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Douglas Gifford

Scottish Fiction 1980-81:
The Importance of Alisdair Gray's *Lanark*



1980

Perhaps I was premature in my claim of last year's survey that "whatever the other cultural effects of the failure of the devolution movement, it has not...dampened the urge of the Scottish fiction writer to new work--nor killed the possibility of his work being published within as well as without Scotland." Output is indeed marginally up; I reviewed some thirty-nine books in 1979; thirty-two in 1978; and 1980 sees forty. But 1980 is a year, first and foremost, of reprints and collections of established older material. Original creative material worthy of serious consideration has dropped well beneath even 1978's level, where I thought that seven new novels and three collections of short stories deserved consideration, to the point where 1980 offers *one* novel of considerable artistic merit and five collections of short stories (may Fred Urquhart and Naomi Mitchison live long and prosper!). There are over sixteen reprints and anthologies of fiction from Stevenson to James Kennaway. I'm delighted to see these last, especially in the republishing of the neglected contemporary of Grassic Gibbon, but regret the signs that our smaller publishers are "playing safe"--as they may be compelled to, given funds at their present low. They have cut their commitment to new Scot-

tish fiction by more than half.

Why the disastrous slump? Could it be that only now we see the real dreich aftermath of the failure of devolution, bearing in mind that much of the 1979 crop were planted years before? 1979 also presented fiction writers with the opportunity to publish their efforts for the 1977 Chambers Fiction Prize. But this does not account for the overall character of tired stereotype which comes through to us in voices from the past, and the retreat from a fiction of involvement with Scotland's present to the favourite Scottish retreat into historical romance and thriller. (Lest this depress overmuch let me look ahead to 1981 and say that much of this is made up for with appearance of the long-awaited, and magnificent surrealist satire on the West of Scotland, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark!*)

For 1980, then I can be brief; in fiction, beyond any doubt it is, as often before, the year of Fred Urquhart. He has followed up his delightful study of childhood in rural servant quarters in Perthshire, *Palace of Green Days* (1979) with two contrasting and successful volumes of short stories: *A Diver in China Seas* and *Proud Lady in a Cage*. The first is Urquhart in the vein of his great two-volume collection *A Dying Stallion/The Ploughing Match*; stories of broken dreams and outworn usefulness made the more affecting because the crippled central characters continue to possess resilience, vitality, and, frequently, a ferocious strength of character which expresses itself in colourful, crude Scots of a kind little to do with "Lallans," shot through as it is with strictly local (Leith, Fife, district Edinburgh) idiom and reference and, contrastingly, the references and coinages of American thirties' film-and-jazz. No one evokes better than Urquhart the elderly lady who endures vigorously and dies hard; but lest this suggest repetition of situation and theme, I would add that always he comes up with surprising yet absolutely convincing situation and *locale*. For examples, we begin with "A Visit to the Old Manse," the home of a great lady writer, friend and letter-confidante to Henry James. Here, in so many treatments, would be the expected situation: secrets to be discovered about the apparently irreproachable Victorian figure. Urquhart, of course, twists the conventional, and with that typical and irreverent love of the underside of life, makes the servants, formidable Teenie Peebles and her successor, Mary Selkirk (their surnames are those of the towns in which they, as orphans, were found), the protagonists, so that the famous lady writer fades into the background and coarse peasant survival life force dominates--even to the point that we wonder if they helped write the stories. *That* may be a myth fostered by the egotistical, reductive pair--what is not is that Teenie has

ruled the roost, banishing her mistress's chances of happiness in love, in her turn to be exploited by Mary Selkirk. "Arrows in the Hands of a Giant" takes a similar situation, that of exploitation of the weak by a hard, working-class survivor, making it even more chilling in that the two gentle old ladies McGlashen take in Jess from the local home out of pity and affection, to find her matured as a sadistic psychopath, obsessed with her Home origins to the point where she makes herself Matron to the old ladies, whipping them, cheating them, and telling lies about them outside. At least Teenie Peebles had a distorted sense of duty; Jess has only her force of personality. Dream has become nightmare. The title story, "A Diver in China Seas," has the third of this kind of study of instinctive cruelty present itself in the first person words of Carrie, the Granton girl who exploits her vulnerable older friends, without ever being able to see, as we can, her own cruelty and selfishness. This kind of story is very much in the "Holy Willie's Prayer"/*Justified Sinner*/*The Provost* tradition. But, although Urquhart remains within his themes of age and its vulnerability, survival and its cruelties, he does so with contrasting arrangements, sometimes--as in "Auld Mother Claus"--allowing the older generation to fight back successfully. Here the two themes widen out to become a contrast between older standards of companionship and family ties and modern lackadaisical unconcern--though Urquhart never falls into the trap of overtly *preferring* or sympathizing with the former at the expense of the latter. The Granny here *is* a trial to her grandchildren, intruding on their brave new world; there is tragedy implied rather than right and wrong attitudes in the failure to connect. But triumphantly *this* Granny doesn't retreat from life, but goes a new and separate, if somewhat tawdry and come-down, path as Santa Claus in a department store. Even gamer is the famous actress-Granny in "Dusty Springtime" (isn't the title dead right? / Dusty Springfield overtones of show biz and painted glamour linked with tired effort at recapturing passing Youth?)--where it's the tougher generation which goes looking for its weaker offspring, Granny hunting alcoholic and nymphomaniac daughter in Paris. Again, in the meeting, where daughter doesn't care and boredly recognizes Granny's intrusion, the contrast of generation is poignantly felt. And occasionally the themes are presented with only gentle social mockery, fun being their main aim--as in "Local Boy makes Good," where a delightful pair of elderly drunks, well-known artists who have never got round to actually marrying, are invited back as famous openers of a new reservoir. Their antics are permitted--now that they are famous; a nice comment, this, only made slightly more sinister by being

underscored by Mrs. McMahon, the male artist's mother, and her life-long disapproval. There's still the "Holy Willie" jarring note, though here muted. I think, however, that, as in all Urquhart's work, the bitter-sweet and elegiac comment has the final place, as in the last story of "Princess Macdougall," la-di-da lady of humble origins in Granton, risen in the world through being Head of Underwear in Jenners' (Edinburgh's Top Shop); who, singing in her church choir, captured the simple heart of a Canadian lumberjack, and lost her native land as a result--not by exile, but by unsettling herself and her standards forever. Canada is not Scotland, she finds; and yet, upon frequent returns, neither is Scotland, with its vulgarity and claustrophobic housing, Canada. The final picture of the collection is of Princess standing in the bow of the liner which takes her back yet again (to either country) in quest of the friends and the home which (in either country) are no longer there; instead, inevitably, lie ahead family rejection and rented rooms.

The only jarring note in the collection lies in one of its stories, "Camp Follower." In itself this story of a Scottish girl's tragic love during the Peninsular wars, and her saving by the painter Goya as a model, is a fine tale, with that touch of the grotesque in her fate which is so frequent in Urquhart's work. But the tale sits somewhat oddly among its modern bedfellows; and would seem a far fitter member of the second collection, the historical and supernatural tales of *Proud Lady in a Cage*. Slightly less well-constructed, occasionally rather formless, these are nevertheless stories which successfully reveal Urquhart's sense of the cruelty of history, with beneath this a disturbing, always understated sense of malignant fate. The "proud lady" of the title is Isabella, Countess of Buchan, who crowned Robert the Bruce, and who was caged for months, dangling above the jeering mobs, by Edward the first, as vengeance. But the effect is made more horrific through the technique of revealing the historical facts in glimpses only--the glimpses of a girl descendant who works in a supermarket, who increasingly finds herself "belonging" to the past--and hanging in rain and misery in the cage. The entire collection lacks the redeeming humour and vivacity of character of *China Seas*, presenting instead a dark series of horrors made the more chilling because of their convincing historic settings. "The Staig's Boy William" is a long-short story set in the England of the early eighteenth century amongst the dandies, the aristocracy, and the world of fine homes and fortunes lost and won on the turf. The beautiful idiot-child William, son of a stable servant, develops a weird, intimate relationship with Challenger the race horse and Toby

Carrick the cat. They communicate without words, and won't be separated--and draw closer and closer till the inexorable and tragic end; distanced in "My Last Duchess" manner by the freezing of the subjects of the story into one of the painter Stubb's racing *tableaux*. And victims of a marred sensitivity haunt the book--from the cripple Lazy Grizel Hepburn, witnessing unspeakable cruelty at the court of James the first, to Highland Mary's doomed love for Robert Burns; and a minister's daughter's equally tragic love for a Jacobite rebel; or an American couple's discovery that ancient evil and nightmare lie at the end of their quest for their Scottish roots. Indeed, the entire collection suggests that deep in the Scottish character and in the central and deepest experience of Scottish history lies either hopeless vulnerable sensitivity or predatory and sadistic cruelty. The very titles--"Kind Oblivion's Shade," or "Your Grave is My Only Landmark"--speak of a darker mood to Urquhart's fiction than previously, with little poetic justice. Nevertheless, though the humour is scarce, and when present, sardonic, there is much of the Scottish tradition of the savagely grotesque. The dark supernatural here is that of Henryson's "Testament of Cresseid," ballads like "The Demon Lover" or "The great Silkie," and Hogg's amoral and savage short stories.

A different kind of grotesque is found in Elspeth Davie's *The Night of the Funny Hats*. Unredeemed by the sense of grace which so clearly shone through her *Climbers on a Stair* (1978), these are stories of the strangeness of situation that can momentarily overwhelm victims and reader. As a bus party crossing Australia enjoy a rather forced last-night party, funny hats in the middle of desolation, they hear that their driver has died of a heart attack. Davie has the ability to take slight enough happenings and invest them with the oddest dream-like sense of nightmare; and here the elemental seascapes of the Great Bight and the immense tracts of desert are disturbing and threatening background to the frail humans who try to act with bourgeois civility while everything around them becomes unhinged. There's a Magritte-feeling to many of the pictures--a girl beside a man on a beach which could be anywhere with a white cup-and-saucer beside him; a man seeing the moon as a clock-face; a sign painter who remembers his childhood sledging as he paints a tobacconist's, till a watching boy says "with searing scorn"

"TOBOGCONIST! What kind of shop is that?" The man himself was staggered at the word. How clear it was and finely formed--and meaningless. He gazed into the O and the G as down into two great holes in the past where, if

he were not careful, he might be swallowed up forever.
For a long time he stared...

It's the moment when the pattern of normality is destroyed for her subjects and for us--that Davie gets over so well. The connection is made strongly between us and one or more subjects who suddenly lose their coordinates, as the man in the audience in "Concerto" who is the only one to feel the horror, and acknowledge that anything untoward is happening, when a fainting, maybe dying man is carried out as the music plays on. In "A Foothold," a customer in a shoeshop carries his relentless search far further than shoes; and the assistant's foothold, his grasp on ordinary life, is broken down into chaos and panic. This is a different tradition of short story, but one in its own way recognizably drawing on a Scottish style. Compare Davie's stories with those of Robin Jenkins or Crichton Smith, say in *Survival Without Error*, and the shared quality (which Muriel Spark has also) is found to be a kind of naive fundamentalism, which can go either towards a sense of Grace or sense of disintegration. Perhaps, as with Muir or even MacCaig in poetry, a relic of disgruntled Calvinism survives as a fundamentalism of this ambiguous kind.

Certainly the common factor in many of the modern Scottish short story writers is a sense of the *otherness* of ordinary life, frequently due to a deep traditional and supernatural sense. Some of our finest stories use folk legend juxtaposed with modern rationalism for maximum grotesque effect. Naomi Mitchison did so in *Five Men and a Swan* in 1958; and at eighty-three she translates this consciousness of past sitting uneasily with present to her "other landscape," the Botswana wherein she is a member of the Bakgatla tribe, to create what she calls a "bridge of the imagination" between Europe and Africa. The result is a kind of cross between Mackay Brown and Nadine Gordimer. These stories range from the simple folk-tale style of "Then Here Then Now," which tries to express a mythic awareness of the stages of man from Black Hunter to Brown Farmer to White Mechanic, to a colder, more sophisticated narrative of modern Africans who have "sold out" their native consciousness--and have thus lost their souls. Symbol and ritual fill the early stories, then begin to disappear or go underground as missionaries arrive to dispel the old gods, and as machines and materials of the Western world take over. Mitchison avoids explaining in these stories, so that there's much that's alien and strange in their movement; but much more important than explanation is the cumulative effect of living through the African transition and feeling the ghosts of the past hovering in the cities and situations of the present.

The last story, "To Deal with Witches," captures the ambivalence of Mitchison's feelings about modern Zambia. A Party Secretary uses a girl whose dreams have told her to give up the chance of University in order to seek out witches to purge a township of evil spirits. Malilo does more than find, forgive, and convert the witches; she acts as lover and forgiver of the Party Secretary, in a consummation gentle and cathartic. Is she the way forward, being also the way backward? In her simplicity, her love of growing things, she seems to stand for Mitchison's love of lost Africa--or is she yet another false consciousness contributing to the unhappiness of modern Africa?

Two extremely short collections of 1980 were so enjoyable that one wishes for much more. Carl Macdougall's *Prosepiece* (published presumably by himself somewhere--there's no indication) is six pieces ranging from a *haiku* paragraph description of a goitred old woman drinking with her husband which somehow captures her hard restlessness perfectly to an ambitious piece which successfully manages to be a love story and an account of a rats' flitting all at once. Rather like Davies, Macdougall captures situations with images of impressive clarity, like that of the King Rat, big as a badger, sitting authoritatively in the moonlight in the middle of the road, sniffing the air before summoning his tribe to move. "A Sunny Day in Glasgow Long Ago" simply evokes stages of a hot city day, from the gracious coolness of the Stirling Library to the giggling office girls at lunchtime in George Square and the men in suits and ties "taking a stroll before going back to do something important" and the old man in the torn hat dancing in front of the army band in the square's bandstand. "Thank you Fred Astaire, or should I say Muhammed Ali," says the conductor over his microphone, laughing at the police chasing the tramp across the square. This is the feel of Glasgow like Alan Spence gave it in *Its Colours They are Fine*. Macdonald's booklet, *Under a Northern Sky*, has a similar simplicity. Wick is the background; and the stories are best when humour stops them being melodramatic. The best is of two boys who feel so far from big-time football that they save up and phone up top football clubs like Tottenham and Chelsea just to hear someone say the actual name in answer. They pretend to be Jock Stein and ask--actually *speak to*--Ron Greenwood of West Ham, requesting Bobby Moore for eighty thousand. This is a young talent to be developed.

I have to defend myself against editorial criticism when I come to *Scottish Short Stories 1980*. Allan Massie cites me in his introduction as "deploring" the absence of McKay Brown, Crichton Smith, and Elspeth Davie from the annual Collins volume, and implies that I'm wrong to want "*salon des refusés*"

material rather than "the best stories." Actually I was "disappointed" not to see Elspeth Davie. I then added that a collection which didn't have the other two and Urquhart, McIlvanney, MacNicol, and Ian Niall did not represent either the actual or the potential state of Scottish short story writing. Yes, I accept Massie's way of editing his volume with his co-editors--but I think as I did, as the co-editor of the first of the series (with Neil Paterson) that there's validity in arguing that *Scottish Short Stories* as a running title carries a certain commitment to *representing* beyond Scotland the state of her fiction of the time as well as happily being a vehicle for new work. In the first volume we hunted stories up to this end--of course presuming a kind of interpretation of the idea of editing which Massie might not like. Both ways of going about the business seem fair; but the 1980 volume does shoe the results of an attitude to Scottish writing which simply takes the currently-entered best, and it's very interesting. The writing is less "Scottish" than before; the volume almost neutrally "British" in tone and range and topic. Even when dealing with Scottish background, it's significant that most of the material is autobiographical in flavour rather than in any way in the tradition of the classic Scottish short story, filled as it was with sense of interaction between social history, landscape and the tension between the natural and the supernatural. The exception is the first tale, Fionn MacColla's "In the Schoolhouse," a fine creepy Gaelic tale of a disappearing man in a room with friends, much in the oral tradition. Yet this one example of the tradition of Hogg, Scott, Stevenson, Linklater, Gunn and Gibbon is the contribution of a writer who died in 1975. I have to conclude that the older tradition *is* dying out; perhaps it is anachronistic to hope for its survival, and the new Scotland is, as Grassie Gibbon said, merely "Scotshire," certainly according to the tales here. The volume is a good one, nevertheless. Interestingly, the themes boil down broadly to two. There are a large group organized round the "growing-up" process, with a child's view frequently of adult strangeness; bitter tales, usually, with a forlorn sense of the past definitely being the past. Dorothy Haynes has "Uncle Joe," a bitter little account from a children's viewpoint of a disreputable old sinner who nevertheless delights them--till his temptation to drink and punchup draws him and them into seedy company. The note of loss of innocence and innocence's gift of transforming the ordinary and the seedy to the marvellous and colourful lies behind Jackson Webb's coolly handled story of the rise and fall of an *entrepreneur* who builds dams in America. Again, it's the child's view of the rise and fall of a father, a legendary

figure who disappears to the Clyde and the quiet anonymity his forebears came from. Webb reverses the usual Scotland-big world drift here; and the reversal of usual categories and significances gives many of the stories here their insight and surprising tenderness. Brian McCabe writes from the bored teenager's point of view in "Killing Time"--a story whose imagery of broken watches, dilapidated and dying bicycles and crumbling urban setting is metaphor for the dying process going on in this boy's (and how many million others?) head as he pointlessly enacts entropy throughout a monotonous unemployed day. Peter Chaloner looks at another reality in "Camping"; a boy scout's vulnerability moves through rain and bullying to his mother's complacent "Well I think he did very well for eleven" on his return--his private hurts unreached and unshared. Patrick Farnon, a new voice, shows an additional sense of grotesque as he treats another childhood, a crazier world, in "Horse Dealers and Canary Farmers"--weird and delightfully unreliable Irish loony neighbors who are the ill-fated would-be big-timers of the title. All these stories present themselves with feeling, tact, and humour from the child's point of view, but a child whose adulthood and disillusion are implied also. Why this should be here as in previous volumes a major theme eludes me; is it to do with the nature of such a short story open volume, in that contributors of less experience than the older hands tend to make their *debut* through reminiscence and autobiography? Is it perhaps a quality of the provincial, of "Scotshire" as opposed to fuller national life, that such "scenes from urban and rural life" should represent so much of the modern Scottish short story? It's significant that the older hands move their focus into adult life--yet even here a sort of tired disillusionment characterizes this other main type of story in the collection. Crichton Smith's "On Christmas Day" is the bitterest, showing him in his darkest "Hermit" mood as a widow goes mad and conflates images of her dead husband with images of lost music and world-wide pain, guitars and smoke rising from paddy fields--all the more sinister for the turkey-and-tinsel solitude of her day.

Anne Flaherty tells of a delicate and unresolved love affair; her girl sees Martin, the unorthodox and elusive bookworm who attracts her, squeezed out by orthodoxy, while Lorn Macintyre's "Insect in Amber" is a sensitive variation of exactly the same theme (with the added element which is so strong in his fiction, the imagery which gives appropriate poetic accompaniment to the theme), the dowdy upper-class, eminently respectable girl's only and last fling at love leaving her with the paperweight of the title, in which she will

eternally see herself, frozen in a setting. A similar if slighter breakdown in personal relations is described by Tessa Stiven; and conversely the theme is considerably darkened and embittered in Eric Woolston's *Mice and Men*-ish tale of a drop-out love affair between a neglected ten-year-old and a motor-bike solitary. This, Crichton Smith's story and Bernard MacLaverty's "A Time to Dance"--yet another of the child's views of a sordid adult world--are the darkest and most powerful of the collection; but there's comic bitterness on themes of human betrayal in stories by Richard Fletcher, Thora Peace and Frank McNulty. Only two of the stories, by John Heron and Robert Crampsey, are classic incident-and-narrative *Argosy* types. I don't say this disparagingly, since they are excellent of their kind, but to draw attention to that odd similarity of themes which the growing-up and adult preoccupations with loss of innocence reveal.

There's only one new novel of 1980 which merits serious consideration. Allan Massie's second novel, *The Last Peacock*, enters James Kennaway territory, that of *Household Ghosts*. It's set in Perthshire; the old lady lies dying as her relatives close in--some out of love, some only when the death occurs, and for profit. There is a louder echo still of Kennaway in the central relationship of niece Belinda and nephew Colin. Mary and Pink, in Kennaway, had their private language, their last defense against a sordid world. They protected a kind of innocence through this, though Pink was finally so sensitive that he crossed over the edge of "normality" and was committed to an asylum. Not so fierce, here; but Colin is semi-alcoholic, totally committed to sardonic evasion of involvement or activity, and Belinda alone can reach--occasionally--his private, disillusioned self. The novel loses the bite of *Change and Decay in All Around I See* because it moves uneasily between being sympathetic exploration of Belinda and Colin and two or three others and being bitchy in the best sense about the kind of people who think that the only place to have breakfast is Gleneagles. The latter activity is Massie's territory--and the nasty relatives are very satisfyingly horrible. I'm not sure, finally, just what the last peacock (a real bird that dies as Grace, the old lady with the symbolic name, is dying also) is meant to signify. If it's gaudy show, then surely that survives very well at the end? If it's innocence--then it's a funny image. This is a considerable novel, but marred by unsureness of final meaning together with too many echoes of *Household Ghosts*.

The rest of the new fiction of 1980 contained only two seriously ambitious novels--Janet Caird's *The Umbrella Man's Daughter* and Elisabeth Sutherland's *The Weeping Tree*. The

first is a hard-working and frequently impressive recreation of a township like Dollar as it might have been in 1832; with something of *Green Shutters* satire on the narrowness and suspicion of the townspeople, who turn on Mary Tullis, the daughter, for her attempts to be different, to write poetry--or simply because she and her father are newcomers, and thus to them probably the cause of the cholera which sweeps Dyplin. The unfortunately pathetic title reveals the book's main weakness, a kind of loss of bite and purpose, whereby the story occasionally changes nature and becomes too nice--as if Janet Caird has felt she's overdone the nastiness and pulls back to make her story simply a small-town melodrama of the vagaries of average human nature. *Mary Tullis* would have been a stronger, simpler title; the black should not have turned to grey; but for all that, there are moments of power, as in *The Weeping Tree*, a vigorous tale of an emigrant's return from Canada to have revenge upon the laird who was responsible for his mother's death in the Clearances. The central association of Dearn Catach, the lumber merchant, with the "Weeping Tree" of his obsession, is poetically handled; the tree of his dreams thus referring to real earth-bound labour, to rooted ideas, which include his vision of the laird's daughter, a growing and better branch of his life-tree. There is too a genuine effort to represent the other side of the Clearances question, with forceful depiction of Highland dirt, disease and overcrowded subsistence farming. If these levels of expression had been maintained, the novel might have emerged as a kind of challenge to the McColla-Gunn-Crichton Smith rendition of the Clearance issue and the ending, where Dearn accepts the more practical, sensible Grisel, other daughter of the laird, and the sensible practical programme of slow improvement and social work, could have been worked into such a challenge. But again the texture of the writing tends at times to the conventional and love-interested. Romantic stereotype prevails over genuine recreation, and like Caird's novel, the story eventually seems to lack a clear center, and to contain too much change of *dramatis personae* and *locale* for its written length.

All the remaining fiction can be classified without insult as entertaining escapism, although Mairi Maclachlan's *All the Roses Falling* deserves some specific attention for its frankly told story of a Scottish family in modern Ulster. There's a peculiar unplaceability about this book's aim, in that one finds it hard to know if intelligent adolescents are her audience--something on the level of Joan Lingard's *Barricades* novels--or whether the stance and tone are just disarmingly naive. In any event the effect has an authenticity, and amidst the civil strife, a charm which comes precisely from the homely and unpretentious presentation which is much more convincing

than the absolutely unrelated dustjacket illustration of peasant, timeless, and rural Ireland. Similarly unplaceable in terms of market aim is Helen Mackenzie's *The Sassenach*--though in the end I plumped for this being essentially an excellent children's story of the adventures of a girl in the Highlands who fights spiritedly for her parents against sheep-stealers and makers of illicit whisky.

A different kind of unplaceable tone always goes with Elisabeth Kyle's best work: apparently gentle and affectionate in opening and setting, she can spring or slowly reveal--surprising depths of guilty community secrets. *A Summer Scandal* brings Neil Campbell back to Cowal and the Clyde at the turn of the century; suspicion and unjustified nastiness boil up into a murder charge against him. We can see he hasn't murdered his wealthy nephew, sponger though he may be. Kyle manages to describe her sleekit scrounger nicely, with real awareness of the West Highland characteristics which cheapen both Neil and his detractors. "Not proven" is a fitting verdict--and Kyle is hinting at a deeper kind of judgment on her douce west-coasters here. Upon reflection, I feel that her deceptively slight work is ready for serious reevaluation; she can write slight novels, but these shouldn't be allowed to hide a real talent for the shadows of her middle-and-upper class territory.

Briefly, the period and romantic fiction of the year is led as so often by Nigel Tranter's substantial if wooden *David the Prince*--David the First, Son of Malcolm Canmore, Tranter's work has taken on more power as he explores the tensions between Celtic and Anglicized Scotland. Marie Muir, who tells her historical tales with economy and pace, goes outside Scotland to the tragic history of Maximilian and Carlotta of Mexico in *The Cup of Froth*. Joan Biggar continues her *The Maiden Voyage* in *Edwina Alone*; Hannah's daughter has bewilderingly swift adventures on stage and in brothel from London and Scotland to the continent before she finds a happy ending after illness and Sybil Armstrong follows the well-worn Highland Kailyard path of Mackenzie and Beckwith in *Jamie in Clachan*--a harmless route, if it wasn't for the fact that it's better known than the real roads. Similarly *Rhanna at War* carries on Christine Fraser's chronicle of a synthetic Western Isle in her successful blend of the styles of Beckwith and Cronin, while Dorothy Musgrave Arnold has used McLellan's Glasgow registered *Embryo* press to investigate pre-Christian cults like those of Isis and Mithras and their third century defeat by Christianity in *Where is the Light?* The ideas are interesting, the characterization wooden. Far better are the last two historical pieces, *The Black Duchess* and *A Place of Ravens*, by Alanna Knight and

Pamela Hill respectively. The first has a disturbing dual view of the Spanish Armada from opposite sides, through the eyes of cousins whose destiny is to clash at the great sea-battle. There's a weird twist to the tale as it moves restlessly over seas to end in Orkney and the Spanish wrecks, with the Spanish cousin being absorbed into the community to fight the cruel Steward Earls. Hill's novel is a straightforward English civil war melodrama. It is impossible to keep track of all the romantic historical fiction issuing from the pens of Scottish writers, especially when their subject matter is not Scottish. It is even more difficult to cover that wide market of thrillers and crime fiction which with the romantic-historical has attracted a disproportionately large amount of Scottish novelists since Scott, Stevenson and Buchan showed that there was money in the mixture. Suffice it to indicate some of the more polished and successful in the genre; like Hugh Rae in *The Haunting at Waverley Falls*, where Rae (who has tried just about every kind of fiction from his Mary Stewart *pastiche* in *Harkfast* [1977] to *Naked Runner*-style nasty American spy thriller in *Sullivan* [1978], and from domestic Scottish realism in *Skinner* and many other excellent home satires to stories of London underworld life in *The Rookery* and his Jessica Stirling collaborations like *The Deep Well at Noon* [1979]) taps the modern vogue of the supernatural horror film. A band of hippies are blamed by a vicious mining community for unexplained pit accidents, and six of them are murdered. Rae has shown often his talent for expressing nasty violence, and it wouldn't be surprising if he goes the film-script way of Paterson, Sharp and Williams shortly--with similar loss to fiction which can deal with contemporary Scotland. Bill Knox's *Bombship* is Hammond Innes in a Scottish setting--war treasure, guarded by monstrous conger eels and monstrous local fishermen. It has no pretensions to being anything other than escapism. Gerald Hammond's *The Reward Game* is a pleasant Borders thriller which trips itself up in its confused plot; while *The Uncertain Trumpet* is Bill Macgregor's thoroughly pointless and tasteless tale of Palestine in 1947 where unreliable Arabs are exploited by ruthless Beginite Jews who kill off weakly pacifist Englishmen --and in the middle there's the nastiest of all, a psychopathic Irishman sent by Britain to eliminate Begin.

Far more important than all these, and yet raising all sorts of doubts as to whether they should be being produced in such random fashion and numbers, are the reprints of classics and previous successes. This reprinting has risen sharply in recent years; is it the case that small publishing houses are playing safe by so doing, and perhaps avoiding the risk of new work? I have been assured by several publishers that this is

not the case, that new good work is just not appearing--but in view of the fact that in 1980 we are still waiting for what has promised long to be a significant work of fiction, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, and which has been finished for some time, can we accept publishers' statements as valid? Costs and risks in new work are high; but I can't help but think that the piecemeal and random re-issuing of whatever past glories the publisher happens to light on is hardly doing a service to schools, universities and the interested public who would like to make some sense of tradition and order out of their reading. We need something like an Academy in Scotland to draw together composite expertise from publishing, education, writers themselves, readers and critics so that some kind of Scottish Library of really basically important books can be kept in print. We have lots of Buchan or Tranter reprinted; but seminal works like *Magnus Merriman*, Linklater's great satire on the "Scottish Renaissance" and Hugh MacDiarmid, Muir's fiction or criticism of the order of *Scott and Scotland* has been out of print for decades.

That said, 1980 was a good year for the discerning follower of Scottish fiction. Ramsay Head brought out a selection of Stevenson's short stories, with "The Merry Men," Stevenson's finest symbolic *novella*, thankfully included, with "The Beach of Falesa"--and the two great essays on the art of adventure fiction, "A Gossip on Romance" and "A Humble Remonstrance." Ian Campbell provides a sound introduction. Jennie Calder edited and introduced *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* for what is somewhat surprisingly called the "Centenary" edition of Stevenson. What centenary? Will Chambers go on to present a complete re-edition? These are handsome and well-presented volumes. S.R. Crockett's *The Grey Man*, a somewhat Scott-and-Stevenson derivative Galloway romance, is reprinted by Jackson and Sproat of Ayr; and, perhaps more questionably, Buchan's *John Macnab*, one of his most "huntin', 'shootin' and fishin'" tales, the country estate milk-and-water adventure designed to infuse new vitality into the jaded veins of Sir Edward Leithen and his friends. Much of Buchan's fiction does deserve re-appraisal, especially his historically set tales which move uneasily between this world and that beyond the threshold, like *Witchwood* or *The Moon Endureth*; but this portrayal of gruff gillies and Gorbals Diehard transposed to the Highlands (in the barefoot urchin Fish Benjie) and Oxonian and London professionals reveals that side of Buchan which was fatally limited, the side which believed in definite class stereotypes. *John Macnab* is a novel which unintentionally reveals a Scottish cultural and social sickness; and since it is part of the nature of great writing to diagnose or interpret the problem of a period or a culture rather than be a symptom of them, by not so doing it relegates itself.

We now come to the twentieth century reprints; and here we find two of the year's most delightful surprises. Lorna Moon's *Doorways in Drumorty* (short stories) and *Dark Star*, a novel, were first published in America in 1925 and 1929. Yet she was Helen Low, daughter of the landlord of the temperance hotel in Strichen, Aberdeenshire. She grew up beneath the white stone horse of Mormond Hill. Her relations with parents are reminiscent of Grassic Gibbon's; her father at least seems to have been unsympathetic to her and her ambitions to write. She married an American and went to the United States, there achieving some fame as a film scriptwriter (hopefully we may yet see in print some of the work she did then, since some manuscripts apparently survive). Her marriage didn't last; her father rejected the dedication of her first book to him, and she died of tuberculosis in New Mexico. Gourdas press and David Toulmin have done North-east literature a great service by representing and introducing her work. Her's is a major talent, occupying a place which for me explains the transition between William Alexander's *Johnnie Gibb of Gushetneuk* (1871), *Life Among My Ain Folk* (1875), Barrie's *A Window in Thrums* and the change in perspective characteristic of *Sunset Song*, the work of Toulmin and perhaps even the later work of Jessie Kesson.

Doorways in Drumorty looks back to Barrie and Alexander in its close focus depiction of relationships and tensions in a small North-east town. It has their wealth of gossipy detail, their curiously ambiguous narrative point of view, which moves disturbingly between love and detached criticism. But unlike Barrie there is no condescension of the kind shown by the chameleon schoolmaster of Glenquharity in *Thrums*, changing language and sympathy according to whether he was amidst peasants or gentry. Moon has charity and balance, even when one senses her controlled hatred of the inhumanity of her small-minded townspeople. She has the gift of sharp, clear visualization of a single scene which captures this in action--as in "The Sinning of Jessie Maclean," where a pregnant and thus disgraced girl runs weeping past the houses of the worthies, and the women-folk--in broad daylight--snap their blinds down in regular succession just as she passes their windows. The stories undercut rural sentimentality. Barrie's exploitation of the weakness of his race is never here, even when the subject matter overlaps. A raw-boned, ugly woman nurses the grievance of a love-slighting for decades, drinking herself into oblivion in secret; and it's not just that Moon probes deeper than Barrie ever could, into sexual and repressed feeling, but that she redeems the nastiness by searching out the moving *why*, the insecure sense of identity and pride which

causes so many of her central characters to destroy their own lives. Moon can moreover express through gesture what Barrie had to try and verbalize--as when a spinster goes through the ritual charade of apparently coincidentally meeting up with the man she has hopes of "courting" and marrying. The last glimpse we have of her, turning heavy-hearted and hopeless as she sees that she has lost her chance once and for all is compassionate without anything of the maudlin; we understand *why* she can't blurt out her case or her rancour, we understand why Moon emphasizes the endless cleaning-up of rooms, the face-saving false cheer, the watching eyes at church, which view with four parts unholy joy to one part sympathy. *Dark Star* shows clearly that Lorna Moon could have been a very great writer. But--rather like *Grey Granite* in this respect only--it is packed too full of too hastily organized material, as though a rage to compress and articulate forced too much into too little space. Central to it is the tragic love affair of Nancy Pringle. The opening has fierce visionary power. Nancy as a child has seen the heir of the Fassiferns spurring his horse madly to the clifftop to leap into the sea, a picture which stays with her all her life, and an omen of her involvement and tragic destiny. Moon had a clear structure in mind for this novel. From this sea-edge suicide she moves to a fairground where Nancy loses her mother to a grotesquely described sinister negro salesman. Fassifern suicide and lost mother dominate the central passages, where the book describes her adolescent and maturing life in a way which anticipates Jessie Kesson's in *The White Bird Passes*, but always with the ominous black imagery of Kesson's other North-east tragedy, *Glitter of Mica* (1958 and 1963 respectively). Nancy never knows whether she's nobly born, an illegitimate Fassifern, or --in horrendous contrast, since he's hairy, incredibly ugly, and coarse to the bone--Willie Weams the horse breeder's bastard. Moon makes the two possibilities mocking opposites which are in essence the poles of her sardonic vision of life. The image of the dark star, with its obvious parody on Christian symbolism, broods over her life and the novel. She torments herself throughout her short life, and her two lovers reflect the dichotomy. In Moon's account of the crippled lover, Andrew Morrison, there are moments of shocking genius--the story of his degradation at Aberdeen University being particularly savage. Indeed, it's sadly the case that Moon's very abundance of talent causes her to place these shocking episodes too close and with too much random distribution for them to have what should be their appropriate effect. Her sense of the necessary pace or *rhythm* of development and climax is too hurried and uncontrolled. Meg Divot, the whore with heart of

gold (another strand developed by Jessie Kesson!) and old Mrs. Anderson, yearning to express a love for Nancy which withers as she tries to articulate it, and all the others who crowd the pages, are material for several novels. It's not that a novelist can't include a host of characters; but that if the novelist does so, there needs to be arrangement and balance in bringing each to fruition. Here they jostle awkwardly with each other. But the instinct to structure is still there, as Moon moves back out of Nancy's central life-passages again through the fairground to the sea-side and shocking end, which shows the blighting effect of the dark star which has ruled her life. We lost here a major talent.

The White Bird Passes, by Jessie Kesson, will be new to most readers. It's a short novel, but another North-eastern masterpiece. It is a story of a childhood: the White Bird is childhood, that passes; and we follow Janie from her earliest adventures in a slum in Elgin to the Orphanage in Skeyne. It is no exaggeration to say that the writing here bears comparison with the best of Scottish writing about childhood--with Muir's *Autobiography*, Gunn's *Young Art and Old Hector*, Chrichton Smith's *On the Island*. Here is too the flavour of Hanley's *Dancing in the Streets*, but in addition to that warmth and vitality there is here a deep pity and sadness about the human condition that perhaps belongs, as Cuthbert Graham says in his excellent introduction to the book, to a tradition of the hard North-East--the tradition of Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and David Toulmin's *Hard Shining Corn*. Finally it stands alone as a wonderful autobiographical document. The Lane is realized magnificently through the eyes of the child--with its pecking order, its daytime bosses, Poll Dyke, Battle-axe, and The Duchess; its prostitutes, including Janie's mother; its children, its songs, its gossip. The Gossip rivals Barbie's or Gibbon's Kinraddie; but always there is more, in Kesson's charity, her unwillingness to darken her picture for cheap effect. People are human, always--even the Trustees who are surprised at the end when Janie, to them just a face to be patronized, says, "I don't want to dust and polish...and I don't want to work on a farm. I want to write poetry. Great poetry. As great as Shakespeare." This is the spirit of the book. In the lodgings of the travelling people, the McPhees, the tinkers and the berry pickers, there is all the warmth of "The Jolly Beggars" of Burns. Janie finds this wonder everywhere, seeing it in her grandmother's home, where only that woman of all the family will speak to the pathetic one-parent fallen family; seeing it in the Lane, seeing it in the byres and outhouses of the Orphanage. This is a great achievement, this sense of a child's wonder--but there is more. Behind all

these wonderful scenes of the child's envisaging, the author lets us see the horror as well, which Janie can't see. We see the mother soliciting, drinking, shivering with fear in the travelling loding house while Janie sits wide-eyed and blissful; we are not surprised at her syphilis, which Janie, with all her innocence, defends her mother with, thinking that syphilis is a better excuse for her staggering mother visiting the orphanage than the drunkenness she is accused of. What this book captures through its songs and its pity is a final image of a child sitting in a ring of light with a white bird, while the shadows, of which she is oblivious, darken around her.

The Conegatherers is arguably the finest of Robin Jenkins's novels, and the finest Scottish novel of the fifties. This is the harrowing account of the hatred of a game-keeper, Duror, for the two conegatherers posted on his estate during the war. The two are brothers, one a simpleton dwarf with a beautiful face and natural kindness towards all created things. In his trees, Calum the simpleton is at one with birds, skies, nature --his deformity cancelled out as he climbs confidently to the highest places. Duror hates him because his mind is by now poisoned because his own life has been deformed. His wife is a grotesque, bloated, bed-bound doll, simpering or weeping, utterly incapable of satisfying his needs; his mother-in-law a vicious gossip. Calum takes on the representation in Duror's eyes of all the world's deformity, and the story builds up like a Greek tragedy, expressed through tree and seed imagery which is poetic and elemental. The book is filled with trees, and the minds of its characters are shaped by them too. Duror feels a great and horrific tree of hatred growing in his mind, while the conegatherers, collecting their seed for the future, are servants to the trees which are good and natural. And as sub-plot to this stark tale there is the linked account of the well-meaning aristocratic Christian who cannot reconcile her notions of Class and Rank with her Christianity, Lady Runcie-Campbell, and her genuinely Christian son, Roderick, who, in his admiration and love for the conegatherers constantly shames and rebukes her. This is a savage tale, filled with grotesque moments such as the end of the deerhunt, in which Duror has forced Calum, who hates all killing, to march as beater. Duror's cutting of the deer's throat is shocking, and even more so when we realize that he is going slowly mad, and that he is here cutting the throats of his wife and Calum in the deer's form. Simple, strong situations and images carry this novel forward; there is no cluttering detail, no intrusive indulgence in landscape for its own sake. But the end is perhaps suspect after this black tale of cruelty and madness

has worked itself out in killing and suicide, we are quite suddenly presented with a final sentence of what is an unjustified and unanticipated affirmation. Lady Runcie-Campbell "went down on her knees, near the blood and the spilt cones. She could not pray, but she could weep; and as she wept pity, and purified hope, and joy, welled up in her heart." Jenkins's vision is ambiguous; his novels oscillate between affirmation (as in *Guests of War*) or pessimism (in *The Changeling*). His latest novels, like *A Would-Be Saint* and *Fergus Lamont*, are genuinely and successfully ambivalent; but *The Conegatherers* seems finally to betray itself with its conclusion. Jenkins cannot argue a redemption from such bleak evidence.

Eric Linklater's sardonic study of greatness in decline, *Position at Noon*, told as a picaresque autobiography, with the addition of the biographies of Edward Vanbrugh's unhappy ancestors, is a sort of opposite to John Buchan's *The Path of the King*. Here a Dame Fortune of warped humour, an absurdly humorous God, presides over the laughable but tragic destinies in India, at Bunker's Hill, in love and in war, of the male Vanbrughs. Their dreams come to nothing--and as in so much of Linklater's work, the higher the Romantic Ideal the more likely the possibility of a banana skin beneath it. The fall of the House of Vanbrugh says something, too, of Linklater's middle-age and the decline as he saw it of an older, more eccentric yet somehow richer Britain. It's not at all a "Scottish" novel, yet its grotesque humour is the hallmark of one of Scotland's greatest novelists.

Mainstream intend to give us the best of James Kennaway's novels. His life was tragically short, and only a half-dozen exist; but they are all major novels, and one hopes to see *Household Ghosts* join this pair soon. *Tunes of Glory* (the basis of the film starring Alec Guinness and John Mills) is his great study of two colonels, one quintessentially Scottish, raw, having worked his way up in actual war, beloved by his men; the other Sandhurst, polished, theory-based. There is stark tragedy in their inevitable collision. *The Cost of Living Like This* was his last major novel, and an indictment of the way we live in its story of a cancer-doomed economist whose marriage has broken down, who draws some last comfort from his tragic love affair with his secretary. His entire situation mirrors the essence of what Kennaway saw as a decadent society. These are major novels by any standards.

Close on their heels in this respect come the three Gordon Williams novels, one of which, *From Scenes Like These*, caused a minor sensation when it came out in 1968. Parodying Burns ("From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs") it took the pathetic young figure of Dunky Logan to his first job,

working on a farm in that twilight territory between real country and town--presumably round Paisley, from where Williams came. Logan was realized fully--in his family background, crippled and bitter father, nagging mother, in his innocence at first amidst the sordid world of fellow adolescents at the farm, in his idealism towards girls; realized too, as a saveable boy, with good in him, which turned sour as the book went on. It was Williams's sympathy and feeling for Dunky that made his transformation at the end into a brute mind yelling for violence so tragic; the vision becoming a Scottish, modern vision of bleakness and despair akin to George Friel's *Mr. Alfred M.A.* *The Camp* was his first novel, a raw, bitter book which many regarded as the best novel written about military life for conscripts. It portrays sadism and degradation in a Royal Air Force base in Germany. Williams mellowed slightly as he went on; the later novels had much more humour--though always caustic--and *Walk Don't Walk* is an uproarious, sardonic picture of America through the eyes of a young writer sent to sell himself by his publisher. He finds a sense of self, but fails at almost everything else he tries to do in his dream country.

Finally, Nigel Tranter's *The Chosen Course*. Early Tranter, this fascinated me because it reveals Tranter the overt Scottish nationalist flirting with some very dangerous ideas. A Scottish engineer comes home from Burma after twenty years. Wanting to help his native Highlands, against all advice from friends in high places he joins the Hydro-Electric movement--to find that the project he's working on, a great dam which will drown a village, is being fought very dirtily indeed by various interested parties. What's fascinating is that the engineer (and Tranter, presumably) ends up by resorting to a sort of violence, in that he blows up the Hydro project, taking the law entirely and dramatically into his own hands.

1981

Lanark undoubtedly will stand as one of the greatest of Scottish novels, along with Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, the best of Galt and Scott and Stevenson, Douglas Brown's *House with the Green Shutters*, Hay's *Gillespie*, and the few others of the twentieth century from Gunn and Gibbon to Crichton Smith, Mackay Brown and MacIlvanney. But this--though true--denies the novel its other singular achievement and significance; which is, that it singularly and effortlessly manages to find equal footing and fruitful comparison with the best of great surrealist and dystopian fiction throughout the world. *Lanark*

is not beggared, but enriched by comparison with *Gulliver's Travels*, *Don Quixote*, *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, 1984, Kafka--and yet it's undeniably Scottish in character. How has Gray achieved this? He has made his picture of Glasgow and the West of Scotland in decline his *Wasteland*--with its exaggerated images of sterility and decay thus becoming the images of the decline of the bigger West, the barren city failures of Europe and the world beyond. Using Glasgow as his undeniable starting point, Gray makes virtue out of necessity and transforms local and hitherto restricting images, which limited novelists of real ability, like Gordon Williams or Archie Hind or George Blake, into symbols of universal prophetic relevance. The late George Friel was moving in this direction in his nightmare masterpiece, his dark vision of Glasgow with its Great Beast slouching in from the shadows--*Mr. Alfred M.A.*

To begin with--*Lanark* is not about Lanark. Gray was amused but dismissive about the suggestion that there might be symbolic force behind the fact that Lanark the place could be construed as pastoral home of the Clyde, that the faded railway carriage prints of a small Scottish country town might suggest the faded background "dear green place" dream so prevalent behind city novels of Scotland. No, Lanark is a person, and the name chosen arbitrarily (if one can accept that "choices" like this are ever artistically "arbitrary"). He is a displaced, memory-less, impoverished traveller whom we first meet in a Glasgow once-plush cinema cafe, amongst the seedy intellectuals and their ladies. But before the atmosphere becomes too reminiscent of Sauchiehall Street and the environs of the Art College, weird glimpses that this city is *not* Glasgow disturb, increasingly, till shortly it bursts upon us that we are living in a Kafka nightmare. This city has little or no sunlight, and its inhabitants have lost memory of or need for the sun. Its inhabitants tend to disappear suddenly, at nights, when alone--without much note being taken. Its industry has either disappeared, rotting away, or is focused in the curious cylinders of sinister but undefined function which rust on the muddy banks of a shrunken Clyde. Gray's evocation of a sterile and Wasteland Glasgow is without parallel--harsh, bleak, yet horrifyingly and naggingly relevant and prophetic. His exaggerated description of the loss of population, the emptying inner city, the gloom and mood of sallow misery has the power of Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* or Smith's "Glasgow"--yet what makes it worse is that all the time the reader is enabled to make the modern connection, seeing that the reason for the disappearance of people is indeed the Glasgow disease, that unemployment is in reality too little commented on, that the mood--say, of Glasgow after yet another industrial closure is announced--is increasingly of

apathetic despair.

This is vision of a very high order indeed. Yet before we are overwhelmed by this mood, Gray moves us along in Lanark's bewildered mind, trying to grasp where he is, who he is, and where he's come from. All he knows is that he's come to the city (later named as Unthank) by railway, with some few tokens of a past life--a map, some stones, a compass--and an odd haunting sense of former identity. Thus Lanark's is a nightmare quest, an Everyman journey, which introduces him to some strange but all too convincing types, from bureaucratic social workers who don't seem greatly concerned or perplexed by him, to corrupt city politicians making a killing on the misery. After a poignant but unsatisfactory affair with the enigmatic Rima (but what affair could be happy in Unthank?) Lanark discovers, in a midnight cemetery (a weirdly flickering dream-version of Glasgow's astonishing Necropolis, graveyard of the city's great captains of Victorian industry), the way through the baffling surface appearance of this "civilisation" to the organizing Power behind it and other "civilisations"; the Institute, Academy, or University, or Civil Service or Hospital Board, it is a huge, amorphous, familiar body of professional people, their meetings, theories, places of work, which in essence is the privileged heart of our society.

Gray's portrayal of Lanark's discovery of the Institute, and the horrific impression he succeeds in giving of its vast but rather demented rights and powers, is amongst the astonishing achievements of the book--made all the more effective for being realized in down-to-earth harsh concrete detail, where reality and fantastic nightmare merge.

The Institute helps those it finds to be worth helping--but Lanark looks (literally) over its dark edge to the pit beyond, where the sighs, moans, and darkness of the mass of humanity are heard and seen. He discovers, to his horror, that the Institute actually feeds on this sub-strata of humanity. He himself has come close to being such fuel-fodder; for throughout his Unthank days reference is made in a most unpleasant and itchy way, to his "dragon-hide," his scaly patches of skin--which are the novel's way of expressing the hardening, the alienation, the sealing-off behind selfish carapace, of the lost individual. Such "dead" individuals--fermenting inside themselves--are about to explode (suicide? outrageous social gestures?)--and as they go "supernova" the Institute actually *uses* their combustion as energy-fodder. Thus we feed off our weakest, says Gray. His scaly new limbs take over a volition and power of their own--Gray's way of expressing something of the dehumanization of unemployment and despair in the lost soul. Rima is such; she is being kept now in the Institute in

an advanced state of dragonhide, about to undergo some weird transformation which the Institute will use for its energy needs. Lanark, in acts of symbolic humanity, pulls her back from this fate, and the two turn their back on the crazy logic and the all-too-convincing academics, administrators, and dreamers of the subterranean Institute. For Lanark is haunted by a recurrent vision, sometimes glimpsed through high windows of the Glasgow-Infirmary-like windows of the Institute, of hills, and greenness, and most of all, sunlight. This lyric and immensely refreshing counter-theme relieves the darkness of city and underground vault. Lanark becomes last home of the human urge for freedom and light, and Gray makes us feel the need to find the open spaces of mountain and sea. And besides, Lanark is haunted also by a memory of *déjà vu*, of having seen all this through other eyes, of having been before --and *part One*, which is described as *Book Three*, ends with Lanark finding, through the oracle, his real past life as Duncan Thaw, Glasgow child and art student. Now *Book One* succeeds *Book Three*--and, with Tristram Shandy logic, there *is* poetic sense in having the novel open at its third movement so that we have to go back two moves to discover the beginning.

In effect one could start to read the novel at page 121, since it's cyclic, or seamless. Thus the opening part, the surrealist or fantastic dream part, prefaces the naturalistic account, in *Book One* and *Book Two*, the next two parts; while the sandwich is completed by the return of *part four* to Institute and Unthank.

If this sounds over complex or pretentiously obscure, it is not so in reading. As we follow the traditionally told events of Duncan's life, the pattern and meaning of the telling become eminently clear. Duncan *is* Lanark, in an earlier life, yet still they are the same; Duncan not with dragonhide, but a skin disease which makes him horribly shy, affecting all his relationships. Here, in "reality" is the origin of Lanark's nightmare loneliness, dragonhide. This inner novel, so close to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is the moving description of the agonizingly sensitive and yet absurdly humour-filled life of Duncan Thaw. It's far from self-indulgent reminiscence. It's cruel about self, embarrassing in its revelation of private detail, hurtful in its familiarity--and very funny. But the overall movement is to an agonized realization of our loneliness, as friends fail to be enough, as his mother "disappears," as love doesn't work and sexual satisfaction is unattainable.

What makes all this so very painful is that Gray doesn't ever over-do the misery; Duncan has a rich variety of friends who do try to reach him, and one of the book's most moving

passages is that when his father, in a desolation of sympathy and love, rocks the asthmatic Duncan in his arms, offering his own suffering in replacement of the boy's. Indeed, Gray is fairly merciless on Duncan--he is selfish, self-indulgent--but finally honest. And the honesty forces him to see that he's finally alone--as a painter, painting (like Gully Jamieson) on walls which are going to be demolished, starving, pursuing an impossible dream. It's the very normality, humanity, and sometimes physical beauty of Duncan's surroundings that highlight his tragic dilemma--that he is not born to know sexual love, that he cannot translate these hopeless feelings into an Art he finds acceptable as substitute.

Therefore he commits his "suicide," if it be that--and his "murder" too, if hints are taken. And thus we return, after "death," to the Limbo-land of Unthank, where Duncan has become Lanark, where he has to work out his salvation, if there be salvation. Here, after bizarre journeys and rejection of what the Institute stands for, Lanark has his family--but finds, in Rima's rejection and his separation from his son Alexander, yet again alienation and frustration. At this point one feels the misery so much that one is about to cry: Why?--Why and with what significance are we living through another failed life?--when, slowly, Gray's conflicting human struggles resolve themselves. There is a moment of communion between Alexander and Lanark, on a hill, in the sunlight, when Lanark thanks life for sunlight, and that moment, if for nothing else. There is, amidst the nightmare political struggles between Unthank and the Institute at the end, acceptance by Lanark, amidst the wreckage of the Cathedral and Glasgow/Unthank, of his place in what is finally seen as an upward human movement--slow, incredibly encumbered and frequently farcical--but upward.

Having said this, there is another way of reading *Lanark* which has disturbing implications for the idea of the book's unity. One of the most striking features about it is its painful honesty; and one cannot go far into this novel without becoming aware of just how personal and autobiographical it is. Only a few pages into the opening sequences of nightmare, where a nameless person wanders a nameless city seeking light and love, we see this person being asked by a kind of Social Security official if he has a name. The official is surprised that any claim is made for a name at all--but before "Lanark" is coined the nameless one "remembered a short word beginning with *Th* or *Gr*...." "Thaw" or "Gray" are obviously meant, the first being the name of the protagonist of the two middle books, the naturalistic and "autobiographical" central layers. Thaw's life is remarkably close to Gray's, so that one event-

ally speculates that the opening nightmare scenes are actually Gray's way of looking at Glasgow when utterly depressed or even from the viewpoint of nervous breakdown. This is backed by "facts"--the "Turk's Head" foundry having its actual counterpart in the now vanished Saracen Street foundry; the "Elite" cafe of the opening being as I remember from Gray's description the Curzon cafe above the Curzon Classic cinema, just down from the Art College. Many such correspondences in the end create, for the reader who has any knowledge of Gray's own life, the feeling that a complex and rich game of hide-and-seek is being played by the author. For example, he brings himself on as actual author towards the end, but in a kind of peevish parody as "Nastler"; he puts his ex-wife's name, Inge, among other actual girlfriends in his "Index of Plagiarisms"--her name being repeated in a sort of harrowing litany no less than nineteen times. Gray and his personal life seeth under the phantasmagoric surface of this novel, so that despite all advice to oneself *not* to fall into that trap James Joyce warned us about in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, wherein we confuse author and hero, one feels that Gray wants desperately for both escape in the Kafka-esque sense and self-dramatization to go on at the same time. Thus on one hand disguises everywhere, so that Gray is Nastler is Thaw is Lanark, and models of other imagined universes from Gulliver's to Don Quixote's and Kafka's are cited as examples of what Gray is doing here for Glasgow; while on the other hand the story can be read as changing visions of Glasgow from within one head only, Alasdair Gray's, with everything else changing disguise for events in real life.

This way of looking at the novel would be quite acceptable but for the fourth book, which both widens out to look at world politics of the future and to trace the speeded-up movements of the rest of Lanark's life. That is to say, it departs from the kind of satire with which the Institute was presented wherein recognizable stereotypes such as university teachers, social workers, politicians were found amidst settings which were amalgams of Glasgow establishments, and breaks the novel's by-and-large autobiographical mould. In the end Lanark is a kind of extrapolation of Gray/Thaw into the future, thus lacking the marvellous echoes and resonances which brought phrases from Thaw's life into the Institution ("Man is the pie that bakes and eats itself," "you need certificates," phrases from conversations Thaw had throughout his life). *Book four* has none or little of this double register and is the thinner without it. But the work is nevertheless majestic in conception, and I freely admit that it will take several more readings before I feel entitled to make confident criticisms.

After *Lanark*, the only novel to reach comparable levels of satiric yet understanding appraisal of human affairs is Allan Massie's *The Death of Men*--again, something of a nightmare view of the modern wasteland, seen here in a fiction with echoes from the Italian terrorist murder of Aldo Moro. His two previous novels (*Change and Decay in All around I see* and *The Last Peacock*) seemed to me to bear the stamp of other novelists' styles--Waugh and Firbank, James Kennaway, respectively; but *The Death of Men*, although given deliberately an atmosphere of moral wasteland which derives from T.S. Eliot in its phrasing and imagery, and a sense of pointless political intrigue which derives from Conrad's *Secret Agent* and *Nostramo*, is the product of a vision which is Massie's own--mature, compassionate, disillusioned without giving way to helplessness. It's odd how recent British writers have chosen modern Italy to express a sense of spiritual aridity which belongs to the western world, not just that troubled country. Muriel Spark did so some years back in *The Takeover*, and more recently (and less successfully) Ian McEwan in *The Comfort of Strangers*. Massie's novel, the best of the three, uses Italy as metaphor for a breakdown in human values. "Every society is founded on the death of men"; Oliver Wendell Holmes is quoted, enigmatically, by an aging Italian, Raimundo Dusa, who has been secretary to the Italian ambassador in America. Now a recluse from public affairs, he writes the history of a nobler age, of Emperor Augustus; visits his mad brother, Guido, poet, of *The Shades of Things*, smokes Toscani cigars; indulges a fading passion for young girls; avoids trouble and violence, particularly political--but finds himself caught up in the public horror which follows the kidnapping of his brother, Corrado Dusa, senior minister in the ruling Christian Democrat party, and visionary who dreams of peace and historic compromise between Left and Right in Italy. His wry, sensitive, yet resilient response to the nightmare of media lies, family ignominies, and final killing dominates the book. Massie has however a far greater vision than even this broad view. He sees events through other, darker eyes; through Tomaso, student idealist of decayed aristocratic stock who aches for Italy, vulnerably falling amongst nihilists and extremist terrorists who capture Dusa; through the American communist journalist Burke who, like Dr. Monaghan of *Nostramo*, destroys his own innocence daily, with his corrosive self-hatred, his peculiar egoism which flatters itself that it has no illusions left, and that it has attained what other men lack, a bitter truth. These three give a triangle of vanishing values, radical dreams, and contemporary scepticism. Within the triangle betrayal, counterplot, glimpses of the urban and rural decadence of modern

Italy, weave and interweave with almost excessive richness. Massie's intention is to create a sense of over ripe surfeit, of ancient glories gone tatty, of traditional poetry gone mad, tormented by ugly modernity as Guido Dusa is tormented by his fascist attendants. Such is Massie's depth of portrayal of character and incident that we come to understand why Corruada's son Bernardo has betrayed him, when both love each other; why Burke doesn't reveal his knowledge of the kidnappers to authority; and finally, most elusive and yet most crucial, why Raimundo, deeply compassionate towards brother and family, nevertheless keeps silent about a vital identification of the face of Tomaso, a Carravaggio Christ, which he recognizes as complicit in his brother's fate. This deeply felt, meticulously crafted book, filled with civilized reference to historical process and culture has at its core a weary scepticism about humanity's ability to organize itself by any political means. Its power lies in the dreadfully effective and convincing portrayal of the background truth to events we know all too well. It is most certainly not a novel yet again parasitically using contemporary political events. Here, the obvious temptation is to read the novel as based on the murder of Aldo Moro in 1978, but in the event one rarely finds the memory of the real history pulling one out of the fiction, which is as it should be since the fiction is not so much about Italy as Raimundo's question: "We all seek earthly crowns. And we have come to identify the *summum bonum* with material satisfaction. That's the whole point of the consumer society. Now what's the consequence?"

Muriel Sparks' *Takeover* at the time seemed to indicate a deepening of her range and concern; but now she returns to her familiar form in which fiction and reality mock each other. In *The Comforters* the form suggested that the central characters were trapped in a novel which they could hear being written. Now, in *Loitering with Intent*, it is suggested that Fleur Talbot has influence over the lives of others as she drafts their memoirs for them. She is firstly a kind of secretary to a rich, shallow group of upper-class egotists, helping Sir Quentin to write their lives. She, an aspiring novelist, soon begins to improve on their boring materials, and soon her fictional additions begin to become truth--as in the culminating death of Sir Quentin. There is humour and satire; Sir Quentin's outrageous mother, incontinent and vulgar, is a specimen to rival Spark's most grotesque. But two things spoil the full impact. The first is that we know Spark's tricks of old, so that to a reader familiar with her work, if not to one coming fresh, the effect palls, however skilfully and economically arranged. The second is that the central

consciousness, first person Fleur, is most peculiar, suspended between reptilian selfish chilliness and sympathetic humanity. Spark frequently used this trick, whereby the central heroines of, say, *The Public Image* or *The Abbess of Crewe*, remained inscrutable, detached from their actions, but here the trick has refined itself to pointlessness. If the novel is a kind of Memoir of a Justified Sinner, it is a memoir which operates in a moral and spiritual vacuum.

Anne Smith's *The Magic Glass* is a first novel in the mould of Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes*, or, more recently, Fred Urquhart's *Palace of Green Days*. It's the tender yet sharply told story of Stella, a working class girl who grows up in the Fife town of Skelf; a small, gossipy, coarse and vigorous place which is no kinder to its children than it has to be. Stella has a hard, if not impossible time of it--what with her harsh but not inconsiderate parents, her tough sisters, her tougher neighbourhood. But the novel is not a horror story--unlike the child on the cover painting, Klee's "Child Consecrated to Suffering," Stella has too much sharp humour, love of life and bawdy joke and sheer nosiness to have time for self pity. The nearest the story comes to this is the sensitive account of her stay with her grandmother, and the old lady's death--and this stays well clear of sentimentality or self-indulgence. Stella sees too many worse off than herself to let her school embarrassments or childhood atrocities or interferences by dirty old men get the better of her. And somewhere, credibly surviving, in all this realism and squalor, is Stella's romanticism and idealism. It's a delightful book, not the least of the pleasures of which is its scurrilously accurate dialect, rich in abuse and reduction.

Lorn Macintyre continues his *Invernevis Chronicles* with *The Blind Bend*, sequel to his excellent *Cruel in the Shadow*. There his evocation of the decadence of a West Highland lairdship explored territory as yet untouched by other novelists of the field, like Crichton Smith and Fionn MacColla. His picture of a genuinely well-meaning landowner, Niall, seventeenth Laird of Invernevis, taking on impossible odds of duplicitous Highlanders, domineering aunts, drunken relatives, and rotting estate, was evocative and poetically successful; its recurrent images such as the salmon scales on Niall's favourite but mentally retarded sister were haunting and structurally powerful. Here, the image of the blind bend, the dark rhododendron-infested corner which haunts the new Laird's young wife with its baleful black evil, has the same role to play. The hint of supernatural presence, malign memory, goes back to the less successful and melodramatic *Blood on the Moon*, Macintyre's earliest work. But the feel of the class-ridden, drink-sodden,

darker side of the West Highlands is still there, well captured in the picture of Niall's brother Alexander, fraternizing with a sleekit local population in the pub, exploited for his generous drunken hand at the bar. But where *Cruel in the Shadow* had a firm sense of poetic justice, with Niall slowly clearing off his human and inhuman problems, this novel muddles up our loyalties. Now Niall becomes too much the unsympathetic prig; memories of his sister are red herrings, his wife wavers between youthful liveliness and insensitivity to tradition, his brother Alexander between being genuine rebel against convention and mere irresponsibility. These may well be the ambiguities of real life; but they weren't there in the first novel, and their introduction here confuses rather than deepens the picture. These are qualifications to a very high standard of fiction; Macintyre's occasional losses of sureness are still well above the high points of the rest of Scottish period fiction.

Another first novel of Waugh-like sharpness is William Boyd's *A Good Man in Africa*. Nkongsamba is a corrupt and steamy city in the African country of Kinjanja. Morgan Leafy is a "Lucky Jim" First Secretary in the British Deputy High Commission--amoral, lazy, fat, but cursed with a warped sense of humour which nevertheless fails to get him out of terrible social disasters involving a black mistress, blackmail by a Negro chief whose wife with whom Morgan has an affair, attempted bribery by Morgan of the only decent person in the book, the Scottish Doctor Murray--who, in a bitter additional twist in the story, is murdered by natives. But all is not black humour, since out of his relationship with Murray comes Leafy's decision to stand for himself against the hypocrisies and sordid temptations of white and black worlds alike. There's a rich and assured sense of humour here, and for a first novel it's poised and controlled. Boyd does not suffer from comparison with Waugh and *Black Mischief*--indeed, some might argue that his satire has what Waugh lacks, a final positive statement asserted through the character of Murray and the rebirth of Morgan Leafy.

Boyd has made a double *debut* in 1981, for of three significant volumes of short stories, the best is *On the Yankee Station*, with some more of the pathetic adventures of the slovenly irresponsible Morgan Leafy. There are unrelated other stories--but they share an overall mood of savage disillusionment with the rotten bulk of humanity. Children torture lizards while their mothers make love with strangers in the back of vans; a neurotic, obsessed with his idea of the purity of a strange girl, murders a hippie who dared to insult her image; and the title story tells of the revenge of a crewman of an

American aircraft carrier on the pilot he hates, who loves napalm bombing and approves of the addition of polystyrene and phosphorus to it so that the napalm sticks to bodies, and burns even underwater. This is not just horror, though, for its own sake. There is a subtle, satiric edge throughout, and the techniques of each story are different and highly proficient. Boyd in his second book shows himself--as *Punch* and *London Magazine* have found--a master of the modern short story, with a hatred of exploitation and cruelty which comes over in each barbed and bitter tale. The "Yankee Station" is a symbol of all powers, American, imperial, media, which destroy, especially those powers which callously fail even to perceive what they are destroying, just as the sealed-off arrogance of the carrier turns the bombing raids on Vietnam into cartoon escapades against gooks, an unreal playground exercise.

Iain Crichton Smith's new volume, *Murdo and Other Stories*, contains some very fine fiction, but lacks a unifying tone, although there is a common theme. That is to say that the title story, *Murdo*, and half the amount of the book is macabre but genuinely funny, while the other tales belong to the earlier style of volumes like *Survival Without Error* or *The Black and the Red*. A missionary carrying a terrible burden, a Calvinist guilt, discovers a new self and higher truth amongst natives in Africa; a couple discover new selves, a new reality in looking into distorted mirrors at a fair. Conversely, a Gael returns at night to curse the owners of an estate in which he wanders, filled with pent-up racial hate; and a wife discovers her hatred of marriage and friends and the western world as she goes mad at a barbecue. In these stories Smith's images are as effective as ever, the images of one of Britain's finest poets of pain and distortion. As always it is the battle which rages in Smith between a racial optimism and pessimism which is fought out, with hurtful honesty and no literary indulgence. All is spare and convincing--until *Murdo*. *Murdo* is a Celtic misfit, a man of eccentric imagination who writes to Dante to ask him where he got his work published, who leaves a rubber nose to his mother in his will, who puts boots on newspapers in the road so that people can read the headlines like "I still love him though he killed for me." He has visions of a pure white mountain and tells symbolic stories to children. The humour is disturbing and the imagery sharp and fragmented. It is new in style, excitingly different from before, and makes one wonder why Smith didn't wait to gather more around *Murdo*, to let the surreal logic and images of this novella gather and accumulate till a complete volume emerged naturally. As it is the volume is impressive but broken-backed.

Scottish Short Stories 1981 again shows how much honest-to-goodness writing ability in the short story there is in Scotland. It fills out my belief, expressed in the 1980 survey, that the traditional Scottish short story from Scott and Hogg to Stevenson and Linklater, the ballad-based story of local landscape and character, with the supernatural frequently lowering through, is dying. Nevertheless the older writers do succeed here. Mackay Brown has a splendid example of his belief in song and ritual shining out through glittering prose; Robin Jenkins has a robust, earthy tale of Glasgow hairies and Holy Loch Americans and grotesque results; Crichton Smith has a strange tale which takes the surreal imagery of *Murdo* even further, into a horrific picture of the "Coffin and Nest" which is the dual aspect of remote childhood upbringing--a tale which could be set anywhere in the world amongst the poor and narrowly religious; and Eona Macnicol tells a ghostly highland tale. Beyond these older voices, however, the new Scotland is very much Gibbon's "Scotshire"; and the topics those those of any materialistic society, from stories set in Wales and Greece to the South of England--or anywhere. Such collections are quite rightly meant to contain the best work submitted by writers living in Scotland, and I don't so much criticize the contents--which are almost invariably polished and effective--as describe an overall drift over nine years towards stories which aren't so much Scottish as modern and placeless. Carl Macdougall, Frank McNulty and Robert Crampsey have something vivid to say about a peculiarly Scottish experience, Macdougall especially capturing the essence of class alienation in modern Glasgow, with his sad picture of a couple "getting on" but losing touch with ordinary people--and the effect is all the more moving because Macdougall makes them characters who are simply decent and vulnerable, trapped as much as anybody else. For the rest, there is a Giles Gordon tale with three possible endings, with his disturbing, shifting background, this time in India; there's an Elspeth Davie, with her dream-like imagery and inhuman humans, expressing a theme of broken communication through the symbol of a vandalized telephone kiosk; a nostalgic piece by Morley Jimieson; and a particularly tough, haunting little piece from James Campbell.

The rest of the new fiction operates at a significantly lower level: workmanlike, often well crafted, but avoiding exploration of metaphysical or mythical areas of experience. That being said, some six considerable novels remain: two on the Highlands, a satire on Modern Scottish Suburbia, a period piece on Glasgow railway history, another on the Highlanders in Spain, and the last, *The Manager*, a study in some depth of

a Scot in football.

Robert Crampsey's 1979 *The Edinburgh Pirate* was a fine period piece, an account of a gross miscarriage of justice following the Darien scheme, well-researched and told with great economy. Crampsey now changes tack completely, the historian giving way to the aficionado and pundit of football. Yet this is no simple sports-fiction; football is rather the clothing for a moving human study. Bob Calderwood is manager of a struggling low-league North of England team of part-timers and diminishing supporters. He knows that his days are beginning to be numbered; there are ominous signs that the all-powerful local businessman chairman is tiring of his hobby support for the team, its aging goalkeeper, its flash-talented centre-forward who's too fond of birds and himself to discipline his efforts towards real greatness. The ground's shabby toy-town stand and faded trophies are increasingly empty symbols of an irretrievable past. Calderwood is also at crisis point domestically. Crampsey captures this well. No traumatic differences between him and his attractive wife--both are fit and good-humoured, but the daily strain has told, and they drift apart. Not the least of this book's achievement is its authenticity. It opens up the world of not just a small-town football manager, but of journalists and local businessmen. Crampsey has no stereotypes and keeps a firm grip on his plot. His reconciliation in the end is credible, if low-key.

Joan Lingard's *Greenyards* is a quiet and restrained study of the Clearances and how they affected the area just to the north of the Black Isle. Enjoyable though this is, and well-researched in its Northern and Edinburgh flavouring, I liked this less than the Lingard of novels like *The Prevailing Wind*, *The Headmaster* or *The Second Flowering of Emily Mountjoy*--all of which seemed to me to have a harder grip of deeply felt personal experience, avoiding none of the pain, and disguising little. This novel moves closer to the Elisabeth Sutherland and Agnes Short worlds where history is merely backcloth for what is essentially romantic action. For the story is of the two loves of Catriona Ross, for her wild and boisterous Highlander Donald and her quiet but responsible Doctor Will. There are indeed two worlds and two sets of values in opposition--Catriona has to learn a kind of realism, to forget dreams of romance for Edinburgh realism and responsibility instead; but however well done the Highland background of policemen in the glen and factors plotting removal of tenants, and however well captured--and it's very well captured--the Edinburgh of the eighteen sixties, the end is foreseeable in a way that the ends of *Prevailing Winds* or *Emily Mountjoy* weren't. But the novel is enjoyable, with an especially good evocation of the

mood and sadness of the movement of so many families to Canada. Like Elisabeth Sutherland's *The Weeping Tree*, it makes use of the Clearances effectively--although one wonders how many more novels will exploit and possibly falsify the history of this debatable and contentious time.

More grandly conceived, if less well held together, is Alanna Knight's most ambitious novel so far, *Colla's Children*, a massive account of one woman's life from childhood in the Highland Clearances to her old age, which is woven in uncannily with the effects of the first world war and the horror of the foundering of the *Iolaire*, the vessel bringing back the Lewis men from war, at the very threshold of Stornoway. This is a bleak, impressive view of island narrowness of sympathy, island superstition and gossip. It's a kind of cross between Gunn and McColla, with something of Bennett's *Clayhanger* here, in the fine way Knight contrasts the barbarous insecurity of the early periods of the novel with modern change--all in the lifetime of one woman, a hard, bitter lifetime. What's less effective is the control over the range of characters--some appear for a while, only to vanish for no apparent reason in mid-novel. And towards the end the focus on the central heroine gets lost.

Less ambitious in style and theme is Margaret Thomson Davis's *The Dark Side of Pleasure*, a novel about the coming of the railways to Glasgow and the navvies who tore their way from Queen Street in Glasgow to Edinburgh. It's presented through a harsh, unusual love affair between a daughter of a leading Glasgow family whose fortune depends on horse-drawn coaches and a rebellious coachman who refuses to accept his mean social position. At first--as with Davis's other work--the reader seems to find a misleadingly sentimental romantic world, which quickly falls away to reveal an ugly, vividly described world of poverty, coarse relationships, elemental human reactions. The girl is ejected from her George Square mansion for becoming pregnant to the coachman, and, forced to live with him, she finds out what Glasgow of the 1830's is like at its economic roots. This is a forceful picture of sweatshops, homes of hellish meanness, debasement of humanity to the animal--and convincingly detailed. With a simple narrative drive which is satisfying, we follow the reversal of fortunes as the mansion of the coach owner gives way to the successes of the speculative drive of the despised coachman.

A failure to "place" action in any coherent moral setting affects an otherwise lively, entertaining first novel by Michael Bassi, *The Kilted Parrot*. The central character is Drummond Cranks, who reacts with satiric ferocity to the inhibitions of Jewish family, Presbyterian society, middle-class

Edinburgh. Nothing is sacred in this novel; dead mothers have their coffins prised open to get back valuable rings, ministers get drunk and walk about in chamberpots, grotesque ex-servicemen lose false legs under Castle Rock. There is the flavour of Linklater in his most shocking episodes of *The Merry Muse*, as in the climax, when a floating gaming saloon (converted from the sludge boat that deposited Edinburgh human waste off Cramond) disgorges all its posh opening night guests in the Forth after Drummond has accidentally leaned on the DUMP button which having intercourse on the bridge in the dark. Bassi has many comic talents, and his command of mood changes as well. The depiction of the genuine grief of Drummond's father sits effectively next to his greed, as does Drummond's anger at hypocrisy next to his own acquisitive dishonesty. But again the final unsureness of moral placing leaves the novel stranded in limbo. It's not that the novelist must have a point to make, more that he must at least adopt a framework which will give his structure some shape--unless, like Waugh in *Decline and Fall*, the point is that there's no morality left at all, in which case the author organizes his book around morally pointless and fragmented episodes. Bassi doesn't. There's enough traditional morality, as in the father's discovery that Drummond has broken the cardinal ethics of his jeweller's trade, to suggest that Bassi hasn't quite found the form he wants. This lively picaresque novel is finally neither satire nor sentiment.

I missed his *The Winter of the Eagle* in 1978, but very worthwhile is the second novel of K.M. Campbell, *Honours of War*, a tale of the strangely interwoven destinies of a British officer, George Ingram, and a Spanish major, the aristocratic Jose Luis Biarroco, during the Peninsular Wars. Campbell locates the story in British failure, the bulk of the book recounting retreat and the squalor of arid or rain-sodden camps and troop-arrangements. Ingram is a decent man; Biarroco a man of honour whom he befriends, but finds to his horror he has to arrest. With something of Conrad's or Thackeray's emphasis on conventions of regiment and gentility, the novel becomes a conventional dance of debts honoured, slights remembered--but it never is artificial, rather evoking a tragic pity for all involved in the whole sorry international mess. Even the discovery that Biarroco is a double-agent doesn't make us hostile to him; even the eventual success of the British troops is no longer a matter for joy. Ingram loses his love, the sister of the major; his friend; almost all, in fact but his honour--which by the end Campbell has shown as a genuine human sympathy as opposed to a shallow observance of custom and military etiquette.

The remaining new Scottish fiction leaves modern Scotland very much alone, preferring high fantasy, ancient history, Cromwellian melodrama, and Ulster troubles respectively. Graham Dunstan Martin's *Catchfire* is straight out of George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis and Tolkien--with the addition, as the author tells us, of a North of Scotland setting as the landscape base for his imaginary battles of mysterious Kendark, ruled over by young King Ewan and Wasteland Feydom, crippled by the ambitions of its resident wizard, Hoodwill, its feeble King, and its wicked nobles. The story--successor to his first novel *Giftwish*--steers uneasily at first between the pitfalls of over-complexity and rather patronizing tone, but it gets these problems sorted out and matures halfway through into serious and imaginative allegory, whereby each opposing kingdom needs the attributes of its opponent, the conscious and reasoning mind (Feydom) needing the subconscious and intuitive darker mind (Kendark). The names have their poetic and allegorical significances, and the action has its own power, the descriptions at times their own undeniable poetry and vivid colour--albeit that Martin does tend in the first half to mix metaphor and overdo adjective.

I found myself liking this more than Nigel Tranter's latest, his recreation of the life and times of another wizard/prophet, this time *True Thomas*, the Rhymer of the Ballads who is supposed to have been taken by the Queen of Faery for seven years, and whose prophecies are still current. Tranter's careful research and accurate recreation here comes a bit unstuck, since he reveals that he has none of the wonder or fantastic imagination that helps authors like Martin, Sutherland, or Mary Stewart to gain their effects. True Thomas has a surprisingly wooden way with his intuitions. There is little mysterious about them though we're still supposed to take them as valid and supernatural. They might as well be headaches or comment on the weather for all the poetry or wonder that Tranter makes out of them. Thomas has a feeling--usually quite suddenly--says his piece of usually bad prophetic poetry, and that's that. For the rest, the history is as always well-conveyed, and I'm sure that Tranter's guesses at who and what and where Thomas was likely to be, and why the legends grew up about him, are as valid as anybody's. It all lacks magic, and vitality--as though Tranter has worked over-long to this formulae.

Three historical romances, a thriller and a mystery complete the new fiction. *Mariota*, by Charles Mackie, is a slight but strangely effective story of a "Lady MacBeth" of the fourteenth century, the wilful and beautiful Mariota, mistress of the Wolf of Badenoch, whom she helps to destroy. Mackie cleverly weaves a modern involvement into his savage sexual tale, and achieves

an effect of nightmare. Agnes Short's new romance, *Miss Jenny*, set in Macdonald country, Edinburgh, and Flanders during the eighteenth century, is a story of long-thwarted love, with Jenny Cameron eventually united to her unfortunate lover Hugh. Lacking the hard bite and sharp realism of her Aberdeen tales like *The Heritors*, this is a well-told melodrama which will be a popular success. Alison Thirkell's *Now the King's Come* is an odd mixture of guile, persuasive local evocation of Edinburgh in the time of George IV's visit in 1820 and *Women's Own* melodrama. It's a shame she wastes some real talent for historical re-creation.

In the group of thrillers, there are at least two which rank as more than mere escapist entertainment. Douglas Scott's *Die for the Queen* is ostensibly a spy-and-counterspy tale wherein Kevin O'Rourke finds himself not only double-agenting for Britain as Irish collaborator with Germans who want to sink the Queen Elizabeth, but loving the girl he's supposed to destroy, who works in John Brown's and spies for the Nazis. All this tells nothing of his convincing feel for the Clyde estuary and for Glasgow's pride and involvement with the Cunarder. Scott reaches beyond the conventional world of the war thriller here. Brian Callison's *The Sextant* is an eerie account of a sea-captain's quest to discover how his captain father really died, after he has come into possession of his father's sextant--which should have been impossible if his father had gone down with his ship, as he's supposed to have. This is a Hammond Innes style of vindication thriller, with a relaxed pace and a weird ending. Bill Knox's *A Killing in Antiques* is the seventeenth in his successful "Detective Thane" series, with their careful plotting and sound knowledge of police procedure, and Elisabeth Kyle in *The Deed Box* creates another of her curious quiet mysteries, filled with the feel of quiet Scottish towns and old resentments, a tale of an orphan girl coming to Failford to find out her origins.

I turn now to reprints--1981 again showing that Scottish publishers want to play safe in the kind of risks they take. Yet they are strangely wilful in their choice of titles to reprint. All I said on this in 1980 is still valid, I feel, for 1981. In roughly chronological order, then, the main reprints ran from Cunninghame Graham to a trilogy of Margaret Thomson Davis. Alexander Maitland's collection of *Tales of Horsemen* by Cunninghame Graham is abstracted from volumes on the Argentine, Mexico, Iceland, and the famous ride of Schiffeley from Buenos Aires to New York over three years. "The Gaucho," Don Roberto, took all life, as Maitland says, "at a gallop," so that a selection of pieces about his own most loved of species takes on metaphoric quality, speaking for the entire man. John

Buchan's *Sick Heart River* (1941) is, in Trevor Royle's opinion, his best novel. I still like his *Watcher by the Threshold* stories, and his other-worldly fiction like *Witchwood*; but re-reading this persuades me that a new more serious Christian stoicism, and a deeper level of experience had been reached. As the account of the last years of Edward Leithen, hero of more conventional Buchan adventures, it is moving and poetic.

Leslie Mitchell's (pseud. Lewis Grassic Gibbon) *The Thirteenth Disciple* (1931) is a welcome reprint in that it is the most autobiographical of Gibbon's fiction, translating real events in the life of Mitchell to fiction and letting us feel the deep distaste he had for the North-East and its narrow-mindedness. It is also important in letting us see the development of the melodramatic early writer to the author of control and vision. Here is the Mearns country seen with much less love and detachment and here Malcom Maudsley and Domina Riddoch are prefigurations of Spartacus and Chris Guthrie. But here also is a much cruder political and social stance than that of *Sunset Song*. It's as though Gibbon spewed out a great deal of bile and nastiness by going over the top with Malcom's immature hatreds of "clownfaced policemen" and dyspeptic academics he'd like to have at bayonet practice. Malcom's loves and politics and social anthropology are incredible, if interesting raw material for later novels. And character is unreal too, from Malcom's early love, his mistress with her hackneyed "flickering tapers" description, which Mitchell uses over and over ad nauseum. The end too is superstitions, contrivance, pointless death, unconvincing melodrama. But there is power and passion, if uncontrolled.

Another neglected novelist who crammed much talent into too short a life is Ian Macpherson. His *Wild Harbour* (1936), one of only four novels, tells of Hugh and Terry, a husband and wife with the same over-sensitivity of Lorna Moon's heroine. Living in the later period of the thirties and imminent war, Macpherson imagines their attempt to deny the modern world and its claims on them for war, making them abandon their home for a cave. This is presented not as naive escapism, but as detailed, substantiated, and in the end successful return to the wild, after many false starts and setbacks. These are presented with persuasive detail, and the account of their domestic shifts has the appeal of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. And up till near the end Macpherson doesn't put a foot wrong in his fable of freedom, albeit his pair are a bit given to hypersensitive reflections on life. Where the novel is for me spoiled or marred is the conclusion Terry and Hugh came to, when after succouring a wounded intruder they felt a great human compassion, a need to rejoin their kind, whatever the

cost. But the death of Terry after this human epiphany was too contradictory of everything the novel had said about humanity and love and left a terrible desolation, powerful but unpoetic. This was a shame, since otherwise the novel's prophetic vision was great.

Thirteenth Disciple and *Wild Harbour* were part of Paul Harris's courageous series of Scottish fiction reprints, as is *Peacocks and Pagodas*, a collection of the best of the short stories of Dorothy Haynes. In many ways this is the most polished volume of the three, with its grotesque and frequently shocking stories sitting in nicely arranged contrast with delightful simple and poetic pieces like the title story, "Peacocks and Pagodas," a story Alan Spence would not be ashamed to own for its gentle epiphany at the end of an old woman's busy day. Haynes has mastered the classic types of the short story, from the Ronald Dahl short sickener (here a tale of a family who are made surprisingly and suspiciously welcome for the winter at a Clyde holiday resort: they are the menu for next year's guests) to the Mackay Brown hard yet tender piece of human ritual (as in "The Head," where a felon finds unearthly compassion for a staked head which haunts him throughout his day in the stocks) to the demonic possession of "Dorothy Dean," with its nice reversability--the thing that sits on her shoulder can even more effectively be interpreted as the private and purely fantastic invention of her desolately lonely repressions. This is hardly a straight reprint, since the stories combine for the first time, even though they are dated. Her work deserves much more recognition.

Eric Linklater's *Laxdale Hall*, first published in 1931, now from Macdonald, is not one of his more successful works. It combines the Scottish setting of the Western Highlands with a *dramatis personae* list full of condescending English house guests. The humour is forced, the open air performance of Euripides's *The Bacchanals* a contrived ending which is neither fantasy nor acceptable naturalism. Here Linklater seems to hover between his northern and southern worlds uncomfortably, at home in neither. This choice of reprint illustrates exactly what I feel to be wayward and wilful in the present reprint scene.

Is it still necessary to convince many people that James Kennaway was a great writer, cut off in his prime? Let doubters return to his great Scottish tragedy of middle-class hypocrisy and personal betrayal, *Household Ghosts*, where the deceits of two lovers ruin two other lives. Kennaway has few rivals in finding a unique shorthand of terse dialogue, understated passion, in his all-too-few novels. This story of predestined family disaster is his greatest and most explicitly

Scottish story--and strips the middle classes of rural Scotland pretty bare. In *Some Gorgeous Accident* he remains with the theme of triangular love and betrayal, setting his story of journalist "devil-figure" Link and his curious two loves, for Dr. Fiddes and a beautiful fashion writer, in sophisticated London. Here is throwaway dialogue, but with never a word wasted; a sort of closed circle of hell, with all three, two men and a girl, doomed to be "linked" in a macabre dance. Despite the London setting, the vision behind (as in so much of Muriel Spark's work) is recognizably Scottish. *The Bells of Shoreditch* (1963), a novel midway in Kennaway's all too short career, shows him at the height of his powers in a typical story of triangular deceit. Kennaway's uncanny ability to present dialogue which stands as the tip of the iceberg of what is unwritten and unrevealed is seen at its most sophisticated here. His hard grasp of city malpractices emerges in this tale of high financial skulduggery, and his grasp of how low and devious ordinary people can become when their identity and their sexual territory is invaded. And as a bonus, Trevor Royle has done a lovely job of rescuing two long-short Kennaway stories, *The Dollar Bottom* and *Taylor's Finest Hour*. These are in delightful vein, of Glenalmond school memories, in the fabulous contrivings of the schoolboy genius of insurance and sexual advice, Taylor II. This is a lighter Kennaway, creating a pair of fairy-tales which don't pretend to more than charm, but which, put together with Mainstream's other fine re-publications, does Scottish and British literature a service. To make the record complete, can we have a reprint of Kennaway's first--and by no means poor--thriller of mental conditioning for dark purposes, *The Mind Benders*?

Nigel Tranter's epic Master of Gray trilogy is about the most remarkable Scottish adventure of the time of Mary Queen of Scots, a man with a finger in every diplomatic pie. First published in 1961, Gray is a vigorous, robust hero whose literary descendants surely include Dorothy Dunnet's Francis Lymond.

Finally, three important fiction reprints from Margaret Thomson Davis, the parts of the *Breadmakers* trilogy of 1972. I have to confess to having wrongly judged the Davis Trilogy on the basis of my reading of her historical novels, which I did not like; in its time I passed it by, and I'm sorry. For, after an initial response to *The Breadmakers'* early chapters where I couldn't see any plot or point, I found myself warming increasingly to what I felt was beginning to emerge more and more clearly--a vision of pre- and post- 1940-45 Glasgow full of love, despair, anger and humour. The random plot, the sud-

den deaths, the apparently unrelated episodes of violence and lust and generosity, all suddenly gelled, fitted together to present me with a collage which was, convincingly, Glasgow. The rather feckless Govan bakers and their trollopy or feeble women suddenly rang true, looked right; the confusion, the mindless passions, the tiredness of women who didn't fight back, the petty snobbery--and a lot of the detail, like the baker on the Charles Atlas course of Dynamic Tension, or the town parades, or the street descriptions--brought home her point. Davis sees the energy, the humour, the cruelty but--unlike, say, Nan Webster or John Quigley or Jessica Stirling--she doesn't try to falsify it in terms of her heroes' heroines' lives. Very little does work out for any of them--marriages lumber from crisis to crisis, yet women stay with "their man," despite beatings, arrogance, despair. No one in the novel finds happiness through war-time life--unemployment and self-deception ruin several lives--yet somehow one feels the warmth of Glasgow come through, not as cliché, but despite the tragedy. It's a much finer achievement than I'd thought it on first reading.

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