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Ian Campbell

A Tribute that Never Was:
The Plan for
A Lewis Grassic Gibbon *Festschrift*



Hugh MacDiarmid received two telegrams on 8 February 1935, both with the same very bad news: Leslie Mitchell had died in London of peritonitis. One telegram came from Mrs. Mitchell in Welwyn Garden City, the other from their staunch mutual friend Helen Cruickshank in Edinburgh. In James Leslie Mitchell, better known under his pseudonym of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Scotland had lost one of its foremost men of letters, as author of *Sunset Song* one of its most popular writers of the century. The joint propulsion given to the renaissance of Scottish writing by the pseudonymous friendship of MacDiarmid and Gibbon would now have to come more singly from MacDiarmid, himself in 1935 at a low point in his own personal fortunes.¹

The loss of Lewis Grassic Gibbon was terrible news, all the worse for being unexpected. Gibbon's letters² had complained increasingly throughout 1934 of ill-health and listlessness, falling behind in his own extraordinary productive work-schedule, lack of ability to write with his usual fluency. But he had presented it as, indeed apparently believed it to be, a result of overwork,

and with the spring of 1935 held out the promise of a return to full normal, as witness the dreadful schedule of books to be completed from his ready pen. *Sunset Song* above all, and to a lesser extent the other parts of *A Scots Quair* had impelled him to public notice, but many also recognised the value of his anthropological work (*Nine against the Unknown The Conquest of the Maya*) and his historical fiction, particularly the successful and well-reviewed *Spartacus*. His science fiction (*Three Go Back, Gay Hunter*) had its discerning public which included H.G. Wells, and one of his last achievements was to publish a biting satiric survey of the *Scottish Scene* co-authored with Hugh MacDiarmid, but written in complete independence and then amalgamated from two often gloriously contradictory halves.³

So Scottish literature lost several things with his death: it lost a major novelist, a front-rank observer of the Scottish scene whose observations contained a valuable detachment and internationalist viewpoint, and it lost a powerful satirist.

I am so horrified by all our dirty little cruelties and bestialities that I would feel the lowest type of skunk if I didn't shout the horror of them from the house-tops. Of course I shout too loudly. But the filthy conspiracy of silence there was in the past!⁴

Shouting too loudly was a deliberate artistic stance. Of course it did not make him universally popular: his topographical references, for instance, were uncomfortably accurate in his Scottish fiction, so much so "that I was forced to insert a few entirely fictitious topographical details—in case some enraged Reisker or other fauna sued me for libel." If the Arbuthnott people from the Reisk were enraged, so too he found were a wider spectrum of Scottish readers.

The amount of stupefied indignation 'Stained Radiance' seems to have raised! . . . My mother is shocked, my sister-in-law is coldly polite, the 'Daily Sketch' has a hysteric fit over my brutality',—and Boots ban the book from their shelves as 'indecent'. Most papers refuse to review it at all, and the booksellers are scared to display it complete with its shocking cover! I stand amazed, but half inclined to write another novel in the same strain.⁵

All this adds to the complication of the picture when Gibbon's death became known. In 1934 he was *avant-garde* a dangerous character and (as the reviews he impishly gathered⁶ and published in *Scottish Scene* make clear) very much *persona non grata* with much of the Scottish literary establishment of his time. Today, with republication of *A Scots Quair* and television serialization of those novels and of the short stories, there is no question of the success of Grassie Gibbon.

The news was bad news for Scotland, then, but only for part of Scotland. *A Scots Quair* had had time only to penetrate part of the reading public of Gibbon's native country, despite a flair for self-publicity which showed itself early and comes more and more out of a reading of the surviving letters. Writing to his early schoolmaster Gibbon mixed cynicism with realism: "so far as my own work is concerned, I am at present attempting to catch the eye of the proletariat, who are unappreciative of style, prefer Edgar Rice Burroughs to Arnold Bennett, and think Ella Wheeler Wilcox a poetess."⁷ The change in his writing towards his death can certainly be interpreted as a shrewd widening of his reading public: as early as 1928 he had held it as an "ancient axiom" that "to obtain notice a young author should diligently shy brickbats at every established contemporary reputation,"⁸ but with some success he became more hardened and more focussed in his commercial attempts. In 1933 he wrote to Helen Cruickshank of the feeling that in *Cloud Howe* he had been "too meek & romantic & afraid of calling a spade a spade. But I'm to remedy those faults in *Grey Granite*."⁹ And the remedy was not schoolboy provocative mudslinging, but complexity of characterization: "I'm afraid Ewan's going to startle & shock quite a lot of people, by being both astoundingly revolutionary & dismayingly old-fashioned."¹⁰ What this mixture of commercialism, self-advertisement and honest approach to art required was the presence of the author, for his personal charms (attested to over and over again by those who wrote about him) and for the sensitiveness to market forces and reviews which he showed in his letters, in the carefully pasted-up cuttings albums he kept, and the stream of exploratory letters to publishers testing out the market with offers, synopses (many survive, tantalizing the reader with work he never finished)¹¹ and hard-nosed attempts to extract advances or better terms. Grassie

Gibbon was a public figure and quite prepared to be one if it helped his commercial life: the *Memoirs of a Materialist* the unfinished autobiography whose typescript synopsis survives tantalizingly in the NLS, includes among its final scenes (for it is cast in the form of a film script) "Shots of a journey to Scotland by automobile" in 1934, and "A distinguished author's reception."¹² We know from the reception he actually had in Arbuthnott, to say nothing of the reviews of the more hostile sections of the Scottish press, what that reception might have been as he wrote of it.¹³

Without the author, the fun was spoiled. The *Voice of Scotland* series which Grassic Gibbon commissioned as general editor for Routledge appeared after Gibbon's death, one volume rather poignantly dedicated to the dead editor:

In Memoriam
J. LESLIE MITCHELL
(Lewis Grassic Gibbon)

Death hath this also: that it openeth the
gate to good fame, and extinguisheth envy.
Bacon¹⁴

Gibbon would have been horrified by this thought in life. The actual letters to Routledge are impudent, openly self-seeking, trying to double his own editorial fee, and slyly dismissive of some of his contemporaries in his summaries to the publisher.¹⁵ The recent publication of MacDiarmid's letters gives a vivid insight into some of the process, and the surviving letters in the NLS give more. The editor at Routledge had been startled by the suggestion that Gibbon receive £200, not £100, and had copied his letter to MacDiarmid with angry comments about "that bloody impossible—Mr Lewis Grassic Gibbons Mitchell. Is he quite compos mentis"? But a month later, "I see that poor old Mitchell died last night."¹⁶ Poor old Mitchell indeed: he would have been much happier mixed in with the abuse, even if he could have seen his old friend MacDiarmid replying to Routledge that £100 was quite enough to offer Gibbon, who was "inclined to think in terms of best seller novels."¹⁷ But then Gibbon himself had been counselling Routledge not to trust MacDiarmid with an advance till the manuscript turned up, so honors were

probably even.¹⁸

The point surely is that Gibbon loved a scrap, especially if it helped his career. With Gibbon dead, that career took a definite downturn, the tentative Hollywood plans quickly dissipated, the publishers quickly letting the books go out of print, the republication schemes dropped, the sales tailing off rapidly to libraries and to individuals. By 1935 *Sunset Song* was being banned (fortunately, briefly) from Aberdeen public library shelves for indecency, and Gibbon's widow had a heartbreaking series of letters to and from publishers which simply attested to waning sales and waning popularity. Some publishers, sadly, pressed for unpaid bills;¹⁹ some quietly forgot advances paid and wrote the matter generously off.²⁰

Friends, however, did not let the matter rest when the author had gone, and the question of a *Festschrift* was a natural suggestion to prolong his reputation, do his sales a bit of good, and make some permanent tribute to an author whose early loss was lamented. Only some of the Renaissance authors in Scotland could be relied on to contribute: the question of how best to approach them, how best to choose an editor and carry through the project was crucial. *Scottish Scene* makes clear Gibbon's hostility to much of contemporary Scottish writing, to narrow nationalism and to the direction of a literary revival which he thought far too historical in its bias, too much (as he confessed to Helen Cruickshank) "blithering about Henryson and the Makars (whoever these cretins were) and forgetting the Glasgow slums."²¹ In Scotland, then, the *Festschrift* editor would have to tread warily. Further afield there might be fewer sensitivities, though in archaeological circles Gibbon had enjoyed a scrap too, and his staunchest ally (Elliott Smith) had first encountered Gibbon through an acrimonious correspondence, only later being won over by the charm of the clever young controversialist.²²

Two personalities dominate the story of the incomplete *Festschrift* project. One is Helen Cruickshank in Edinburgh, fighting always for her friends and for their wellbeing, and fighting for Scotland. She might have been an obvious choice as editor, but the project went instead to John Lindsey,²³ a London friend who knew the Mitchells in Welwyn Garden City and seemed well-placed to get the project off the ground.

Two main collections of papers can be used to piece together the history of the *Festschrift*. One is the collection of Helen

Cruikshank letters in Edinburgh University Library, in MS Gen 1929, letters from Lindsey, from John Gawsworth²⁴ and to and from Ray Mitchell, Gibbon's widow. The other is the relevant part of the Gibbon papers, Lindsey's own papers and (often) his side of the story. From the start, the project showed signs of inner tension. A circular letter to possible contributors began the process of gathering ideas, and Lindsey had this scheme (with suggested article lengths in thousands of words) soon in mind.²⁵

Helen Cruickshank: <i>Ave!</i>	
Alexander Gray: <i>Grassic Gibbon's Schooldays</i>	8000
Stuart Parham: <i>Grassic Gibbon and the Services</i>	5000
Edwin and Willa Muir	4000 ²⁶
Catherine and Donald Carswell	5000
John Lindsey	5000
John Gawsworth	2000
George Malcolm Thomson	4000

LGG's works

Compton Mackenzie	2000
John Lindsey	2000
Helen Cruickshank	4000
H.J. Massingham	5000
Ivor Browne	4000
C.M. Grieve	5000
William Power	2000
Neil Gunn	3000
R.L. Megroz	2000
James Barke	3000
A Business Man	2000
? His Ultimate Place	2000
C.M. Grieve: <i>Vale</i>	

This much we know of the proposed shape of the book; in effect only two parts seem to have been written—Helen Cruickshank's²⁷ article and one by William Power.²⁸

Lindsey had originally proposed a biography of James Leslie Mitchell, writing to MacDiarmid on 31 May 1935, but he seems to have diverted his attentions to the editing of the *Festschrift*.

Shortly he had made this progress:

promises: Alexander Gray
Stuart Parham
Compton Mackenzie
Helen Cruickshank (with completed article)
H.J. Massingham
William Power
Neil Gunn
James Barke

refusals: George Blake
H.G. Wells
Eric Linklater

no reply: Edwin and Willa Muir
The Carswells
George Malcolm Thomson
Ivor Brown
Hugh MacDiarmid
R.L. Megroz

There is something very characteristic about the list. Those who had agreed were often not only friends but those strongly committed through personal feeling (Gray, Barke) or passionate agreement on intellectual or political issues (Massingham, Barke). It was typical of Helen Cruickshank's civil service efficiency (which has made her archive so valuable to scholars now) that she not only agreed, but wrote the article, had it typed (in several copies) and expected the same speed of action in others.

The refusals are sometimes explicable in terms of pressure of business—certainly Wells' secretary gave that reason²⁹—but the reason in Linklater's case was that he thought the memory of Grassic Gibbon would be better served by republication and ready availability of the novels themselves, a not unreasonable view. Not all his advice was so reasonable; he also acted as publisher's reader for the project proposal and rejected it, as Helen Cruickshank recorded on 23 January 1936.³⁰ Earlier it had been rejected by Jarrold, Faber and Heinemann, particularly disappointing in the case of Jarrold who had been Gibbon's publisher in life, and were to remain the publishers of the *Quair*

for more than twenty years after his death.

Most disappointing of all was the "no reply" list. Some are very strange, such as Ivor Brown (a close family friend, who gave practical help to the family in later life and contributed the preface to *A Scots Quair* when it was eventually published in that form)³¹—perhaps he did not like the editor, perhaps the project. MacDiarmid, of course, was very busy and though warmly connected to the Gibbon family had his own literary projects in hand and very possibly felt them press more sharply on his limited time. The Muirs were both working at the time on books commissioned by Gibbon for Routledge—eventually to appear as *Scott and Scotland* and *Mrs Grundy*—so that they should not have felt impelled to answer, nor to write, is strange.

Whatever the reasons behind the patchy response to the invitations, the project ran into more serious difficulties when Lindsey (through ill health and much business) fell behind with the mechanics of writing letters and chasing up contributors, and fell foul also of Helen Cruickshank who had sharply criticized the lack of progress. Lindsey's circular letter to contributors, after all, was dated 31 May 1935 and by 14 October (when Helen Cruickshank wrote to ask why the delay was so long)³² it must have seemed unreasonable to her that other people could not produce work at a time when the author's memory was fading, and the commercial and other justification of the project along with it. The interchange of letters is not complete, but one can piece together much of the story from the surviving correspondence. John Gawsworth sent the folder of documents—letters, her own contribution, and one from William Power—to Helen Cruickshank in Edinburgh on 18 November 1935, with a request that *she* do something with the apparently moribund project. This infuriated Helen Cruickshank, who had a full life (and an invalid mother staying with her) and saw no reason why the project should be given her in this unfinished state after it had lain moribund for months. Her reply, returning the folder and refusing the commission, survives in draft in Edinburgh University Library, along with a deleted passage which shows the strength of her feeling.

To have it thrust upon me without warning or a 'by your leave' —to have in short, not only the baby to hold, but the baby to create, rather beyond . . .³³

—she refused, and sharply. Obviously she had an ally in Gibbon's widow, whose view (in her Christmas letter to MacDiarmid in 1935) was that "the symposium" was "a complete washout."³⁴ Relations with Lindsey, not surprisingly, became strained, and there is a rather halting exchange between Lindsey and Mrs. Mitchell in the NLS repairing what was obviously a serious breach caused by the *Festschrift's* failure. "Miss Cruickshank likes to criticize me. My answer to her is that she is welcome to try her own hand." But that, obviously, was something Helen Cruickshank was not willing to do.³⁵

From this point on, the *Festschrift* project quietly disappears, Helen Cruickshank's tributes and William Power's the only trace, and the contributors obviously quietly forgot about the whole thing. We can only regret that the project as originally envisaged did not take place while Gibbon's memory was still strong in the minds of authors like Gunn and Wells and MacDiarmid; we can only regret, too, that Helen Cruickshank's idea that the publisher's advance should go to the family at once at a difficult time was not the practical outcome of an early completion and publication. Instead, delay and recrimination and a curiously half-hearted commitment by the Scottish and English *literati* seems to have sunk the project without trace. The story does do much to reinforce the extent to which Gibbon was *on the edge* of success when the cruel timing of his death removed him from the literary scene. At a stage in his career when he needed his talents of self-publicity and deliberate provocativeness to give propulsion to his books (in a difficult market with money tight), his family and friends could not provide that impulse when he was gone, when his talent for publicity was not there, when the flow of new work did not continually give new copy to the newspapers. It has taken several decades for the much slower growth of critical recognition, republication and criticism, which the speedy appearance of a *Festschrift* might have triggered in 1935 or 1936.

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NOTES

¹Thanks are due to the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh University Library, Aberdeen University Library, and Stirling University Library for permission to consult archives in their possession, to Mrs. Rhea Martin and other members of the Gibbon family who have helped me at every stage, to John Hall, Stanley Simpson, Douglas Mack and W.R. Aitken for professional advice, and to David and William Hutchison for their help in preparing the material for publication.

²The majority of the letters are now in the NLS, Acc 7900, in sixteen boxes, all but one accessible to the public. A smaller number can be found in other libraries, notably EUL, and a checklist of those known to survive appeared in *The Bibliothek* 12,2 (1984), 46-57.

³A survey of Gibbon's work, with a welcome emphasis on its wider interest beyond Scotland, is William K. Malcolm, *A Blasphemer & Reformer* (Aberdeen, 1984).

⁴To Helen B. Cruickshank (HBC), 18 November 1933, in EUL.

⁵To Alexander Gray, 14 November 1930, in NLS.

⁶Writing to Jean Baxter, 17 September 1932 (in AUL), Gibbon promised to bring his cuttings album on a visit. "You'll find special delight in my fray with the 'Fife Herald' . . . *Sunset Song* . . . isn't going as well as we once imagined, despite excellent reviews."

⁷To Alexander Gray, 8 January 1927, NLS.

⁸To Alexander Gray, 9 March 1928, NLS.

⁹To HBC, 4 September 1933, EUL.

¹⁰HBC's notes, on Fritz Wölcken, [1934], quoting LGG in EUL.

¹¹NLS, Acc 7900, box 7: a history of America before Columbus, "The Story of Religion," "A History of Mankind," "Memoirs of a Materialist," "Men of the Mearns," "The Lost Tribes," "The Morning Star" are only some of the projects.

¹²NLS Acc 7900 box 7.

¹³For some discussion of this see the introduction (pp. 7-17) of Gibbon's unfinished novella *The Speak of the Mearns* (Edinburgh, 1982).

¹⁴Compton Mackenzie, *Catholicism and Scotland* (London, 1936).

¹⁵NLS Acc 7900 box 8.

¹⁶*The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid* ed. Alan Bold (London, 1984), 537 and 537n.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸NLS Acc 7900 box 8.

¹⁹Jarrolds were pressing for correction charges: see Ray Mitchell to Hugh MacDiarmid, 23 June 1940, in EUL.

²⁰George Blake told HBC that Gibbon had quite a big advance from the Porpoise Press for a book which was never written; for this reason the appeal for funds for the Mitchell family in Welwyn (for which Helen Cruickshank raised £200) had no contribution from Blake. Blake-HBC, 15 April 1935, in EUL.

²¹To HBC, 18 November 1933, in EUL.

²²See Ian Munro, *Leslie Mitchell: Lewis Grassie Gibbon* (Edinburgh, 1966), 62-65.

²³Correspondence with both LGG and his widow in NLS Acc 7900.

²⁴Likewise close family friend; correspondence in NLS Acc 7900.

²⁵Copy of the circular letter in HBC papers, in EUL.

²⁶Willa Muir's *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, "a slap-dash performance," was (she said) written "more or less to entertain Leslie Mitchell"; *Belonging* (London, 1968), 193-4.

²⁷Several copies of HBC's poem written at LGG's funeral, and the *Festschrift* article which was obviously inspired by the occasion, survive, in Stirling UL, EUL, and elsewhere; see HBC's *Octobiography* (Montrose, 1976), 91; her *Collected Poems* (Edinburgh, 1971), 116-7; *Montrose Standard* 1 March 1935; Stirling UL MS. 2(8); and HBC-Ray Mitchell 23 December 1944 (NLS) in which her essay on LGG was being re-typed for possible future use.

²⁸In NLS, Acc 7900. Typescript.

²⁹NLS Acc 7900 box 9.

³⁰EUL.

³¹(London, 1946), 5-8.

³²EUL.

³³EUL. For the folder of documents see NLS Acc 7900 box 9.

³⁴22 December 1935 EUL MacDiarmid papers.

³⁵NLS Acc 7900 box 9.