shows how the Saturday night after-dance knifings *really* arise. It's still a need for colour--only now hate and deprivation and jealousy have turned the colour to a flash of violence, an eruption. To scream from supporters' buses, to stamp and sing, is "gallus;" and to feel thus, says Shuggie, (from the demolished tenements, father dead after years of labouring, no prospects) is "pure fuckin brilliant." Note what has happened to the glow of real colour there. Opposed to these two grim discolourations are gentler, warming stories; of a middle-aged man's day wandering in Paddy's market, at the "broo," in Botanic Gardens' Kibble Palace, talking to an older man with wine. The story lives through the man's discoveries; of old records, of lively banter, of spirit and cheerfulness in the old man with his wine and his pup. It also haunts, through its suggestion, which the central character can't see, that the old man is the logical extrapolated conclusion of the younger man's tired loneliness--if he's lucky. That story is called "The Palace;" the choice of title is typical. The Kibble Palace is less the inspiring factor than the interior palace, the riches within which have been discovered despite rented rooms and social security money. Again, one recognises the Joyce of "Araby" as well as something of Gunn's emphasis of "the moment of delight," that irreducible human atom; but again it must be stressed that Spence is very much finding his own vision, and that influences such as those of Joyce or Gunn merely reinforce what he feels deeply. Central to the entire collection is a story which is pure Spence--"The Rain Dance," the account of a wedding and its prelude. The title symbolism illustrates Spence's complex, yet completely unforced, inter-relationship of meanings and themes. The dance is everywhere; in Kathleen's tribal ritual parade by her friends through Glasgow streets before her wedding; in the dances at the festivities; in her father's party piece, when he gets himself up in Indian headdress. But it is also the dance of changing partners, the married friends who broke up, the movements of successive generations, even the seasons of Glasgow; and finally it's the dance of Corn King and Spring Queen, of fecundity, of life cycles. None of this is argued overtly; all is presented as ordinary, sometimes lively, sometimes quiet Glasgow banter. Spence has the gift of making the ordinary lumin-

ous, of finding colour in the apparently mundane.

The last section contains stories which one senses are autobiographical. Here are vivid accounts of Spence at a point in his life when, like so many of his generation, explorations were to be made in smoking, in moving restlessly between Glasgow and London, in living lifestyles modelled on Eastern wisdom and disciplines. When I say these are not so good as the others, I must qualify this by arguing that they are still very good indeed. They are poetic, non-egotistical accounts of a quest and discovery; they show what has contributed to his own sensibility. Spence is honest; he accepts the welter of pop-songs, the occasional violence done to him, all the more dramatic since one *knows* that he is a non-violent and sympathetic person. I find the stories a quiet epilogue to the volume, fascinating in what they reveal of the man himself. I also find, as with Mackay Brown, that when his belief is stated too baldly, instead of being transmuted into appreciation of colour and delight, I back off from the attempt to involve me in conversion. But I end by claiming that this is the most important book I have surveyed in this article--which explains the disproportionate length I have given to its consideration.

Dominic Cooper's *Sunrise* emerges from a totally different sensibility, diametrically opposed at most points to Spence. All that they share is a fine awareness of external nature, of atmosphere. This is very strong in Cooper's novel, which is a man's quest for freedom set against a West Highland background drawn with love and sometimes terrifying intensity. As with *The Dead of Winter*, the landscape is detached from the people in it. It's rather like Douglas Brown's technique in *The House with the Green Shutters*, whereby the beauty of the scenes mocks the squalid limitations of the people--the difference being that where Brown's figures deserve their doom through petty *Hubris*, Cooper's central figures are made for destruction not through themselves but more through a malevolent Chance which removes the unnecessary fact of humanity from the otherwise beautiful scene. There is nothing intrinsically mean about Murdo Munro, forester of the Hebrides. A shy, sensitive man, his marriage is loveless, his wife a small-minded shrew dead to all but the bourgeois decoration of her country council house. This is where Cooper's strange pessimism enters--since in both his novels it is those very qualities in his protagonists which dignify and raise them above their neighbours which lead to their destruction. This becomes the central criticism of Cooper's work; that, a bit like Hardy, he falsifies his evidence to make too bleak a picture of life. Unlike Gunn or Spence, there is a violence, and a corroding hatred of his fellowmen, which seems to me to distort this writer's otherwise major talent. Murdo,

in church beside his wife, middle-aged, suddenly has a wave of rebellion against his lot; he escapes from the church, burns down his house, and thenceforward leads the life of a hunted exile, sought by wife and police as he traverses the West from cottage to the heights of bleak mountains. It's a picture with the colouring of *Timon of Athens* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in its powerful sense of fundamental loneliness and naked rebellion, hopeless and yet austere, against elements grand, alien and pitiless. His quest takes him nowhere; and that discovery on the reader's part, that Murdo has only the urge to rebel without anything to sustain the rebellion, leaves the reader without *catharsis*, without uplift, with only the fact of Murdo's pointless death and the sense of being profoundly moved and tired. Cooper must extend and heal his vision before his unquestionable abilities will release themselves.

Iain Crichton Smith's new volume of stories, *The Hermit*, is his best since *The Black and the Red*. It suffered in my reading only from the fact that *The Village* of the previous year had already given a good, shorter version of the long title story, "The Hermit." Here the tale is deepened to suggest much more about the teller, the retired schoolmaster, and his own shortcomings, his repressed sexuality, his dubious frankness. *The Village* is essentially the same tale, with deepened background; the hermit has the same meaning, symbolism, as before; there is that quality of wholeness and stillness which the Lewis village cannot abide, since to recognise and accept it would involve questioning their own identities, their values. It's still a very powerful story. It is the others that are new, though, which continue and enrich the sense of loneliness, of vulnerability to the world's cruelties, which Smith can present so well. Once again there is the painful, real sense of witnessing what Smith has himself endured, a sense of rawness of nerve-ends. A dry lawyer marries, and cannot understand why Brenda, his childish wife, is attracted to the light of others and of painting; or when he begins to understand he finds that he is too late and too incapable of expressing the love he feels. A woman murders her husband because of his continual denial of her essence, *her* self; and finds release, incongruously, talking to a neighbour over his body as they drink tea. A professor interferes with the ideas of a student, "exorcising" the student's love of and imitation of Kierkegaard's ideas and life pattern, so that the student can come back from lonely self-isolation to love and marriage--but is he right to do so? And death is everywhere--either through shocking suicide (the last story ends with a middle-aged woman shooting herself in the mouth) or, when it's not real death, there is a sense of the death of a former self. Smith has always treated death in

this dual way; as final defeat, black negation, or as last chance of spiritual rebirth. Consider the treatment of the "Old Woman" theme in so many of his poems, and contrast it with the redemption of Mrs. Scott in *Consider the Lilies*, and the ambivalence of the significance of death to Smith becomes clear. At his best he handles these two possibilities with a poetic vitality which seems to be able to enrich either kind of story with a beauty or power which does not depend on negation or affirmation. "The Incident" asks why the events of childhood should resonate some forty years later, telling of the inexplicable fight between two brothers. One (the teller) had been reading and had followed Wild Bill Hickock across a mountain range; blue mountains which are like the hills behind the boy's own home when the sun sets...and suddenly his brother (now in Kenya, married, sending photos of his five children) began to fight with him, for no reason--or for no reason that anything other than poetry could explain. The book is torn in the fight:

And even now I cry when I think of it. For I was crying because I would never know what had happened to Wild Bill Hickock. I can still see him climbing the mountain in pursuit of the outlaws, his gun drawn, tall against the skyline, but I can't see the end of the story.

Of course I know that he won, of course I know that he killed them all...why should that torment me?

The story has the power of Muir's *Autobiography*--indeed, at points its telling strongly recalls Muir's story of the fight with Freddie Sinclair, material for his "Hector in Hades." There is that haunting sense of dead selves, or rather dead experience which still casts a shadow over later living. Smith tells this story, too, with that frank, almost naive, simplicity which can sometimes mar his work but which here gives the desired effect of painful truth.

This story should be taken in comparison with "The Brothers," one of his most vivid accounts of regeneration, of transcendence of dead self. The teller has given up Gaelic to write his novels in English. His typewriter now begins--apparently in his absence, at first--to tell the story of Joseph and his brothers. This is not what surprises and shocks the novelist. Indeed, he was writing the story himself; but this version is not from the Edinburgh-based, internationally literate reader of Kafka and Proust who considered the Gaelic world left behind because he despised it.

If you asked me why I despise it it is partly because of these silly ghost stories and partly because of the simple

unsophisticated mode of life of those people whom I have little affection for. In fact when I was growing up they seemed to laugh at me. I have even written articles attacking that placid unchanging world...

The irony of the tale is that it is a "ghost story" of the classic kind. The story of Joseph--now in Gaelic, and told from the very different point of view of the brothers, is indeed being typed by a "ghost," a former self ("Joseph was a traitor. His journey was arrogant and aristocratic. We brothers believe that he betrayed us, that he hated our language and our way of life. We speak for the oppressed and inarticulate countrymen who live in the small places far from the city.") The haunting is powerfully conveyed. Record players begin (of their own accord?) to play Gaelic songs of child murder; sounds of island life, stories, animals, songs of exile--even footsteps outside the flat--put the sophisticated English writer under siege. The very walls of his flat (two sun-yellow, two black) pose a choice which we have met before in *Consider the Lilies*. Like Mrs. Scott, the teller is painfully differentiating between his surface and deeper self; between a false, spuriously conditioned set of values and those older, life-giving and more fruitful values belonging to his ancient culture before it was blighted by extreme Presbyterianism. The allegory here is clearly of loneliness, self-induced and desperate to purge itself. The story has an austere beauty of its own, in its triumphant re-assertion of older Gaelic values, and its defence of peripheral culture.

I looked around me. The typewriter sat on its own in the moonlight. I sat down at it in the peaceful night and began to type. The words were Gaelic and flowed easily and familiarly, as if I were speaking to my brothers who had sung drunken songs outside my door. I looked down at my clothes and found that they were all one colour...I sat in my yellow robe at my yellow typewriter in the yellow room. And I was happy. I overflowed with the most holy joy.

It will be interesting to see if this vision of wholeness and regeneration marks another of those personal steps forward which have occurred in Smith's development both as person and writer.

George Mackay Brown's latest book of stories is essentially a children's book, though *Pictures in the Cave* is deceptive in its child-oriented simplicity. Since Mackay Brown's work is always characterised by a lucid clarity of image and a spare

simplicity of telling, the book transcends these limitations and is ageless in its appeal. The stories can be taken as simply the stories of various ages which happened to centre on the cave on the boy Sigurd's island; or, at that higher level--as in *Greenvoe*--where Brown is making his crucial point about the importance of the oral tradition, of the fabulous story, in a mechanistic culture. The end, the mining in the cave for uranium, exactly parallels the destruction of Greenvoe by the Dark Star project. And, still on short stories, there is David Toulmin's fine collection, *Harvest Home*; with all the hard, terse description of his Buchan landscape that was in *Hard Shining Corn* (1972). This collection is additionally interesting for the fact that it has as almost every second story a tale of what must be Toulmin's own youth and experience of farm working at Kingask. But no one can question the authenticity of Toulmin's pictures of this world. All I would question is the *ordering* of his experience in these tales. If he were to structure his stories and novels better, he would be a formidable talent indeed.

For the rest of 1977, I enjoyed Giles Gordon's new novel *Enemies*; a strange account of two couples, one visiting the other in an unspecified, Kafka-like setting of a foreign country; there they are sealed off, and their love-hate relations anatomised till the bizarre and disturbing conclusion. With this novel Gordon links up his surrealist sketches and short stories with his other main theme of marriage sickness. And Colin Douglas continued his Houseman adventures with *The Greatest Breakthrough since Lunchtime*. I liked this even more than the earlier story; it seemed to me to have more feeling in its picture of the curious blend of cynicism and sensitivity in his protagonist and the hectic world of his hospital. It was better controlled, too--the ending, with its lost opportunity and bitter-sweet regret, is linked with the rest of the action much more closely and fittingly than in *The Houseman's Tale*.

1977 saw the histories back with a vengeance. *Queen's Royal* continued John Quigley's whisky chronicle; *The Dark Pasture* completed Jessica Stirling's Stalker family trilogy; Margaret Thomson Davis completed her trilogy on the two worlds of Glasgow and Virginia in the days of the Tobacco Lords, with *Scorpion in the Fire*; Agnes Short, formerly Agnes Russell, evoked Aberdeen in the days of the Bloodless Revolution in *The Heritors*; Marianne Lamont set her love story in the time of the Civil War and Montrose in *Nine Moons Wasted*, while Joan Biggar set hers on an 1860 emigrant ship from Glasgow to New Zealand in *The Maiden Voyage*. Elizabeth Sutherland retells the Munro witchcraft trials of the sixteenth century in *The Eye of God*, something of a sequel to her *The Seer of Kintail*. Obviously

there is more than ever a market for Scottish history through fiction; equally obviously on reading these there is a great range of creative ability.

There seem to me to be three broad groupings. At the most popular level, Davis, Lamont and Biggar are romancers in the Heyer tradition who set their tales of love in a period for colour and backcloth. Quigley and Stirling attempt more; Quigley uses detailed period knowledge, like his period information on the Scottish colourist painters or aspects of whisky-making history or the movement of the social classes of Glasgow in the West End, to give more than just a setting, but an atmosphere, to his novels, as does Stirling, showing considerable, more-than-just-background knowledge of the Edinburgh legal scene of the nineteenth century, or of mining history. Nevertheless, their characters seem "modern," their love stories the most important element, for all the research. I think this is what stops any of these works from being considered as really major contributions to literature--and I don't want in any way to denigrate the solid work and achievement by saying this. Agnes Short sometimes clears herself from this situation, and her picture of the Aberdeen society of *The Heritors* shows a crudeness of feeling, a toughness, to her protagonists that *is* of the period; as does Elizabeth Sutherland in *The Eye of God*, where she succeeds in showing in her heroine Catherine Ross someone who genuinely has a feeling for ancient, pre-Christian knowledge of ritual, of beast and plant life which is Druid and Celtic--without being superstitious and rejecting the stupid excesses of the witch cults. This last is a novel in Henry Treece's *The Green Man* tradition--or, within Scotland, in the tradition of Eona Macnicol's *Lamp in the Night Wind* (1965) or Marion Campbell's *The Dark Twin* (1973).

Finally, *Scottish Short Stories* (1973-1977) and *Three Glasgow Writers* (1976). It seemed best to consider these larger groupings separately--especially in the case of *Scottish Short Stories*, where a retrospective review covering all the volumes so far allows one a fair enough spread to assess whether the series has justified itself or not. Five volumes have appeared as I write. They usually contain about 15 stories (the actual number per volume being 17/14/16/15/14). The policy has always been extremely flexible, as far as definition of "Scottish" runs. Non-Scots domiciled in Scotland are frequently represented: Robert Nye three times, Philip Hobsbaum, Richard Fletcher, Paul Mills, Patsy Thomson, Bernard McLaverty; conversely Scots based outside Scotland like Giles Gordon and Douglas Dunn are included also. Similarly, the choice of *kind* of story has never been restrictive in a narrowly "Scottish" sense; writers like Oswald Wynd and Robert Crampsey have pre-

sented stories with the slenderest of connections with Scotland, while Nye and Elspeth Davie contribute stories which refuse to be anchored to any locality outside the imagination. Philip Hobsbaum in 1977 gave us a delightful and lyric evocation of Yorkshire childhood.

This breadth of tolerance has been one of the series' great strengths, allowing annual volumes to receive whatever is emerging naturally from within the arena of creative writing in Scotland or from Scots without that arena, but willing to contribute. Indeed, a great strength of the process which might pass unnoticed is that by allowing the most interesting and impressive of writing of such broad provenance to form "Scottish" short story collections, it becomes, paradoxically, easier to assess if there is still a "native" tradition of Scottish writing, and it removes grounds of accusations that one is falsely "cooking" the evidence one way or the other, for or against the survival of such a tradition.

Scottish Short Stories (1973-77) collectively gives us thus a very interesting yardstick for assessing what modes, fashions, traditions are being exploited by recent writers of and in Scotland. Some interesting generalisations can be made. The classical types of Scottish short story were surely those which were preoccupied with the relationship between man and his historic past, man and his landscape, man and his supernatural beliefs. One thinks in turn of "The Two Drovers," "Beattock for Moffat," and "Thrawn Janet;" or one thinks of tales which combine all three in that special intensity which defines the separate Scottish tradition, as with "The Merry Men," or Linklater's "Sealskin Trousers." Sadly, that combination of types, and the types themselves, seem to be fading from the scene. There are some self-conscious attempts to work in the genre, such as David Black's "Three Letters from the Baroness" (1973), which is based on the ballad "The Baron o' Brackley;" but however successful--and it is--the consciousness of the writer is of a different kind from that which produced the ballad and that which produced the great earlier Scottish short stories. Only George Mackay Brown still works this mine, still uses that blend of folk-imagination and literary discipline. Where Linklater, Mitchison, Neil Munro and John Buchan in the earlier part of the century still lovingly exploited the possibilities of supernatural set in a traditional Scottish "other landscape," the present writers--including Mitchison herself--have moved into psychological fantasy.

As compensation, though, the various parts of Scotland, and especially the cities, have been evoked as never before. Alan Spence, Jim Kelman, William Grant, Patsy Thomson, and Peter Chaloner have presented Glasgow with an insight missing in the

older Glasgow writers from Blake to Gaitens and McCrone. *Scottish Short Stories* may well be turning up new novelists/playwrights of future stature. Jeremy Bruce Watt, Alan Massie, Alan Jackson, and Elspeth Davie give something of this new insight into Edinburgh; while Lorn McIntyre in "The Shortest Season" (1975) had more success in capturing the Faulknerian side of the Western Highlands than in his longer fiction. Thus, although perhaps the older, nineteenth-century types of short story are vanishing, there is a new variety, a new sense of place reflected in these collections; although Edwin Morgan was nevertheless right in his 1976 preface when he found "a distressing preponderance of the backward look," with too much "reminiscence, nostalgia, kailyard melodrama." I would add to this that there is still (*pace* Giles Gordon, Alan Jackson, Elspeth Davie) far too little willingness to experiment with new angles of presentation, new tones of voice, new material.

One is left with an ambivalent feeling about the collections. On one hand they undoubtedly succeed in getting together a range of highly readable stories, all the more interesting because, peculiarly, they pull together high and unashamedly middle to low-brow writers. Mackay Brown, Davie, and Friel sit harmoniously with historical and thriller writers like Dunnett, Wynd (Gavin Black) and P. M. Hubbard. The form seems to pull the latter *up*, as though they enjoy the "holiday" from the marketplace. And of course the collections publish new writing. But on the other hand I'm left wondering about their conscientiousness--and here I'm not intending to be rude to the various co-editors in any way; having helped collect the first volume, I know the difficulties. But I do feel that any collections that miss out Iain Crichton Smith entirely, or include Fred Urquhart only once, or that most neglected short story writer Eona Macnicol only twice, are neither representing nor fostering the way they should. Where is David Toulmin, whose *Hard Shining Corn* (1972) and *Harvest Home* (1978) are two of the best collections of short stories of recent years? I feel that editors should have wider powers than at present. Instead of reading only MSS. submitted in response to the Arts Council advertisements they should positively encourage, invite and commission outstanding Scottish writers. After all, the volume is published by Collins; the editors are partly serving that commercial concern as well as representing the Scottish Arts Council. I'd like to see future volumes less random in assembly, and more representative of Scottish fiction as a whole.

Finally, a brief word on *Three Glasgow Writers* (1976) made up of stories by Alex Hamilton and James Kelman, and poems by Tom Leonard. The volume is a thin paperback by Molendinar Press.

I was particularly impressed with Kelman's short stories. At best, as in "Remember Young Cecil?--He used to be a Very Big Stick Indeed" (which is also in *Scottish Short Stories*, 1975) there is a detachment, a dry humour, and an ability to capture an unusual and off-beat side of Glasgow which is opposite and complementary to Spence's discoveries of moments of delight in the same setting. Kelman has published a collection of thirteen stories in 1973 in Maine, called *An Old Pub Near the Angel*; the time would seem ripe for a volume to be published here.

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NOTES

The commentary on *Calum Tod* and *The Village* appeared in September 1977 in number 62 of *Lines Review*; my brief commentary on lesser novels of 1977 appeared in May 1978 in number 1 of *Books in Scotland*.

Below I list the fiction read for the preceding article. I cannot claim that the list is inclusive; it should be supplemented by the relevant annual bibliographies of Scottish literature produced by James Kidd and Robert Carnie for *The Bibliothek*; in some cases they add to the material listed herein. I have added brief comment after entries only in the case of works not discussed in the text of the article.

1975

BRAMBLE, Forbes. *The Strange Case of Deacon Brodie* (London, Hamish Hamilton).

BYRD, Elizabeth. *I'll Get By* (London, Macmillan).

Witty autobiographical novel of New York in Elizabeth Byrd's girlhood in 1920's.

COOPER, Dominic. *The Dead of Winter* (London, Chatto and Windus).

DOUGLAS, Colin. *The Houseman's Tale* (Edinburgh, Canongate).

DUNNETT, Dorothy. *Checkmate* (London, Cassell).

GORDON, Giles. *Farewell Fond Dreams* (London, Hutchinson).
Short stories.

--- (ed.). *Beyond the Words* (London, Hutchinson).

"11 writers in search of a new fiction;" short stories by Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, Elspeth Davie, Eva Figs,

- Giles Gordon, B. S. Johnson, Gabriel Josipovici, Robert Nye, David Plante, Anne Quinn, Maggie Ross.
- GRANT, Roderick. *The Clutch of Caution* (London, New English Library).
Morayshire Scotsman--employed novelist who has gone to live in Surrey; the novel is a love story based there in wartime.
- HUBBARD, P. M. *The Graveyard* (London, Macmillan).
Hubbard is frequently represented in the annual Collins *Scottish Short Stories* series which has run since 1973. His longer fiction is well-written suspense material, and this is a West Highland-based thriller about deer stalking.
- KNIGHT, Alanna. *A Drink for the Bridge* (London, Macmillan).
A well-researched romance with the setting of the Tay Bridge disaster.
- KYLE, Elisabeth. *Down the Water* (London, Peter Davies).
Romance set in Glasgow, 1900, with the background of the painters called "The Glasgow Boys."
- McGINN, Matt. *Fry the Little Fishes* (London, Calder and Boyars).
- McILVANNEY, William. *Docherty* (London, Allen and Unwin).
- MITCHISON, Naomi. *Solution 3* (London, Dobson).
- QUIGLEY, John. *King's Royal* (London, Hamish Hamilton).
- RAE, Hugh C. *The Rookery* (London, Constable).
Thriller set in Victorian underworld. "Pastiche of nineteenth century blood-and-thunder."
- SANDISON, Janet (Jane Duncan). *Jane Towards Another Day* (London, Macmillan).
Final novel in four-novel sequence under the general title of *An Apology for the Life of Jean Robertson*; Jane Duncan died in 1976.
- TRANter, Nigel. *The Wallace* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
Scottish Short Stories (London, Collins).

1976

- BROWN, George Mackay. *The Sun's Net* (London, Hogarth).
- CAMPsIE, Alistair. *By Law Protected* (Edinburgh, Canongate).
- COWAN, Evelyn. *Portrait of Alice* (Edinburgh, Canongate).
- CRAIG, David (and Nigel Gray). *The Rebels and the Hostage* (Lancaster, Fireweed).

Attempt to understand the point of view of left-wing terrorists who kidnap one of the Plessey family and hide out in beautiful Lancashire farmhouse. Interesting study of Scottish anarchist.

- DAVIE, Elspeth. *The High Tide Talker* (London, Hamish Hamilton).
- HUBBARD, P. M. *The Causeway* (London, Macmillan).
Solway Firth sailing thriller.
- KYLE, Elisabeth. *All the Nice Girls* (London, Peter Davies).
Clydeside romantic tragedy.
- MACDONALD, Norman Malcolm. *Calum Tod* (Inverness, Club Leabhar).
- McILVANNEY, William. *Laidlaw* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- RAE, Hugh C. *Harkfast* (London, Constable).
- SMITH, Iain Crichton. *The Village* (Inverness, Club Leabhar).
- SPARK, Muriel. *The Takeover* (London, Macmillan).
- SUTHERLAND, Elizabeth. *Hannah Hereafter* (London, Constable).
- TOULMIN, David. *Blown Seed* (Edinburgh, Paul Harris).
- TRANTER, Nigel. *Lords of Misrule* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
First of trilogy on rise of House of Stewart; followed by *A Folly of Princes* and *The Captive Crown*.
Scottish Short Stories (London, Collins).
- Three Glasgow Writers* (Glasgow, Molendinar).
Stories by Alex Hamilton, James Kelman, Tom Leonard.

1977

- BIGGAR, Joan. *The Maiden Voyage* (Glasgow, Molendinar).
- BLYTH, Robert. *Festival* (Edinburgh, Canongate).
A thriller set in Edinburgh Festival.
- BROWN, George Mackay. *Pictures in the Cave* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- COOPER, Dominic. *Sunrise* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- DAVIS, Margaret Thomson. *Scorpion in the Fire* (London, Alison and Busby).
- DOUGLAS, Colin. *The Greatest Breakthrough since Lunchtime* (Edinburgh, Canongate).

- GORDON, Giles. *Enemies; a Novel about Friendship* (Hassocks, Sussex, Harvester).
- LAMONT, Marianne. *Nine Moons Wasted* (London, Constable).
- MAY, Naomi. *Troubles* (London, Calder and Boyars).
Novel studying background of Ulster political troubles.
- QUIGLEY, John. *Queen's Royal* (London, Hamish Hamilton).
- SCOTT, Douglas. *The Spoils of War* (London, Secker and Warburg).
Thriller set on British merchantman taking part in Italian landings of Second World War.
- SHORT, Agnes. *The Heritors* (London, Constable).
- SMITH, Iain Crichton. *The Hermit* (London, Gollancz).
- SPENCE, Alan. *Its Colours they are Fine* (London, Collins).
- SUTHERLAND, Elizabeth. *The Eye of God* (London, Constable).
- TOULMIN, David. *Harvest Home* (Edinburgh, Paul Harris).
- TRANTER, Nigel. *A Folly of Princes* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- . *The Captive Crown* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- WEBSTER, Jan. *Collier's Row* (London, Collins).
Jessica Stirling and John Quigley-like account of nineteenth-century Lanarkshire coal-mining Kilgours. First part of trilogy.
- WILLIAMS, Gordon. *The Duellists* (London, Fontana).
Story based on film of same name from Conrad's "The Duel."
Scottish Short Stories (London, Collins).