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Alistair M. McCleery

The Sources of *The Silver Darlings*



The Silver Darlings (1941) and *Highland River* (1937), of all Neil Gunn's works, most attract the praise of the general reader and the analysis of critics. *Highland River* was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for 1937 on the recommendation of J. Dover Wilson and is still in print today in a paperback edition, a token of its popularity. The roots of its success are not difficult to find. It is a sensitively-written account, without sentiment, of a boy growing up and his initiation into manhood. Although the novel is set against the particular background of Caithness and at a particular time, the period roughly 1890 to the First World War and after, its theme, of a lost vision which must be recaptured to form the whole man, is universal in its appeal and application.

The Silver Darlings, too, is popular. It is the only title retained by Faber and Faber who originally published all of Gunn's work except his first novel. Critics, in particular Douglas Gifford and Alexander Scott,¹ have seen it as Gunn's greatest achievement. The purpose of this article is not, however, to follow in their footsteps by attempting a critical discussion of the

novel itself, but to trace and detail the sources of the various strands of the novel that make it so successful and satisfying, both to the general reader and to the literary specialist. Not that this is an essay in reductionism. No account of the components of *The Silver Darlings* could ever explain away the vitality and life of a novel that is the transformation of those components by a man who is Scotland's greatest novelist since Scott. The whole is much greater than the sum of the parts in the case of *The Silver Darlings*, and examination of those parts can only help understanding of the novel's strength and success, of how Gunn made it so effective.

The Silver Darlings shares with *Highland River* the unfolding of a boy's life as he passes into manhood, and the maturity that in both novels manhood implies, but *The Silver Darlings* presents a fuller, more realized picture of the particular social and historical setting for that passage. In *Highland River* the boy is the center of attraction; he does not share that focus with the community in which he lives. *The Silver Darlings* also contains more of what Gunn once called "aids to grip"² than does *Highland River*. *The Silver Darlings* is more of an adventure story, more compulsive narrative, but it combines these elements of adventure and of realistic description with the levels of symbolism and myth readers find also in *Highland River*.

The chief elements then of *The Silver Darlings*—youth, adventure, history, myth—can be related to the four main sources of the novel. The first is Gunn's own experiences, both the events of his own childhood and, more particularly, the sailing trips which led also to the writing of *Off in a Boat* (1938) and of some of *Highland Pack* (1949). Secondly, the narratives which Gunn heard in childhood contributed, by his own admission, to the making of *The Silver Darlings*: "Snatches of such fights (against the sea) the boy heard now and then when on a winter's night a half-circle of men hemmed in the kitchen fire, smoking their pipes, at ease, their weathered faces lit by their eyes and the oil lamp and the lazily flapping peat flames, telling stories of one land or another."³ Gunn also undertook extensive research into the growth of the Scottish herring fishing industry and was aided in this by the expertise of his friend Peter Anson.⁴ Finally, echoes of Celtic folklore are used to give the story in the novel a greater resonance, to emphasize, paradoxically, both its universality and its particularity.

Neil Gunn wrote of his childhood in *The Atom of Delight*: "If his mother was the earth, his father was the sea. In fact he could hardly think of his father without thinking of the sea. Out of the sea came the livelihood of the household. They depended on the sea, and of all the elements in nature it was the least dependable" (p. 101). Many of his earliest writings reflect that relationship. *Morning Tide*, his first successful novel, grew out of a short story, "The Sea," collected in *Hidden Doors* (1929). It portrays the anxious fears of a young boy on shore as his father, skipper of a fishing-boat, battles against a storm to reach land. In the chapter of *The Silver Darlings* titled "The Wreck," a Dunster boat is caught by a storm before it reaches shore and is dashed on the rocks. It is a turning-point in the novel: the attempt to rescue the crew brings together Finn and Roddie in a new and equal bond of friendship. It is significant that Gunn feels a need in narrating this episode for a boy's perspective and, as Finn has grown up, he has to introduce another boy, just for this scene. "A little boy, whose parents had deserted him, stood behind a turf wall, and wondered if the folk yonder were making a new market-fair."⁵ Gunn has written elsewhere of his own view of the heroism of the men of his father's generation being trained through the eyes of a boy.⁶ Whether the experiences described in "The Sea" are first-hand, or grew out of the common store of emotions shared by a fishing community, is perhaps impossible to state—but they are described with an authentic intensity which makes them seem more than just the product of a fertile and sympathetic imagination. The novels written before *Morning Tide*—published and unpublished—do not contain this intensity of "felt experience" but are more distanced portrayals of the decline and loss of vitality of the Highlands.

Gunn added to his first-hand experience of the sea and the Scottish coast when, in 1937, he gave up his post with the Customs and Excise service to become a full-time writer. His initial act, as part of this fresh beginning, was to buy a boat and set off on a cruise, with his wife, around the West Coast and the Islands. His "adventures" on that trip formed the basis of *Off in a Boat*. They were also the germ, as F.R. Hart notes,⁷ of the western parts of *The Silver Darlings*. Perhaps of greater significance for the writing of that novel, however, was a later journey Gunn made to the Flannan Isles for the rounding up of the sheep that are left to graze there. Three articles describing

this journey were published in *Chambers Journal* and were later incorporated, as its closing sections, into *Highland Pack*. The description of the cliff which must be climbed to reach the sheep was to be transformed into one of the central episodes of *The Silver Darlings*, "Storm and Precipice," chapter 15 of the novel. This chapter is generally accounted one of Gunn's most effective pieces of prose-writing and was chosen by Gunn himself as the title extract in his later collection of prose, *Storm and Precipice* (1942).

As the incident is described in *Highland Pack*, it is part of a journey the narrator, Gunn, makes from Bernera to the Flannan Isles. It is told in the first person and the context is firmly that of a real-life experience. As well as being an interesting occurrence in its own right, the climbing of the cliff contributes to the picture of the Gael as resourceful, tenacious and poor which Gunn has been concerned to draw in all three of his articles. It is a dramatic illustration of the arduous and adventurous way of life in the Islands and has a propaganda and an entertainment value. The four younger members of the boat's crew—anonymous or known by their forenames alone—leap from the stern onto the rocks, then begin to climb the cliff-face of the second island they have visited. Gunn expresses his incredulity at the climb and the precarious holds they manage to find.

The rock above them was a sheer black wall, but a narrow ledge, sloping to the sea, ran to their left and gave on to a miniature funnel. One after another, without any hesitation, they went nimbly along the dangerous ledge and climbed up the funnel—and thus in a few minutes the worst of it was over, though we watched them for a long time hauling themselves up over the broken surfaces of above.

But Gunn's sense of disbelief is due as much to the purpose of the climb, to collect the three sheep, as to its difficulty. The passage continues by emphasizing that "here was the other side to that dark picture of the 'dole' and all it was supposed to represent in economic inefficiency and lack of initiative." The motivation behind the recounting of this episode is made even more explicit:

In his blood the true Highlander is still a hunter and a

seaman. Twenty-four hours on end he will stand incredible discomfort and danger if all his energies are employed, if life gets its thrill from continuous movement with a definite object in view. But he has got to live, and if the result of his labours does not amount to the certainty of 'dole' payments that can be got without such labours, naturally, being human, he is inclined to take, like the rest of us, the easiest and safest economic way out (p. 262).

The spirit which informs the description in *Highland Pack* is a political one.

David Lodge, in an examination of the nature of narrative, states that the crucial differences between telling a "true story" and producing a literary fiction are *context* and *motivation*. The context of the episode in *Highland Pack* is clear enough: it is part of a description of an actual journey which Gunn made, and the authenticity of which he guarantees by his own presence. The motivation too is patent: he is both recounting something of interest to his readers but, more importantly, using it as an illustration of this quasi-political point which he also wishes to make. When the same incident is recalled in *The Silver Darlings*, it is with a different context and motivation. David Lodge says, "To turn an anecdote into a literary fiction is axiomatically to deprive it of its original motivation and contextual support, and therefore the author is obliged to supply alternative means of support that will be internal to the text."⁸ So, in *The Silver Darlings*, the novel as a whole provides a context: the episode involves characters whom we know as individuals and it is related with a great deal more detail than its source. As for motivation, "Storm and Precipice" both acts as an "aid to grip," to enhance the compulsion of the narrative, and also adds to the development of characters and themes within the novel.

The skipper of the boat from Bernera had told Gunn of a fierce storm which he had experienced in the shelter of the Flannan Isles and which had forced him to put to sea to risk the storm rather than the rocks and cliffs. The storm is the starting point of "Storm and Precipice." It highlights Roddie's mastery over the sea—an implied contrast to Tormad's failure at the beginning of the novel—and, during it, Finn experiences the "exaltation" of being a member of a companionship in adversity. The other members of the crew exhibit their individuality in

their reactions to the crisis—Henry, calm and calculating, Callum, retaining his sense of humour and joviality, Rob, the Job's comforter. Where the crew of the "Rhoda" in *Highland Pack* had seen a French smack illegally fishing for lobster, the crew of the "Seafoam" in *The Silver Darlings* meet a smack from Lerwick. It gives the "Seafoam" an idea of its position—adding detail to the context to make the fiction more realistic—but its appearance also reminds Finn of the tall ship which had taken his father, Tormad, away. This echo underlines the contrast between the failure of Tormad and the success of Roddie and Finn. It illustrates Lodge's point that "literary discourse is characterised by symmetry, parallelism, repetition of every kind and on every level" (p. 55).

If the storm brings out the sense of community felt by the crew, arrival at the Flannan Isles gives Finn the opportunity for individual endeavour. His plan to climb the cliffs in a search for something to drink is resisted by Roddie. Roddie is concerned both for his responsibility for Finn to Catrine and for his own position which might be undermined by Finn's show of skill and courage on land. For Finn, there is "an animosity against Roddie," a challenge and a "triumph of enmity," in his offer; the challenge of the youth becoming man to the surrogate father. The description of the maneuvers needed to bring the boat into the cliff-face (Roddie's skill at sea) and of Finn's actual climb are more detailed than the original episode in *Highland Pack*. The narrative is more exciting, more suspenseful: our attention is focussed on the difficulties of Finn's climb.

All at once, as he looked up, his vision darkened and his heart began beating at a tremendous rate. He had lived and moved these last seconds beyond his exhausted strength. His skin went cold all over and his flesh started to quiver and tremble in a sickening manner. He lay against the rock, face in, until the silent buzz of the darkness in his head began to subside and his vision to clear. The whistling of his breath made his mouth so much dryer than it was that, when he closed it, it stuck, and came apart again painfully (p. 315).

The writing is more expressive, more urgent and intense.

When Finn reaches the top of the cliff, he is "like an

immortal youth" (p. 316). The simile opens the whole range of heroic comparisons contained in the name "Finn" and sustained throughout the novel. It integrates the individual episode of Finn's climb into the succession of episodes that make up his movement into manhood. His discovery of a small, stone house where "there was a damp smell of the earth or of something very ancient" and where "Finn felt that he was not alone" (p. 317) anticipates the final scene of the novel where, in the House of Peace, "Life had come for him" (p. 584). That Life had not come for him yet on top of the island is demonstrated by his boyish behavior in capturing the sheep and "the red worm of hate" he still feels towards Roddie. This soon disappears, however, when the crew put out to sea and regain their sense of community under Roddie's command. The chapter closes on that note. From an incident within his own experience, Gunn has created an episode, self-sufficient enough to be extracted from the novel for an anthology, but, in the context of the novel, a necessary part of the development of both characters and themes.

The Silver Darlings is dedicated: "To the memory of my father." But Gunn was relying in writing the novel upon not only tales of his father and his father's generation but also stories belonging to the community's past.

Often these stories were of earlier years, of memorable storms, of landfalls and ghostly adventures (that might explode in laughter), of skippers who were 'no more' and had had the extra seamanship which connoisseurs will salute to the end. Time or age was needed to mature a story, to give it the tone of voice that went into the past. Recent happenings were conversational (*Atom of Delight*, p. 101).

It is difficult to isolate these stories from the general narrative of the novel but it is possible in two cases. Firstly the story of the "Seafoam" losing its way that is the catalyst for the "Storm and Precipice" chapter discussed above was told to Gunn by "an old seaman."⁹ But there is no detailed record of this original story with which we can compare the version in *The Silver Darlings*, as there is in the second instance. In 1937 Neil Gunn published a short story called "The Boat" in *The Scots Magazine*: it was subtitled "the story of a true happening."¹⁰ This short story is

the basis of the early episode in *The Silver Darlings* which describes the first, and last, attempt by Tormad and his friends to take a boat fishing and which ends with their capture by the pressgang. The period of both short story and novel is the immediate post-Clearance, around 1817, when "at least there was no landlord or bailiff or other human enemy to interfere with them on the sea" (p. 187)—an ironic statement in the short story which is repeated in different terms, with a different emphasis, in the novel. If a "true happening" then, it is a tale which Gunn had heard after its transmission through three generations.

"Storm and Precipice" demonstrated Gunn's transformation of personal experience into highly-wrought fiction; in what follows we see two literary versions of the same story. There are a great many verbal parallels between short story and novel which seem to prove conclusively that when Gunn came to write the first chapter of *The Silver Darlings* ("The Derelict Boat"), he did so with a copy of "The Boat" in front of him. But, as with the Flannan Isles episode, it is the transformations Gunn made of his basic material that give us an insight into the vitality and strengths of *The Silver Darlings*. "The Boat," as would be expected of a short story, is self-contained: it has a prologue setting the scene for the first expedition of the displaced crofters to catch fish, and it ends in a cinematic shot of the frigate sailing south-wards in the dawn. The chapter of the novel introduces background information in the course of its fifth and sixth pages and its opening is devoted to the relationship between Catrine and Tormad, and, particularly important to the development of the novel, to Catrine's fear and hatred of the sea. The close of the chapter stays with the "little cabins" set below the hills of Kildonan as it is here that the action of the novel will continue and here that the central character, Catrine, lives on. A wife appears briefly in the short story, but she is excited by this first fishing trip: ". . . his young wife's cheeks were whipped with colour and her eyes very bright" (p. 186). She is part of the youthful optimism represented by the crew and the only note of discord comes from the "half-keen" of an old woman. Catrine, in the novel, possesses greater insight.

The mood of "The Boat" passes from this early optimism to a sad irony. The change is marked by a passage, not carried over to the novel, in which the greenhorn sailors smell something on the wind.

It was a dank, sooty smell, faint, evasive, but quite unmistakable. At the mouth of the strath itself, they would hardly get it, but here away from the usual land and animal smells, the air they breathed was very clean. The recent rains must have turned the old blackened homesteads into sodden heaps, and now the winds as they eddied down the glens and joined forces on the sea, brought the sodden smell in occasional whiffs (p. 190).

This is Gunn propagating the established "Gloomy Memories" picture of the Clearances, a picture that was nurtured in the turn-of-the-century Celtic Twilight pangs of doom, a *soi-disant* "Faithful picture of the Extirpation of the Celtic Race."¹¹

Broken by their chief; man, woman, and child driven from the glens their forbears had held since the dawn of time. And to that bitter defeat—now this growing sense of defeat by the sea. They had sold good cattle to get this boat and gear. They had set out from the Ullie shore as the hope of the disinherited—to come upon this heaving immensity, barren, treacherous, and deep as death ("The Boat," pp. 190-191).

The culminating irony which erases all "the hope of the disinherited" comes at the close of the short story when, having had a full catch of herring, and on their way home, the crew are captured by the press-gang. The indifference of the English to the fate of the Gael is typified by the comments of one of the gang: "Them's the blokes wot've been turned out of their homes by sheep! . . . Just shows you wot bloody yarns they spin us" (p. 194). This, too, is absent from the novel.

In *The Silver Darlings*, the omissions mentioned above demonstrate Gunn's fresh view of the Clearances. While he does not try to mitigate the initial effects of the eviction, he is more positive both about the future of the people and the role of the landlord. The latter had begun to build a harbor at the river's mouth and had advanced money to finance the building of curing-sheds. "The people would yet live, the people themselves, for no landlord owned the sea, and what the people caught there would be their own . . . For the Moray Firth it was the

beginning of the herring fisheries, of a busy, fabulous time among the common people of that weathered northern land" (pp. 13-4). This is to be the subject-matter of his novel, that "busy, fabulous time," and, while Gunn must show how it grew out of terror and misery, he does not want to detract from the success he will write about later in the novel. Just as he changed the Flannan Isles episode from a defense of the Gael into a celebration of Finn's youth, so too the dashed hopes of "The Boat" become the successful Messianic hopes placed on Roddie and Finn. The chapter in *The Silver Darlings* also contains other connections with the main narrative. The crew are described as touching the boat "as if it were a strange horse" (p. 15) and this simile anticipates Catrine's dream later in the novel. It is absent in the short story. The chapter is vital, too, to the plot-mechanics of the novel: it is not simply a prologue. Tormad's loss leads to Catrine's departure from the Dale and the uncertainty of his fate comes as a barrier, for some time, between Roddie and her. In recasting the first chapter of *The Silver Darlings* from the short story, Gunn has made it an essential, integral part of the novel.

Neil Gunn himself explained, in an introduction to a dramatized version of *The Silver Darlings*, part of the provenance of his novel:

It was stories of this kind that set me researching into the beginnings of the herring fishing industry in the early years of the last century, and I had not gone far before I discovered what must have been the nearest thing to a Klondyke gold rush ever experienced on Highland shores. Behind it, the Sutherland Clearances, with the disinherited being driven to the sea. Contrasts seemed fabulous wherever I turned. And certainly the air of the fabulous was not diminished as I realised that what became so vast an enterprise was started off by a Government bounty of four shillings on a shore-cured barrel of herring. No wonder if humour in a fond moment called the fish 'the silver darlings.'¹²

Anecdote was not enough. Gunn needed facts but he was writing about a period in Highland history which, although consecutive to the Clearances, was much less well-documented

than the latter. He may have begun his research, as F.R. Hart notes (p. 47), with Anson's *Fishing Boats and Fisherfolk on the East Coast of Scotland*, but he ended by delving into a range of little-known sources. A bibliography of these appears among Gunn's papers deposited in the National Library of Scotland¹³ and a list is appended to this article. Gunn would have found Anson's book light on detailed information about the herring boom. For example, it states of Dunbeath (the fictional Dunster) merely that "in 1894 there were 103 boats . . . during the herring season, and over 320 men and boys. Five years later eight curers had yards at Dunbeath, and eighty-nine boats were owned locally by 350 fishermem of the district . . ." (p. 249). The book does contain some more general information on fishing, such as the saying and touching of "cold iron" when certain taboo words were spoken, but, considering his own fishing background, Gunn would have known this anyway. Anson may have sparked off Gunn's initial interest, but the details he needed to make the background to his novel more authentic he traced elsewhere.

The fullest discussions of the herring fishery in *The Silver Darlings* are to be found in Chapter IV, "The First Hunt for the Silver Darlings," and Chapter XVII, "Drink and Religion"—particularly the conversation between the three curers. Into these discussions Gunn has assimilated the detailed knowledge gained from his researches. Some of the material describing the beginnings of the East Coast boom in herring fishing, the theme of Chapter IV, he gathered from John Mitchell.¹⁴ Here are to be found details of the 1815 Act which increased the bounty per barrel from 2s to 4s and which inspired Special Hendry to invest in the fishery. A more important source, however, for Gunn was James Thomson's 1849 book. It supplied the information necessary for the discussion in Chapter XVII on the future of herring fishing and the availability of export markets. Thomson describes in detail the effects of the Act of Slave Emancipation of 1833 which led to the loss of an export market of some 60,000 barrels. The newly-freed slaves in the West Indies preferred to spend their earnings on English hams, rather than Scottish herring.¹⁵ This loss of the West Indian market prompts Bain, one of the three Stornoway curers in *The Silver Darlings* discussion to press on his colleagues the need to develop other markets. Russia is virtually closed, his opponent in the argument claims, because "the Russians let the Norwegian herrings in at a tax of

one-and-sixpence on a barrel while they charge us over four shillings" (p. 353). This detail, too, Gunn garnered from his reading of Thomson. "The duty on Scotch herrings per barrel is, seemingly, one ruble [sic] and thirty copecs, equal to about 4s 2d sterling; whilst the duty of Norwegian, to the best knowledge to be arrived at is, per barrel, thirty-five copecs, or 1s 6d sterling" (p. 148). The conversation in the novel continues with Bain appealing to his colleagues for a closed season to enable better exploitation of the German market, for the early fish exported to Germany at the moment is like "unripe trash wi' a taste like stale loaf-bread." This section of the chapter ends with Bain advocating to the other curers that "this fishing shouldna start until the beginning o' June" (p. 354).

Gunn has taken Bain's argument from Thomson who wrote:

Not only the boats belonging to the island [Lewis] seek after the prize in the beginning of May, but fisherman from the Moray Frith [sic] set out annually on a Stornoway expedition. The end in view may in this case be said to be defeated by the means. The result in view is an extravagant value in the Baltic. But, as an unripe pear has no sweetness, so a May-caught herring has neither taste nor flavour. Real interest is sacrificed at the shrine of impatient cupidity" (pp. 169-70).

Thomson calls for a closed season in herring fishing to begin on June 1st. "The German consumption will assume a healthy tone from the commencement . . ." (p. 170). Gunn has taken Thomson's polemic whole and put it into the mouth of Bain whom, as readers, we have come to trust in preference to his opponent, Maciver, because that is the choice which Roddie has already made between the two men. In other words, Gunn accepts Thomson's argument and leads his reader to accept it too.

If, in using his sources in this way, Gunn allows his characters to express "feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done,"¹⁶ then it is because he is, in Lukács's term, a "critical realist," like Scott, depicting social transformations through "typical individuals." Unlike Flaubert in *Salammbô*, Lukács's other key exemplar, he does not use the results of his researches to write a historic costume-drama. He

does not simply use historic detail; he is writing a folk history. He is concerned not simply to add local color to his story, but to portray "the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals" (p. 43). Not that a penetrating sense of history guarantees the quality of a novel as a work of fiction. But Gunn is not preoccupied by history alone: his novel can reward the search for what George Steiner calls "a powerful imaginative construction."¹⁷ Although Finn may embody the history of the community he springs from and its successful transition from agriculture to fishing, he is not a blank, neutral figure at the centre of the novel as Edward Waverley is. When Gunn came to write *The Silver Darlings*, he did not keep the historical and the individual characterization in separate compartments of his imagination.

While this is true of the novel as a whole, there are a few instances where Gunn *is* guilty of an antiquarian accumulation of facts. For example, he uses Thomson in at least one other respect in the novel. In the final chapter, Finn has bought a new boat. It is referred to as "South-built," a term which Gunn does not explain, but he had perhaps found it in Thomson who describes all Scottish fishing boats as being either "south-built" or "west-built." The further description of the "Gannet" as having a "30 feet keel, 34 feet 6 inches overall, and open from stem to stern" (p. 571) Gunn found in Holdsworth who states, in 1874, "ten years ago the large-class boats at Wick were about 15 tons, 30 feet keel, 34 feet 6 inches overall . . . they were, we believe, entirely open boats." Holdsworth's commentary on East Coast fishing boats continues: "Since that time there has been a great change for the better; the boats on this part of the coast have been built with 10 or 12 feet more keel."¹⁸ Having incorporated the initial piece of information into his narrative, Gunn cannot resist using this second fact as well and it betrays him into an artistic flaw. He is led, during his description of Finn's new boat, to anticipate Finn's future career: "He was yet to own a boat of over forty feet, all decked . . ." (p. 571). This knowing remark of omniscient narrator to conspiratorial reader strikes a false note in the novel at this point.

The majority of correspondences between source and fiction which I have been able to trace demonstrate Gunn's skill in incorporating into the novel the precise detail needed to

authenticate his tale as historically accurate. Indeed, they do more than this: they demonstrate his creative awareness of the historical process that leads the crofters of Sutherland to become the fishermen of Caithness. He portrays this social transformation with the same insight as Scott.

Perhaps the most quoted statement about Neil Gunn's work has been Kurt Wittig's comment that "he is not interested in chance happenings; he is looking for the pattern of life, the underlying ritual, the myth."¹⁹ The story told in *The Silver Darlings* is not just, as has often been pointed out, that of a particular boy passing from youth to manhood, nor even just that of the experience of a particular people at a particular time embodied in that one boy. Finn's rite of passage and the skill of the fishermen when faced with the hostile elements of storm and sea, are universal experiences which find an echo in all cultures, at all times. But there are also aspects of the novel which are more precisely archetypal. Gunn was interested in the theories of Jung for the same reason that he later became engrossed in Zen Buddhism, that is, because they seemed to correspond to his own thinking and experience.²⁰ The fact that Gunn was a conscious, deliberate manipulator of his material, taken with his knowledge of these theories of the collective unconscious and the archetypal image, prevents any attempt to see Jungian influence in his work from becoming the partisan in search of the pre-conceived. We can safely tread a path between the excess of enthusiasm for archetype-hunting shown, for example, by Maud Bodkin and the outright dismissal of Jungian psychology and "the dangerously occult idea of the collective unconscious, of a racial memory" by such as René Wellek.²¹

We have already seen Finn compared to the Finn of legend, "an immortal youth." Gunn's use of Celtic myth is analogical. Finn is no avatar, nor the imitation of any legendary prototype,²² but the allusions to Finn of legend are used as a commentary upon Finn of Dunster and his role in the novel. They are not an attempt to create an automatic depth of meaning but act as a challenge to the reader to see the relationship between modern tale and mythological story. This mythological story of Finn, the Fair One, does not provide a structure for *The Silver Darlings* nor are the parallels extended. (On the other hand, Gunn can use Celtic myth as the more complete background for a novel, as is evidenced by *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*.) Its analogical

use in *The Silver Darlings* is possible because Gunn regards myth as concerned with human nature, as offering insights into human nature. This is the primary lesson gained from Jung. The collective unconscious is that part of the mind which retains and transmits the past experience of the human species. Its existence is manifested in the recurrence of archetypal images. The parallels between ancient myths and modern stories are not then coincidental, but are examples, as Bodkin says, of "themes having a particular form or pattern which points, amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to, a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the minds of those who are stirred by them."²³

Northrop Frye defines "archetype" more narrowly as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole."²⁴ But it is wrong to hypostatize a general archetype by referring to a particular myth; Finn, son of Catrine, is not based on the Finn of legend, but both are reflections of a universal phenomenon. (It is the attempt to see the universality of that phenomenon that leads to the charge of cultural atavism being levelled against Gunn, of appealing to a collective unconscious rather than to reason.) Judith Hubback claims that archetypes "are really conceptual models which account for the apparent universality and continual recurrence of certain typical life-experiences and our images of them."²⁵ Both Finns are young men of courage, daring, skill, possessing qualities of leadership. The Finn of legend eats Fintan, the salmon of knowledge, who lives in a pool of the River Boyne under boughs of hazel from which drop the Nuts of Knowledge onto the stream. Finn captures the salmon and fulfills the prophecy that whoever ate him would enjoy all the wisdom of the ages.²⁶ Finn, of *The Silver Darlings*, achieves a maturity, both in his own personality and through taking his role in the community, after a series of testing experiences, including the precipice climb and the rescue discussed above, but the most important of which is his acceptance of the relationship between Roddie and Catrine as he moves away from his mother to find a wife of his own. This is his attainment of wisdom. It is not helpful, however, to seek other, more detailed parallels. While it is true that the Finn of legend is brought up by his mother, after his father's death, until he is ready to take over his father's former position, any attempt

to see the story of Finn further underpinning the novel inevitably breaks down. It is on a more general level that the correspondence between the two Finns exists.

The qualities which mark out Catrine are wisdom and insight characteristic of the old women found in some of Gunn's other novels. We have already seen this old woman appearing in "The Boat." In the novel, it is Catrine who anticipates disaster for the fishing. She is loving mother to Finn, and then loving wife to Roddie. Roddie possesses skill, strength and enterprise, but he also has a darker, more aggressive aspect which is seen during the stay in Stornoway when he is involved in a brawl. Catrine is the *anima*, like the land, stable, fertile, and Roddie is the *animus*, like the sea, changeable, powerful. The question at issue is which of these Finn will follow. Catrine attempts to repress Finn's *animus*, and to tie him to the land and to herself. Finn's natural inclination, as a man, is to the sea, and to Roddie. His establishment of the *animus* as the dominant element is the proper process of life enacted in every generation. It leads to a well-integrated individual but also to a healthy, dynamic culture in which the *anima* and *animus* have found a balance.

So the allusions to Celtic myth may underline the regional basis of the novel but, more importantly, they highlight the archetypal nature of the experiences described. In *The Atom of Delight* Gunn wrote:

The only way I know of testing whether an intimate memorable experience can be communicated to others is by finding out whether others have had an experience of a sufficiently comparable kind All literature, it seems to me, consists precisely in a communication that touches off an innate capacity for its acceptance and so induces an immediate response (p. 75).

The strong, particular background of *The Silver Darlings* gives access to elements common to all human experience. This is perhaps the final key to the novel's success. It is an affirmative work in which, according to Donald Campbell, "Gunn sees hope and applauds the human spirit."²⁷ The youth passes from the innocence of childhood to the maturity of manhood; the community passes from the wasteland to the sea-harvest. The image of the circle, the cycle of renewal and regeneration, runs

throughout the novel from the birth of Finn and the death of Kirsty's father to the final chapter "Finn in the Heart of the Circle" and the closing sentence, "Life had come for him." In his transformations of the climb of the precipice, and of the stories of the community, in his use of historical material, Gunn has been concerned always to accentuate this sense of the positive. In this attitude to life lies the true source of *The Silver Darlings*, and, in this, according to Virginia Woolf, lies the mark of the authentic masterpiece: "the single vision . . . the immense persuasiveness of a mind that has completely mastered its perspective."²⁸

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APPENDIX

The following bibliography appears in Notebook 4, Box 1, of the papers of Neil M. Gunn, Deposit 209 in the National Library of Scotland. It is reproduced here without amendment.

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¹D. Gifford, "Neil M. Gunn's Fiction of Delight," *Scottish International Review*, 5 (May 1972), 25-7; Alexander Scott, "Folk Epic: *The Silver Darlings*," in A. Scott and D. Gifford (eds), *Neil M. Gunn: The Man and the Writer* (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 123-40.

²"Melodrama, plot, murder, death, sex-appeal, or any of the usual aids to 'grip'. . ." Gunn to George Malcolm Thomson, May 4, 1930, in the papers of Neil Gunn, Deposit 209 of the National Library of Scotland.

³Neil M. Gunn, *The Atom of Delight* (London, 1956), p. 101.

⁴Peter Anson, *Fishing Boats and Fisher Folk of the East Coast of Scotland* (London, 1930).

⁵Neil M. Gunn, *The Silver Darlings* (London, 1941), p. 517. The paperback edition (London, 1969) follows the same pagination.

⁶"For I could still see them clearly through a boy's vision. Men with beards, with steady eyes and quiet manners, and an air of competence and strength . . . there was that clear memory of self-reliance, of the grown man standing responsibly on his own feet, with power in his hands." Neil M. Gunn, *Highland Pack* (London, 1949), p. 246.

⁷Francis Hart, "Neil M. Gunn: A Brief Memoir," in Scott and Gifford, p. 44.

⁸David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism* (London, 1981), pp. 48-9.

⁹Neil M. Gunn and Maurice Lindsay, "Conversations with a Novelist," *The Scottish Field*, (May 1961), p. 38.

¹⁰Neil M. Gunn, "The Boat," *The Scots Magazine*, Vol 28 (1937-8), pp. 186-94.

¹¹Donald Macleod, *Gloomy Memories in the Highlands of Scotland . . . or a faithful picture of the Extirpation of the Celtic Race* (Glasgow, 1892). The first edition was in 1841 but the 1892 re-printing was the more widely circulated.

¹²*Radio Times*, (August 30, 1962), p. 18.

¹³Deposit 209, Box 1, National Library of Scotland. My thanks are due to the executors of the Gunn estate for permission to consult these papers and to the staff of the NLS for their kindness and assistance.

¹⁴John M. Mitchell, *The Herring, its Natural History and National Importance* (Edinburgh, 1864).

¹⁵James Thomson, *The Value and Importance of the Scottish Fisheries* (London, 1849), pp. 135-6.

¹⁶Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London, 1962), p. 63.

¹⁷George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London, 1967), p. 363.

¹⁸E.W.H. Holdsworth, *Deep-Sea Fishing and Fishing Boats* (London, 1874), pp. 291-2.

¹⁹Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 336.

²⁰See, for example, the series of essays by Gunn which appeared in the *Saltire Review* vol. 5, Nos. 15 and 16 (1958) and Vol. 6, No. 18 (1959).

²¹René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, 1963), p. 335.

²²Pace Alexander Scott, in Scott and Gifford, p. 137.

²³Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (Oxford, 1950), p.

²⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 365.

²⁵Judith Hubback, "Transcending Jung," *The Listener*, (Nov. 24, 1977), p. 695.

²⁶The story is told in Chapter 1 of *Young Art and Old Hector* (London, 1942). Gunn found it, as he did many other Celtic legends, in T.W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (London, 1911).

²⁷Donald Campbell, "True Imagination: *The Silver Darlings*," in Scott and Gifford, p. 155.

²⁸Virginia Woolf, "The Novels of E.M. Forster," *Collected Essays*, Vol. I, (London, 1966), 345.