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*Sherrie A. Inness*

"They must worship industry or starve":  
Scottish Resistance to British Imperialism in  
Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*

Patrick Sellar, a highly successful sheepfarmer and the factor of the Sutherland estates, more than any other person typifies the evils of the clearances in the Scottish Highlands. A fervent spokesman for the supposed benefits of the clearances, in 1815 he declared:

I was long a passionate declaimer against the only reasonable improvement of which the Highlands are susceptible. I mean the removal of the people to fishing ground—to allotments where a man in ten minutes in many seasons may catch as many fish as his family can eat in four and twenty hours—and stocking the interior with sheep. The effects of such arrangements in advancing the estate, the country to which it belongs . . . in wealth, civilisation, comfort, industry, virtue and happiness, are palpable—ask Sir William Grant what his Grandfather was—a removed tenant! But for the just views of the proprietor this great man would have been now in a place like Scottany . . . following two or three Highland ponies [*sic*] with a cocked bonnet on his head and a Red top to it, and a ragged philiby reaching half way down his leg, afflicted I doubt not by a hereditary itch which all the brimstone in Scotland would be tardy to cure.<sup>1</sup>

Sellar's rhetoric makes it clear that any person who protested against the clearances, in which thousands of people were forced off their small farming crofts with little or no notice, was foolish and ill-informed, since, at least according to Sellar, the clearances helped promote economic well-being and

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Eric Richards in *A History of the Highland Clearances* (London, 1985), II, 371.

upward class mobility. Moreover, he expressed little concern about the possibility that the clearances would help destroy Scottish culture, which he considered insignificant, while furthering English economic and cultural hegemony. Indeed, he was convinced it was Scotland's destiny to be a cog in the English imperialist system, commenting, "The interior of this country is clearly intended by providence to grow wool and mutton for the employment and maintenance and enrichment of industrious people *living in countries suited to manufacture*."<sup>2</sup> Thus, for Sellar, Scotland's providential purpose was to be a vast sheepfold for the burgeoning populations of England's urban centers. I have quoted Sellar's words at some length because they reveal the multiple struggles—urban life versus rural, English values versus Scottish, nationalist loyalties versus allegiance to England, poverty versus wealth—that are addressed in Neil Gunn's historical novel of the clearances, *The Silver Darlings* (1941).<sup>3</sup> By studying these historical Scottish concerns, the reader better understands what Isobel Murray and Bob Tait call "one of the most powerful stories to be found in modern Scottish fictions,"<sup>4</sup> as well as recognizes that the novel's criticism of English/Scottish relationships is not only pertinent to the early nineteenth century, but also to the twentieth.

By analyzing the novel's biting indictment of England's cultural and socioeconomic hegemony over Scotland, this paper will seek to come up with a more carefully nuanced definition of minor literature than the theories advanced by many current critics. First, however, it is necessary to define minor literature. A useful definition is found in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's famous essay, "What Is a Minor Literature?"<sup>5</sup> They argue that three features distinguish minor from great literature: a concern with collective rather than individual values, an emphasis on politics, and deterritorialization, which describes the profound displacement experienced by both indi-

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>3</sup>Different critical approaches to *Silver Darlings* include John Burns, *A Celebration of the Light: Zen in the Novels of Neil Gunn* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 63-85; Donald Campbell, "True Imagination: *The Silver Darlings*," *Neil M. Gunn: The Man and the Writer*, ed. Alexander Scott and Douglas Gifford (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 141-56; Douglas Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 116-46; Margery McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 84-96; Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, *Ten Modern Scottish Novels* (Aberdeen, 1984), pp. 32-54; and Richard Price, *The Fabulous Matter of Fact: The Poetics of Neil M. Gunn* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 90-102.

<sup>4</sup>Murray and Tait, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?," *Mississippi Review*, 11 (1983), 13-33.

vidual and entire cultures that are uprooted or dislocated from the contexts that have traditionally given them meaning. All three of these criteria are applicable to Gunn's work. Certainly the collective nature of Gunn's writings is clear; in it, he repeatedly speaks about the decline of a collective body of people, the Gaelic-speaking, Highland Scots. As to the second requirement, Scottish nationalist politics is a common chord in many of Gunn's literary works, as well as in his daily life; he was an active member of the Scottish nationalist movement throughout the 1930s. Gunn's role as a deterritorialized author is also clear. Not only did he write in a "foreign" language (Gunn wrote during the Scottish Renaissance, a period in which any language other than Gaelic was considered alien and culturally suspect by many Scottish writers and intellectuals), but he also lived in a fragmented country, divided into two regions: the wealthier lowlands and the poverty-stricken, rural Highlands. Thus, Gunn qualifies as an author of minor literature, attempting to find a discourse that will help define, explain, and critique England's historical dominance over Scotland. As Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd comment, a minority discourse

is in the first instance, the product of damage—damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture. The destruction involved is manifold, bearing down on variant modes of social formation, dismantling previously functional economic systems, and deracinating whole populations at best or decimating them at worst.<sup>6</sup>

It is exactly such damage to Highland culture that Gunn attempts to map in *The Silver Darlings*. He delineates, as well, the many ways in which the Scots maintain a distinct way of life that is not entirely subsumed by the dominant culture.

Gunn's novel provides a voice for an entire marginalized society, fulfilling what JanMohamed and Lloyd regard as one of the key functions of minor literature.

In those societies caught in the transition from oral, mythic, and collective cultures to the literate, 'rational,' and individualistic values and characteristics of Western cultures, the writer more often than not manifests the collective nature of social formation in forms such as the novel, thus transforming what were once efficacious vehicles for the representation of individually, atomistically oriented experiences into collective modes of articulation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, "Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is To Be Done?", *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

I hesitate, here, over JanMohamed and Lloyd's implication that there is an opposition between minority cultures and "Western cultures." Certainly, Scotland (as well as Ireland and a host of other small European countries) has traditionally been considered a nation with a Western culture. Scotland, however, cannot be understood as having the same position in Western culture as England. Actually, Gunn insists on the opposition between the two nations, constantly reiterating the collective nature of Scottish culture versus English culture as well as emphasizing the importance of Gaelic oral and mythic traditions in his writing. It is only with an understanding of these differences that literary theorists can appreciate Gunn's significance as a minor writer. A recognition of Gunn's minor position points out the need for considering the historical, culture, and socioeconomic differences that must be analyzed in order to understand not Western culture, but Western cultures.

My choice of approaches—to analyze the historical and nationalist messages of *Silver Darlings* rather than focus solely on the mythical, allegorical and symbolic qualities of Gunn's text—differs from that of many contemporary critics, who prefer to pay less attention to the harsh economic realities and nationalism evident in Gunn's earlier works than to the mysticism in his later texts, which reflected Gunn's interest in Asian philosophies, including the teachings of Mencius, Chwang Tzu, Lao Tze, and of Zen. John Burns, for instance, recognizes that Gunn's novels "present a comprehensive vision of Highland history," but he considers this "only the surface of Gunn's world."<sup>8</sup> Burns thinks that the "vision of light" that influenced Gunn's later novels

did not come easily. The early novels, particularly *The Grey Coast* and *The Lost Glen* are bitter and angry. *The Grey Coast* presents a grim picture of the economic realities of living in Caithness at the turn of the century, while *The Lost Glen* is torn apart by the intensity of its author's questioning. Yet despite the difficulties, the false starts, the uncertainties of beginning to write, Gunn gradually evolved a more creative response to life.<sup>9</sup>

For Burns, the "real impact [of Gunn's work] is . . . universal, being concerned with each man's individual struggle towards wholeness and integration."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, F. R. Hart assumes that the "universal psychological and spiritual substance of Neil's books" will prove particularly important to for-

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<sup>8</sup>Burns, p. 2

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

eign readers (especially Americans).<sup>11</sup> More particularly, Margery McCulloch writes of *Silver Darlings* that its "universality" makes it represent "the summit of Gunn's narrative achievement."<sup>12</sup> Although I agree with Burns, Hart, and McCulloch that Gunn's texts contain much thought about struggles germane to all humankind, and that Gunn's works are deeply influenced by his Zen philosophical beliefs, I do not agree with them when they claim his political message has only regional importance, and thus is of lesser significance than his other more "universal" themes. Without doubt, the "bitter and angry" novels do contain a particular message about a particular nation, but they also give expression to the anguish of any country that struggles under foreign rule.

Gunn himself was well aware of the political, nationalist messages contained in many of his earlier novels, and was harshly critical of those who wished to de-emphasize the political nature of his writings.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, he understood the importance of one's national identity as a font of ideas for a writer. "Literature is national in origin and has found its subject-matter or drama precisely in those class differences and other distinctions or inequalities which together make up the life of the nation," Gunn wrote in 1936.<sup>14</sup> Given such ardent beliefs, it is hardly surprising that his Scottish nationalism was repeatedly a source of difficulty for Gunn when he attempted to have his works published. *The Lost Glen*, for instance, one of Gunn's most overtly nationalist novels, was rejected by several publishers. In a 1929 letter to the publishers Hodder and Stoughton, Gunn criticized what he perceived as a tendency by English publishers to avoid risks by not accepting novels that were "[t]oo political. . . . a trifle too concerned with the Highlands as they are; [with] enough enough romantic tartan"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: From Smollet to Spark* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), p. xi.

<sup>12</sup>McCulloch, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup>Gunn's nationalist beliefs were also apparent in his own life. In the 1930s, he was a member of the Council of the Scottish National Party. A more complete description of Gunn's political views is given in Francis Russell Hart and J. B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn: A Highland Life* (London, 1981).

Information on Gunn's nationalist philosophies can be found in his essays "The Essence of Nationalism," *Scots Magazine*, 37 (June 1942), 169-72 and "Literature: Class or National?" *Outlook*, 1.4 (1936), 54-8, as well as others.

<sup>14</sup>Gunn, "Literature," p. 54.

<sup>15</sup>*Neil M. Gunn: Selected Letters*, ed. J. B. Pick (Edinburgh, 1987), p. 9.

Those of us who are interested in which is sometimes called the Scottish Renaissance Movement must, I support, be sanguine enough to keep looking for the publisher who is prepared to take risk! Though why we should expect him to, heaven knows! For we are aware how comparatively easy—and acceptable—it would be to supply the staple fare of kilts, sporrans, and Romance, in island dawns and Celtic twilights—not omitting a helping of cabbage from the 'kailyard'! But . . . we are sufficiently moved by the emergence of new forces in Scottish life to keep blasting away at the new claim.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Gunn makes it clear that the Scottish writer may either exploit the romanticized Highland past, made famous in Walter Scott's novels, or he may more critically examine Scotland's history, trying to find the source of both the past and present-day socioeconomic woes of the Highlands. For Gunn, it was essential that the modern Highlander look at history in the second of these two ways; as he wrote in his essay "Caithness and Sutherland" (1935), "it is necessary to get some understanding of the forces, human and economic, that have been doing him down in the past in order to appreciate even the scenery amid which he lives now."<sup>17</sup> For Gunn, then, history was not a long-dead past, but a series of events that continue to influence the present. As Alistair McCleery notes, "Gunn tried to find in Highland history the roots of contemporary malaise, the process which had led to the loss of communal identity and the imposition of the 'ghillie-role' or exile upon the individual Highlander."<sup>18</sup> Nor was Gunn alone in attempting to find the historical roots that resulted in the fragmentation of Highland culture in the twentieth century. Other Scottish Renaissance writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Eric Linklater, Naomi Mithison, and James Bridie adopted similar, critical historical perspectives, understanding the development of cities and the movement away from croft-farming and small-scale fishing as not a "civilizing" move, but as a change that devastated Scottish culture and communal society. Gunn, however, was the Scottish Renaissance writer who best articulated both the horrors of the clearances and the joys of the Scots as they succeeded in earning a livelihood from fishing after they had been forcibly evicted and relocated to the coast.

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>17</sup>*Landscape and Light: Essays by Neil M. Gunn*, ed. Alistair McCleery (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, "Introduction," pp. 1-21.

The literary text that a contemporary reviewer identified as the book "Neil Gunn was meant to write, in fact was made to write"<sup>19</sup> is one of a trilogy of Scottish history novels written by Gunn, which includes *Sun Circle* (1933) and *Butcher's Broom* (1934). While *Sun Circle* takes place in Scotland's long-distant past, the other two novels focus on Highland life in the early nineteenth century, with the events in *Butcher's Broom* the precursors to those in *The Silver Darlings*.<sup>20</sup> *Butcher's Broom* concludes with the clearances, while *The Silver Darlings* charts what happens to the Highlanders after the clearances, recording the Scots' attempts to gain an economic toehold on the forbidding coast by working in the herring fishing industry. To borrow Margery McCulloch's words, *The Silver Darlings* is "the epic story of a people who snatched victory from the jaws of the defeat that the Clearances represented."<sup>21</sup> Both of these novels emphasize the clearances as being a crucial event in Scottish history. The clearances have long haunted the Scottish cultural imagination, even up to the present day, and have been a recurring image in the fiction of such Scottish twentieth-century writers as Iain Crichton Smith, Eric Linklater, Sorley Maclean, John MacGrath, and, of course, Neil Gunn.<sup>22</sup> Similar in many ways to the English enclosure movement, the clearances were mass evictions of peasants from their crofts so that their small farms could be merged to become huge tracts for sheep grazing, resulting in substantial profit for the gentry. These former crofters were often forced by economic pressures to move to the coast, where wealthy landowners needed workers to help them establish large fishing concerns (which, the landowners hoped, would ultimately fatten their pocketbooks). Patrick Sellar expressed little concern about the reluctance of croft-holders to move to the coast. "They require to be thoroughly brought to the coast where industry will pay," Sellar remarked, "and to be convinced that they *must* worship industry or starve."<sup>23</sup> From 1780 to 1855, thousands of people were cleared out of small villages, with little or no provision for their welfare. Often, in

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<sup>19</sup>J. B. Salmond, "Review of *The Silver Darlings*," *Scots Magazine*, 35 (June 1941), 320.

<sup>20</sup>Neil M. Gunn, *The Silver Darlings* (1941; rptd. London, 1984). All subsequent references to this novel are taken from this edition. They will appear in the text.

<sup>21</sup>McCulloch, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup>For an excellent recent history of the clearances, see Richards. For the standard nineteenth-century account of the clearances, see Alexander Mackenzie, *The History of the Highland Clearances* (Inverness, 1883).

<sup>23</sup>Quoted by Richards, p. 378.



order to justify these evictions, the landlords emphasized the benefits that would accrue to the dispossessed tenants. As Richards comments, many members of the aristocracy saw the clearances as an "experiment in social and economic engineering" that would result in the inhabitants of the straths moving to the coasts

where they were intended to engage in new and improved modes of subsistence. The interior tracts would be turned over to sheep; rents would rise with productivity, the people would no longer be susceptible to periodic famine, nor would the landlord be liable for expensive relief measures.<sup>24</sup>

Despite such capitalist rhetoric, the Highland have been an economically distressed area ever since the clearances, and the sheepfarms have never been as successful as Patrick Sellar and others predicted.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in both *Butcher's Broom* and in *The Silver Darlings*, Gunn is attempting to understand more than a long-past historical event; he is also trying to explain the roots of the economic malaise that was all around him in what Francis Hart calls "the desert of the Clearances."<sup>26</sup>

*The Silver Darlings*, which Gunn thoroughly and carefully researched, covers the period from 1816 to approximately 1838, the crucial early years for the Moray Firth fisheries, a period that Gunn calls "a busy, fabulous time" (p. 14).<sup>27</sup> Gunn reminds the reader, however, that even the wealth that resulted from the success of the herring fisheries fails to atone for the devastation wrought by the clearances, a devastation that Gunn never forgets:

[The coast dwellers] had come from beyond the mountain which rose up behind them, from inland valleys and swelling pastures, where they and their people before them had lived from time immemorial. The landlord had driven them from these valleys and pastures, and burned their houses, and set them here against the sea-shore to live if they could and, if not, to die.

The first year had been the worst. Many had died. Many had been carried away in empty lime ships. A great number had perished on the sea. But a greater number, it was believed, were alive in Nova Scotia and elsewhere in Canada and

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup>Hart, *The Scottish Novel*, p. 327.

<sup>27</sup>As Hart and Pick write, Gunn had a "puritan regard for fact, hard news and historical accuracy" (p. 173). For information on Gunn's research, see Hart and Pick, pp. 173-6 and McCulloch, pp. 85-6.

other lands, though fighting against dreadful tribulations and adversities. It had been a bitter and terrible time. (p. 12)

By the verbal similarity between "a bitter and terrible time" and "a busy, fabulous time," Gunn links the prosperity of the fisheries to the devastation caused by the clearances, showing that neither event is fully comprehensible without taking into account the other. Moreover, although the fisheries lead to increasing physical and emotional stability within the seacoast villages, in Gunn's view the resultant stability can never compensate for the diaspora that the clearances caused.

As well as telling the story of the fisheries, *Silver Darlings* is more particularly the story of two dispossessed peasants, Catrine and her husband, Tormad, and their struggle to survive on the foreign and forbidding coastline. Life on the coast is harsh: the "first winter had ben a terror. For one long spell, they had little or nothing to live on but shellfish and seaweed. Often they ate the wrong thing and colic and dysentery were everywhere" (p. 13). In order to survive, Tormad goes to sea to fish. Although Tormad and his men quickly adjust to their first fishing expedition, it is abruptly cut short when an English frigate arrives and captures all the Scottish fishermen for the Royal Navy press-gang. Like Melville's *Billy Budd*, Tormad is impressed at sea. Unlike Billy, however, Tormad does not docilely accept his fate, and is grievously injured in the struggle that breaks out between the Scots and the press-gang, but it is only much later in the novel that the reader learns that Tormad died shortly after being captured. At first, the reader might be puzzled about the significance of this chapter and about the reason for Tormad's brief presence in the novel. This chapter, however, far from being superfluous, establishes the conflict between the Scots and the English that is a dominant theme throughout the text. Tormad's capture is a brutal introduction to the overt conflicts between the Scottish and the English as well as between the upper classes and the working classes. The press-gang scene, occurring so early in the text, haunts the rest of the novel, reminding readers of the tensions underlying even seemingly tranquil periods. Even when not mentioned explicitly, the control England wields over Scotland's economic and cultural life is implicit in the text and must be recognized by readers if they are to comprehend the novel's full significance.

After Tormad is seized, Catrine, pregnant and alone, goes to stay with a friend, Kirsty Mackay, who lives in the small town of Dunster. On her long walk to Kirsty's, Catrine hides in terror when she hears the rattle of the stagecoach, since the coach signifies "to such as Catrine the traffic and pomp of the great world, its ruthless power and speed, its cities and its wealth" (p. 52). Here, Gunn establishes a dichotomy not only between the English and the Scottish but also between urban and rural dwellers (typically identified with the Lowlands and the Highlands, respectively). Gunn's emphasis on

this fissure within the community reveals the complexities the reader faces in explicating this novel or any other minor text as a work that explores only the antagonistic relationship between the dominant culture and the subordinate culture. If *The Silver Darlings* is read as a novel that concentrates only on relationships between England and Scotland, the nationalist, economic, and cultural differences that divide the Highlanders from the Lowlanders cannot be fully understood. Thus, the reader must recognize the multiple levels of conflict in the text, both between nations and within various sub-groups of the population, in order to understand how this (or any minor text) articulates myriad differences. In this fashion, the critic better recognizes that the politics of nationalist difference cannot (and should not) be analyzed without taking into account other forms of conflict, such as gender, class, and racial inequalities that exist within the state. For instance, it is important to recognize the influence of national politics in promoting the clearances, forcing Tormad and Catrine to the coast, and ultimately resulting in Tormad's imprisonment and death. It is equally as important, however, to recognize the socioeconomic inequities between urban and rural life that cause Catrine to hide from the carriage, as well as to realize that different opportunities are available to each gender, making it difficult for Catrine to survive on her own.

In Dunster, Catrine meets Roddie, the best fisherman in the village, who joins her as she continues to Kirsty's. As they stroll along, they glimpse the ancient remains of a church, "The House of Peace," as well as a ruined fort that is, as Roddie remarks, "so old that no-one knows much about it. . . . it goes back to long before the coming of the Vikings" (p. 61). These ruins deserve attention, since they are a recurring motif in Gunn's novel, serving as a reminder of Scotland's bucolic, semi-mythical past, which is essential to remember in order to maintain a national identity.<sup>28</sup> (The significance of maintaining these links between the Scottish individual and his or her cultural past is made clear at the conclusion of the novel, when Kirsty's son, the night before his marriage, returns to the House of Peace in search of spiritual sustenance; thus, the renewal of the race is intertwined with its long-past history.) Furthermore, the critic can extrapolate from this argument that it is not only the ancient past that must be remembered, but also the more recent past. The Scottish reader is reminded that the past represented by the clearances is equally as significant as the past represented by the House of Peace. Only by keeping such experiences alive can a people hope to retain its national identity when confronted with the hegemony of more dominant groups.

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<sup>28</sup>For a thoughtful interpretation of the House of Peace and its significance, see Price, pp. 98-102.

After Catrine is settled at Kirsty's, she gives birth to a son, Finn, whose name conjures up the image of Finn MacCoul, which is prophetic, since young Finn's exploits, although different in nature, will correspond to those of this ancient Scottish hero. The rest of the novel is as complicated as a tapestry, interweaving Finn's growing maturity, Roddie's strong physical attraction to Catrine, and, above all else, the daily lives of the fisherfolk and the growth of the fisheries. Despite disasters, like the cholera that causes Kirsty's death, Finn, Catrine, Roddie, and many other villagers prosper as a result of the cyclical runs of herring; as one old man observes, a "young fellow" could make more money in one night than he could make in a year on a croft (p. 84). The lure of financial gain proves irresistible to the inhabitants of Dunster, who are promised that "creels of silver herring will turn into creels of silver crowns" (p. 81). This is a prosperity that is shared by all, not just the fishermen. As Gunn writes in his essay, "The Wonder Story of the Moray Firth," which provides an historical description of the fishing in the 1830s and 1840s, the prosperity was also experienced by "curers, coppers, women gutters and packers, makers of herring nets and creels, shopkeepers, carriers, seamen engaged in the export trade—a whole complex living swarm of human life."<sup>29</sup> Thus, Gunn depicts in *The Silver Darlings* a sweeping economic revolution in the small coastal villages that has a profound impact on all classes.

This revolution, however, benefits the well-to-do more than the poor. The wonder years of the fisheries only came about because of capitalist investment that resulted in a "torrent of new boats, nets, curers, men, and banknotes" (p. 413). For instance, it is in his own self-interest that Mr. Hendry, an innkeeper who sets himself up as a curer, supplies the financial backing for Roddie to buy a fishing boat, with the expectation of making a fortune from the herring Roddie and other fishermen supply him with. Large landowners realized even more profit than a small shopkeeper like Mr. Hendry. As Gunn points out, landowners were a crucial factor in the development of the complex capitalist machinery that supported the growth of the fishing industry:

The landlord who had burned [the inhabitants] out in order to have a suitable desolation for sheep, had set about making a harbour at the mouth of the river, the same river that, with its tributaries, had threaded their inland valleys. Money had been advanced by him (at 6.1/2 percent. interest) to erect buildings for dealing with fish. . . . The people would yet live, the people themselves, for no landlord owned the sea, and what the people caught there would be their own—or very nearly (for landlords over a long period continued to levy tribute on the fish landed). (pp. 13-4)

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<sup>29</sup>Neil M. Gunn, "The Wonder Story of the Moray Firth," *Anarchy*, 86 (1968), 124.

The language in this passage reveals the complex causes for the growth of the fishing industry. While the fishermen try to survive and locate a physical freedom on the ocean that they could not find on their former crofts, the landlords exploit the desires and needs of the working class for their own financial gain. Nor are women excluded from this manipulation. For instance, in order to earn a single penny, Meg, a net-maker, must tie 3,789 knots, and in order to make a single net, 908,505 (p. 180). Thus, by pointing out the class exploitation that is an inevitable part of industrialization, Gunn reveals a deep skepticism about whether capitalism can ever lead to anything but economic subjugation of the weak by the powerful and the wealthy.

Although Gunn suggests that an economic endeavor, no matter how positive it might seem to the working-class men and women it employs, is ultimately exploitative, he does not rule out the possibility of local resistance. In fact, such subversion is an essential element of the novel, showing the ways that the Scots paradoxically manage to retain a large degree of autonomy and independence even within the very system that enslaves them. This freedom, which Gunn perceives as physical, mental, and spiritual, is most readily accessible to men who go to sea, an experience that Gunn describes as figuratively reshaping a man's character in a more heroic mold. In *Morning Tide*, readers are told "there are moments when the ways of the sea are the ways of brave men."<sup>30</sup> As this quotation implies, the ocean offers a man numerous opportunities for heroism, unlike the workaday environment of factory, farm, or office. The best-known example of an epic adventure in *The Silver Darlings* is Finn's torturous journey up the cliffs of The Seven Hunters to obtain water to save the lives of his comrades, who are dying of thirst after being blown off course by a storm. And who can forget the description of Roddie when he returns from a particularly successful fishing trip: "Roddie, the terrible East-coaster, the mad Viking the spiller of blood, the curse on Stornoway, brought the Seafoam to her berth, silver-scaled to his thighs" (p. 389). Clearly, the ocean offers Finn and Roddie more than just a livelihood; it also gives them a sense of agency and authority that is denied them on shore, exemplified by the time they were forced off their crofts. One of the characters in Gunn's novel *The Lost Glen* (1932) muses about the effect the sea has on a man: "Somehow here not only one's mind but one's body grew large . . . There was so much space, and clean wind, and far horizons . . . No enclosing walls and dogmas deadly and doubtful."<sup>31</sup> Although present-day readers recognize the inaccuracies of this description (after all, Tormad met his death on the ocean), still they must recognize the

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<sup>30</sup>Neil M. Gunn, *Morning Tide* (Edinburgh, 1930), p. 167.

<sup>31</sup>Neil M. Gunn, *The Lost Glen* (Edinburgh, 1932), p. 52.

ocean's importance for Gunn as a source for the formation of both working-class and nationalist unities.<sup>32</sup>

The ocean, which Gunn calls the "dominant motif in the grey-woven symphony of the coast,"<sup>33</sup> has a significance beyond that of just fostering male heroism. It also serves as a conduit to the Scottish past, helping men (in Gunn's fiction, women do not have the same access to the ocean) to recall the cultural knowledge that has been and continues to be suppressed by the hegemony of English culture. Thus, when Finn makes a long, arduous sea voyage to reach the cliffs that he must climb to show his mettle, he is also taking a journey to rediscover Scotland's past, which is represented by the ancient hermit's dwelling that Finn discovers. When Finn comes upon a pool of fresh, clear water that tastes "like the water in the burn at home; it was full of memories that did not quite come, that stayed on the other side of knowing" (p. 317), it is clear he is doing more than just quenching his thirst; he is also drinking from the pool of knowledge, an act that symbolically links him to the past. Again, the ocean serves as a bridge to bygone days when Finn and his shipmates talk about Rona, a semi-mystical island utopia. One of the men, Rob, remarks

the thing that struck me about Rona—and this is as true as I'm sitting here, for it's all written down—was that they had no money. You see, there was nowhere to spend it, so it would have been no use to them whatever way. Isn't that strange? Yet they lived happy without it, and they had their meal and fish and sheep and cattle—in fact, all the human body needs. But I remember that in particular—how happy they lived. It struck me. (p. 294)

Rona, like the House of Peace, is a symbol of the golden past of the Scots, the semi-mythical period prior to capitalism. It is an example of how Gunn uses the Celtic past to critique present society, particularly the dominance of the English. As Alan Bold suggests, Gunn saw the Gaelic past as offering to the Scots a spiritual, symbolic element that was missing in contemporary

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<sup>32</sup>In his other writings, Gunn repeatedly emphasized that the ocean, more specifically the ownership of a family boat, offered workers a rare opportunity for autonomy and agency. For instance, in his essay, "The Family Boat: Its Future in Scottish Fishing," *Scots Magazine*, 27 (June 1937), 169-74, Gunn argued that in "their fight against the English capitalist system, the Scottish Herring Producers' association should be supported by every Scot who still has any care for individual liberty and decency" (p. 173). For Gunn, the Scottish, family-based fishing industry represents more than just a means of earning a livelihood; it also represents Scotland's struggle to retain a national identity when confronted with the threat of envelopment posed by English capitalism.

<sup>33</sup>Neil M. Gunn, *The Grey Coast* (1926; rptd. Edinburgh, 1931), p. 37.

life.<sup>34</sup> For Gunn and for other Celtic writers (Yeats comes to mind) mythology is one of the most important foundations for a nationalist identity, since it helps the individual understand and articulate the continuity between the past and the present. Thus, in order to understand Gunn's nationalism, one must concurrently examine the role of Celtic and Christian myth in his works.

Although so far I have focused on the importance of Roddie, Finn, and other men as perpetuators of the Scottish mythic, heroic past, I do not wish to intimate that women fail to play a significant role in the maintenance of a communal and nationalist identity. For instance, *Catrine*, who Margery McCulloch calls one of Gunn's most individualized and convincing fictional women, is a great source of strength for the community, holding it together even in times of adversity, such as when Kirsty is stricken with cholera and all the villagers flee except *Catrine*.<sup>35</sup> Kirsty, like *Catrine*, plays an important role in strengthening the Scottish community and its sense of identity by recalling and orally transmitting the Scottish past. She deals "in fact about living or dead people, and though *Catrine* might not have known them, still they came out of the background she knew and gave it a movement of colour and life like the lines in a tartan" (p. 106). Her "endless" voice weaves "intricate genealogical patterns" (p. 111) that help to maintain a sense of Scottish community, particularly crucial because so many of the Scots had been dispersed during the clearances. Even after many members of her family emigrate, Kirsty keeps them alive in the cultural memory by retelling their stories. As she explains, after the clearances her family was

scattered to the four winds. Two brothers in the Americas, one in Australia, one dead through howking the stones out of this ground we live on, a sister in London whose husband is half the time sailing the seas, and the youngest, Ruth, married to that runaway shepherd in the Borders (p. 110).

Despite the attempts of the Scottish gentry to emphasize that the clearances were beneficial for those cleared off their lands and their attempts to suppress voices of discontent, Kirsty is not quieted, and insists on recounting the evils of the clearances and the emigration that scattered the Highlanders:

With the clearances came enforced mass emigration, and in *Catrine's* short lifetime, boatloads of her own desperate people had been shipped to Canada, where, working through terrors and distress and death, they were building up new generations in a new land. . . . Colonizers, explorers, fighters, traders, from Hudson to

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<sup>34</sup>Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (New York, 1983), p. 140.

<sup>35</sup>McCulloch, p. 89.

India, from the plain of Waterloo to the Blue Mountains of the Cape. Such geographic names were familiar on Kirsty's lips, not in any vague way but connected with someone she knew or knew about. (p. 108)

When printed materials are not readily available to a society because of widespread illiteracy and the high cost of printing, the storyteller plans in invaluable role: articulating experiences that would otherwise be forgotten. Gunn's novel suggests that such an oral history/mythology is superior to even a written text, since someone like Kirsty can invest her narrative with the immediacy and warmth that are absent in a textbook account of geography or history.

The above passage, however, also reveals a more disturbing aspect of the multiple complexities of relationships between minority cultures, and the difficulty of simply assigning to one nation the role of the suppressor and to the other nation the role of the suppressed. As JanMohamed and Lloyd comment, "Cultures designated as minorities have certain shared experiences by virtue of their similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture, which seeks to marginalize them all."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Scotland, since its traditional culture was suppressed by the English, shares something in common with India, South Africa, and Canada, all countries where minority groups were similarly suppressed by the English. The fact that all these nations share a minority status, however, does not mean that the critic can ignore the complex interrelationships between the countries or overlook that under different circumstances the oppressed can become the oppressors. For instance, Kirsty displays no compunction about the Highlanders, who were forced off their own lands, in turn forcing others off their lands. She even praises the strength and courage of the Scots who assume roles as functionaries of imperialist policy. It is only by recognizing how a minority group, such as the dispossessed Gaelic Highlanders, can be simultaneously subordinate and dominant in different localities, that theorists can understand the impossibility of positioning one culture as either exclusively minor or dominant. It is this constant instability and this fluctuation between dominance and subordination that makes it necessary to recognize that even a minor text, such as *The Silver Darlings*, which speaks for a marginalized community, nation, or group, can also paradoxically express the views of a dominant culture (in this case, of the Anglo colonizers).

In order to understand *The Silver Darlings*, it is necessary to see it as only a single chapter in Gunn's fictional re-creation of Scottish life and the fishing industry. Although *The Silver Darlings* seems to predicate that it was indeed possible for the Scots to survive and even prosper after the clearances,

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<sup>36</sup>JanMohamed and Lloyd, p. 1.



Gunn's other novels about the gradual decline of the herring fishing industry (*The Grey Coast*, *Morning Tide*, *Highland River*) present a bleaker view.<sup>37</sup> For instance, in *The Grey Coast*, the fishing is dying out, and Ivor, a fisherman, must return home with an empty boat, unlike Roddie in *The Silver Darlings* who arrives "silver-scaled to his thighs" (p. 389). *The Grey Coast* charts a decline that Gunn, whose father was a fisherman, could understand from his own experiences, as he watched the seacoast fishing fleets dwindle. After the prosperity recorded in *The Silver Darlings*, the fleets were never again to attain their former preeminence. For example, Helmsdale, a prosperous fishing port and a busy curing center in the nineteenth century, sent out two-hundred-and-fifty boats in a single season. By 1930, the town's prosperity long since gone, the fishing fleet had shrunk to a mere thirty vessels.<sup>38</sup> Viewing *The Silver Darlings* in the light of the history of the fishing industry, the reader realizes that the vision of working-class organization and the unity of the fishing community, which is so prominent in this novel, is a lost utopic vision for a Scottish writer of the twentieth century.

The struggle for Scottish autonomy that Gunn charts so memorably in *The Silver Darlings*, however, is by no means over today, as the Scots continue striving for a cultural and economic representation that they still lack. All too frequently, the cultural heterogeneity between the Scots and the English is overlooked or dismissed as unimportant. As Gunn wrote, "The English smile . . . whenever the Scot objects to the use of 'English' to include 'Scottish'."<sup>39</sup> Yet, there are dissimilarities that critics must not overlook in order to be culturally sensitive to the rifts between these European nations; they must recognize that nationalist, cultural, and economic differences can divide a Scot and an Englishman just as much as they can divide an Englishman and a South African or an Englishman and an Indian. The differences that still separate these countries today are evidenced by the considerable control that England still wields over Scotland's culture and its economics. Much of present-day Scotland is a preserve, consisting of grouse moors, deer forests, and salmon streams, primarily for the entertainment of

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<sup>37</sup>For a thorough, if dated, historical analysis of the fishing industry's decay, which influenced Gunn's own work, see Peter F. Anson, *Fishing Boats and Fisher Folk on the East Coast of Scotland* (London, 1930). To obtain a picture of the twentieth-century decline in fishing, the critic should read Gunn's many essays on the Scottish fishing industry, which include "Doom in the Moray Firth," *Scots Magazine*, 24 (Oct. 1935), 414-18; "One Fisher Went Sailing . . . : The Plight of the West Coast Herring Ports," *Scots Magazine*, 37 (Sept. 1937), 414-18; and "The Wonder Story of the Moray Firth," *Anarchy*, 86 (1968), 122-5.

<sup>38</sup>Anson, p. 247.

<sup>39</sup>Neil M. Gunn, "This 'English' Business," *Scots Magazine*, 37 (July 1942), 295.

foreign and English aristocrats. With salmon fishing rights selling for hundreds of thousands of pounds, most Scots are excluded from this exclusive sport, and are reduced to serving as "ghillies" to the upper-class foreigners. Similarly, working-class Scots find their agency increasingly reduced on the ocean as well, since only wealthy individuals or corporations can afford the technologically-sophisticated equipment needed to compete economically. Today, a modern purse-seiner can cost £500,000 to £1,000,000.<sup>40</sup> Smaller fishing boats cannot compete with these larger, corporate-owned boats, which are capable of capturing a whole school of fish in a single day, contributing to the increasing scarcity of the herring.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the fishing villages that prospered during the "busy, fabulous time" in the first half of the nineteenth century now stagnate, sending out fewer fishing boats every year. As Ed Knipe notes in his study of Gamrie, a Scottish fishing village, the decline continues. In 1890, Gamrie had 92 registered boats; by 1978, this figure was reduced to a mere 33.<sup>42</sup> By recognizing Scotland's present-day economic malaise, readers can better understand that Gunn's novel of nationalist conflict has as much relevance today as it did in the first half of this century.

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<sup>40</sup>Ed Knipe, *Gamrie: An Exploration in Cultural Ecology* (New York, 1984), p. 69.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.