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*Jeremy Idle*

## Lewis Grassic Gibbon and the Urgency of the Modern

Lewis Grassic Gibbon is best known for the trilogy *A Scots Quair* which traces Scottish history from 1911 to 1934 through the eyes of ordinary representatives of the Scottish people: the novel has provoked debate over issues such as the representation of women, committed leftist writing, and Scottish identity. A fairly hit-and-miss writer, his other novels of quality include *Stained Radiancy* (1930) and *Spartacus* (1933) both of which have been republished recently. The essays and short stories, published in collaboration with Hugh MacDiarmid, that appeared in *Scottish Scene* (1934)—republished in a collection entitled *The Speak of the Mearns* (1994)—are also essential reading for those interested in Gibbon or, more generally, the Scottish literary Renaissance of the thirties. While future considerations of Gibbon's work as a whole may well contribute to the ongoing debates just mentioned, they might also pursue paths other than these, in attempts to do justice to the range of Gibbon's ideas. This paper will discuss what modernity and its adjuncts signify in Gibbon; most centrally modernity means the iconoclastic twentieth century. Before the main section of this paper I will sketch his thoughts on two geopolitical developments, crucially new in Gibbon's terms, that predate the twentieth century: the birth of civilization and the industrial revolution.

Civilization for Gibbon is an evil: originally man was free, without Gods or the state, without sexual inhibitions or war. Man existed like this for untold centuries; he should have continued existence indefinitely in such a fashion. Egypt is where man's downfall occurred, where history was born, from where civilization "diffused," according to his theory. Gibbon uses the conventional

“ancient” for the Egypt he’s describing; everything after his uncivilized Golden Age, though, is in a sense new:

All civilisations originated in ancient Egypt. Through the accident of time and chance and the cultivation of wild barley in the Valley of the Nile, there arose on a single spot of the earth’s surface the urge in men to upbuild for their economic salvation the great fabric of civilisation. Before the planning of that architecture enslaved the minds of men, man was a free and undiseased animal wandering the world in the Golden Age of the poets (and reality) from the Shetlands to Tierra del Fuego. And from that central focal point in Ancient Egypt the first civilizers spread abroad the globe the beliefs and practices, the diggings and plantings and indignations and shadowy revilements of the Archaic Civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the story (as it appears in the essay on Scotland in *Scottish Scene*, “Antique Scene”) of humanity in outline, condensed from the writings of Diffusionist anthropologists and writers such as William Perry, William Rivers, Harold Massingham, and most crucially Grafton Elliot Smith, whose *Human History* (1930) became Gibbon’s Bible.<sup>2</sup> Smith-Perry-Rivers-style fundamentalist Diffusionism has been regarded as lunatic fringe material for some time now, although debates in archaeological circles continue about the (limited) Diffusion of agriculture, building and language.<sup>3</sup> Diffusionist material may be considered in a broader context than that of its specific originators; nostalgic ideals located in prehistory such as these come under attack from both snobs and populists interested in major ideas circulating in the 1920s and ‘30s. Clive Bell, from a lofty high-culture perspective in *Civilisation* (1928) derides the “cult of innocence and animality” which advocates going “back to the intertidal scum, via arts and crafts, gardening and abuse of Voltaire...small coteries to regret ingeniously and melodiously even the lost pleasures of ignorance and the beatitude of unattainable imbecility.”<sup>4</sup> John Carey, writing in a study of the

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<sup>1</sup>*Scottish Scene* (London, 1934), p. 124. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup>For summary of such influences as Perry, Rivers and Massingham, see Douglas Young, *Beyond the Sunset* (Aberdeen, 1973), p. 10. See also Grafton Elliot Smith, *Human History* (London, 1930).

<sup>3</sup>See Colin Renfrew, *Before Civilisation* (Harmondsworth, 1990; first published 1987), in particular the chapters “Collapse of the Traditional Framework” and “Beyond Diffusion” (pp. 93-132) in which European megaliths are shown to predate Egyptian ones; also Marek and Kamil Zwelebil, “Agricultural Tradition and Indo-European Dispersals,” in *Antiquity*, 62 (1988), 574-83, who disagree with Renfrew about agricultural and linguistic diffusion from the Near East.

<sup>4</sup>Clive Bell, *Civilisation* (London, 1928), p. 195.

period some sixty-four years on (and, incidentally a savage critic of Bell) attacks the fetishizing of primitivism and the "cult of the peasant," tracing it through Morris, Yeats and Synge to Lawrence and Forster and putting the emphasis in accounting for it onto a patrician hatred of the urban masses and twentieth-century developments in mass culture.<sup>5</sup> Literary modernism is, for Carey, a reaction against modernity in a more general socio-historical sense; Gibbon's protests, though tied explicitly to what began to develop thousands of years ago, are implicitly involved with urbanization still in process as he writes. But despite his own fictional harkings back to an ancient past, Gibbon himself denies being a primitivist, given where mankind has arrived in history. In his essay "The Land" (*Scottish Scene*, p. 294) and his novel *The Thirteenth Disciple* he ridicules G. K. Chesterton's idealizations of peasant life, imagining his corpulent target mucking out a byre.<sup>6</sup>

"Antique Scene" backs up Gibbon's protests of ambivalence about history, in a passage where new is good, given the way the Scottish nation has been warped by its Calvinistic church. Necessary modernity comes in the form of the industrial revolution:

It is evident that in the ancient scene in Mexico...where every year thousands of people were being sacrificed to the Gods of the earth and rain, that a few more hundred years of evolution along the same lines would have wrought a biological deviation from the human norm: the ancient Mexicans, but for the fortunate arrival of Cortes, would have aberrated into a sub-species of homo sapiens. The same might be said of the Scots. Left alone and uninvaded, they might have passed entirely beyond the orbit of the normally human but for the coming of the industrial revolution (*Scottish Scene*, p. 317).

For Marx, the industrial revolution was simultaneously the best and the worst thing that could happen to man, generating unparalleled human degradation but also unparalleled societal progress.<sup>7</sup> The same idea, specific to Scotland, is implicit in Gibbon's essay. He never plays down this revolution's effects; indeed, he exaggerates them in the scenes of unrelieved squalor and dehumanisation in *Grey Granite*, and when painting Glasgow as "the vomit of a cataleptic commercialism" and a city of slum-dwellers akin to Wells's Morlocks (*Scottish Scene*, pp. 136, 137). Nevertheless, better such things in Scot-

<sup>5</sup>John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London, 1992), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>*The Thirteenth Disciple* (Edinburgh, 1981; first pbd. 1931), p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>See Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (1849), in Jon Elster, ed., *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 227. For veiled exploitation the bourgeoisie has substituted "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation," yet "the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."

land than a continuing theocracy; the industrial revolution was ultimately worth it.

Gibbon's version of twentieth-century modernity, though, surpasses previous epochal shifts in its extremity: this century does its best to annihilate the past, most graphically in *The Thirteenth Disciple* (1931):

They were burning out the nineteenth century: Victorian England, Victorian Europe, cant a religion, smugness a creed, gods in whiskers and morals in stays.... That fire went up with the crackling of crinolines and bustles, brothel and bethels. It screamed with the agony of murdered children in Midland factories, sighed and glimmered in a world of such pious belching as no century had ever seen. It flared on a gaseous literature and an idiot art, sank, and seethed and roared again with the fuel of gutter dreams and palace spires (p. 4).

Most of the art, literature and history of the century preceding Gibbon's own has to end in the bonfire; this is possibly modeled on the Beltane festival in Wells's *In The Days of the Comet*, in which most of the houses and factories, architecture and machinery, are reduced to ashes in order to rebuild and create a new civilisation.<sup>8</sup> Gibbon's "Aberdeen" essay looks at a different period and rolls up its sleeves for the corresponding demolition job:

Great sections of the older streets and wynds stand condemned...with antique names that move the antiquarian to suitable regrets when he considers their fate—the Upper Kirkgate, the Nether Kirkgate, the Gallowgate, the Guestrow. But I have no such regrets. Those gates to kirk and gallows: you think of a foetid sixteenth century stench and the staring mobs...and you turn, with relief and a new resolve, to face the glinting, flinting structures that tower new-built up Union Street (*Scottish Scene*, p. 250).

Gibbon's sentiments in *The Thirteenth Disciple* and "Aberdeen" recur in *Gay Hunter*, when the views expressed through the medium of Gay Hunter, involving wholesale contempt for the old in general, are among his most wantonly vandalistic:

Suddenly it seemed to her that it was not only the great and towering bestialities of that life that had been vile...but...old cottages and old couples seated in front of ivy-wreathed doors and old sweethearts and old loyalties and old hopes. Old! what a curse they had been in her world, the old and all the old things that they cherished!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>H. G. Wells, *In the Days of the Comet* (London, 1906), pp. 287-8.

<sup>9</sup>*Gay Hunter* (Edinburgh, 1990; first pbd. 1934), p. 132. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

Analogue to feelings such as this in the literary thirties can be seen with Valentine Cunningham's chapter "Too Old At Forty" about the thirties cult of poetic youth,<sup>10</sup> in which old men become despised and most of the decade's literary heavyweights seem to be under twenty-five in 1930. Gibbon's stance will also recall the iconoclasm of early Modernism, architectural as well as literary. Before Joyce's and Eliot's sophisticated attempts to counterpoint the ancient and the modern, we find Marinetti, leader of the Italian Futurists, proposed in 1909 that he and his friends "will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind.... We want to free the land of its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni and all antiquarians."<sup>11</sup>

T. E. Hulme, early theorist of Modernism, writes on similar (though more specific) lines, claiming to be in favor of "the destruction of all verse more than twenty years old."<sup>12</sup> (Carey's *Intellectuals and the Masses*, predicated on the idea that fascism/elitism and a worship of the masterpieces of High Art go hand in hand, fails to address the problem of the existence of Marinetti and his kind.)<sup>13</sup> Paul de Man would add proto-modernist Rimbaud and Theatre-of-Cruelty advocate Antonin Artaud to such a list: "written poetry has value for one single moment and then should be destroyed."<sup>14</sup> Hulme seems to be acting tactically, implying a program, with his twenty-year limit, in contrast to Artaud's extremist commitment to the existential moment. Gibbon belongs in the Hulme camp, being less interested in momentary aesthetic incandescence than in the planned renewal of culture and society. On the literary front, for instance, John Garland in Gibbon's *Stained Radiancy* attempts to trump High Modernism itself by championing Wells as advanced, in his sense of novelistic purpose, in contrast to Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence, who, despite "lack of purpose" in their novels,

believe themselves up-to-date, Neo-Georgian, yet in novel-writing [are] a generation behind the times... They don't realise that the novel of portrait and manners is a dead dog.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 106-54.

<sup>11</sup>F. T. Marinetti, "Futurist Manifesto," *Le Figaro*, 20 Feb. 1909, p. 1

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 78.

<sup>13</sup>See Carey, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup>Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son Double* (Paris, 1956) is quoted in de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (London, 1983), p. 148, in a chapter entitled "Literary History and Literary Modernity."

<sup>15</sup>*Stained Radiancy* (London, 1930), pp. 87-8.

As it happened, Wells would appear to have lost the debate with Henry James about showing and telling in Art, his later novels remaining substantially unappreciated.<sup>16</sup> But for Gibbon, Wells is advanced; Wells's sense of "purpose" is to be followed ideally for the foreseeable future. At the same time, though, Gibbon avoids jumping on the communist thirties bandwagon of proclaiming a crisis in bourgeois art, locating the crisis of his time in politics and economics only and saying that statements to the contrary equal so much "Bolshevik blah."<sup>17</sup>

Gibbon's iconoclasm in *Stained Radiancance* got him into no real trouble from contemporaries; neither did the will-to-destroy in evidence in *Gay Hunter*, *The Thirteenth Disciple* or "Aberdeen." What did was the strikingly anti-patriotic passage in "Glasgow" in which he ranks all national history and culture as profitless in comparison to present needs. If it comes to a choice between a free, culturally lively independent Scotland which includes rank poverty or an unfree Scotland which does not, he would choose the latter:

for the cleansing of that horror, if cleanse it they could, I would welcome the English in suzerainty over Scotland till the end of time. I would welcome the end of Braid Scots and Gaelic, our culture, our history, our nationhood under the heels of a Chinese army of occupation if it could cleanse the Glasgow slums, give a surety of food and play...to those people of the abyss (*Scottish Scene*, p. 141).

What's important for Glaswegians, then, is for their basic animal needs to be satisfied, and in this they would correspond with Nietzsche's archetypal animal in *Thoughts out of Season*, which is happy, free and unencumbered because it remembers nothing: "de Man says 'I remember', and envies the animal that forgets at once, and watches each moment die, disappear in night and mist, and disappear for ever."<sup>18</sup> They would also correspond with Gibbon's fictional Golden Age men and women in *Three Go Back* (1932), who have customs but no history, and live only for the moment. Gibbon's Chinese fantasy, though, was greeted with disdain among his fellow Scots, among them Neil Gunn, who sees the occupying army idea as a "fantastical irrelevance." The Scots alone, he claims, could sort out their own problems, if given a

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<sup>16</sup>The debate with James has been given various treatments; one such is in the opening chapter of J. R. Hammond, *H. G. Wells and the Modern Novel* (London, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>Gibbon, "Controversy," in *Left Review*, 1, 5 (Feb. 1935), 179.

<sup>18</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thoughts out of Season* [*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung II*] quoted in de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," p. 146.

genuine chance to do so.<sup>19</sup> But this aside, Gibbon's words in *Scottish Scene* have to be taken with a pinch of salt. They form part of a colorful polemic of doubtful taste against the extremes of nationalism—in the same essay we see his diatribe against small nations:

What a curse to the earth are small nations!... Groupings of babbling little morons—babbling militant on the subjects (unendingly) of their *exclusive* cultures...their *national* genius, their unique achievements in throat-cutting in this and that little squabble in the past. Many little curs a-yap above their minute hoardings of shrivelled bones, they cease for their yelpings at passers-by only in such intervals as they devote to civil war flea-hunts. Of all the accursed progeny of World War, surely the worse was this dwarf mongrel-litter (*Scottish Scene*, pp. 144-5).

Gibbon is not without influential allies here. He seems to be roughly following the sentiments of Friedrich Engels, who wrote the following on small Slav nations in 1848:

These relics of a nation mercilessly trampled under foot in the course of history, as Hegel says, these residual fragments of peoples always become fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution, and remain so until their complete extermination or loss of their national characters: just as their whole existence in general is itself a protest against a great history revolution....

The next world war will result in the disappearance from the face of the earth not only of reactionary classes and dynasties, but of entire reactionary peoples. And that, too, is a step forward.<sup>20</sup>

This was written when Engels fundamentally misunderstood why a variety of Slav peoples failed to join in wholeheartedly with the 1848 revolutions; Engels thought their behavior was governed by reactionary nationalism, when in some cases it was actually skepticism about how they would be treated by a fundamentally conservative Hungarian gentry who were making a bourgeois revolution of sorts.<sup>21</sup> Engels aside, Marxism's intolerance of small "unhistorical" nations has obviously extended well into this century. Tom Nairn, maverick Marxian Scottish nationalist, suggests that "the basic concept" of the non-historic is "stronger than its polemical misuse"; some peoples have not formed

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<sup>19</sup>Neil Gunn, "Tradition and Magic in the Work of Lewis Grassie Gibbon," in *Scots Magazine* 30 (October 1938), 28-35.

<sup>20</sup>Friedrich Engels, in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, January 13, 1849; in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (London, 1976), vol. 8, pp. 230, 238.

<sup>21</sup>For a fuller account of this, see R. Rosdolsky, *Engels and the Question of the "Non-Historic Peoples" of 1848* (Glasgow, 1987).



separate states, and thus have no history as separate nations.<sup>22</sup> But polemical misuse, like it or not, has often been the norm; if Gibbon does not use the concept explicitly, it hovers suggestively in the background.

Having now quoted two passages in which Gibbon favors modernity's fierceness against nations, and other pieces before that in which, more generally, the past is modernity's target, it is only reasonable now to reflect on his quite different stance in *Sunset Song* where he mourns deeply the loss of a culture and a language, climaxing with Colquhoun's funeral oration over the four war dead at the standing stones, the four representing "The Old Scotland", a dead and a mourned nation with a particular language and culture. We see a representation of the memorial stone for them, which has a precedent in the form of the Covenanter's gravestones at Dunnottar Castle, one of which is also reproduced:

HERE : LYES : IOHN : STOT : IAMES : AITCHISON:  
IAMES : RUSSELL : AND : WILLIAM : BROWN : [ . .  
. ] WHO : ALL : DIED : PRISONERS : IN : DUN-  
NOTTAR : CASTLE : ANNO : 1685 : FOR : THEIR :  
ADHERENCE : TO THE : WORD : OF : GOD : AND :  
SCOTLANDS COVENANTED : WORK : OF : REF-  
ORMATION REV : 11 CH 12 VERSE<sup>23</sup>

Whatever interpretations one makes of the Covenanter's cause (One of bigotry? Of libertarianism?) for Chris Guthrie their grave stands as a key historical link with ordinary folk and as a spur to basic emotion. It is second in this only to the standing stones above the loch, to which she runs when in deep thought or in trouble. Indeed she thinks over the entirety of her story in the company of the stones, which are "memorials to the Golden Age" in Douglas Young's words, although "only as reminders of the first bringers of civilization who destroyed it." The Great War, remembered by the four dead soldiers' names being carved into the stones,

marks the final triumph of those forces of civilization which made their first encroachments with the early invaders. It is fitting that the stones which are a memorial to that first invasion should also be a memorial to the final defeat of the Pictish folk of the golden Age.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London, 1997), p. 206.

<sup>23</sup>Gibbon, *Sunset Song* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 125.

<sup>24</sup>Young, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

Gibbon, then, attaches key significance to monuments which commemorate relevant and useful elements in the past, even while he expresses wishes himself or through fictional surrogates to fasten modernity to the destruction of the unnecessary past. A record, though, of Gibbon's destructive impulses in relation to modernity leaves out his more positive emphases, which derive both from a Communist belief in an improved world following the destruction of capitalism and an anarchist belief that man might move nearer the freedom of the pre-civilization Golden Age after the necessary readjustments of Communism.<sup>25</sup> The trajectories of much of his fiction show Gibbon anxious to accelerate into the future.

Gibbon's science-fiction novel *Three Go Back* jumps twenty or so thousand years forward near its conclusion. The essence of the story occurs thousands of years in the past on the isle of Atlantis; the three main characters arrive at such a point through the machinery of a freak storm and an airship disaster; after they have discovered the Golden Age in this time and place, and after impending disaster due to an attack by Neanderthals, a jump forward in time takes place and hero and heroine resolve to convert the world to Diffusionism now back in the present. This, Gibbon's worst novel, is one of his most characteristic, anticipating *Sunset Song* in its references to Golden Men and its accent on archetypes, as Francis Russell Hart suggests.<sup>26</sup> It is also characteristic in its Messianic insistence that the fundamental Truth (Diffusionism) about humanity and history has been revealed to its cast, and must now be revealed to the world; *The Lost Trumpet* (1932) and *Image and Superscription* (1933) are in this category, as is *Gay Hunter* which sees the same basic move as *Three Go Back*: from a time far distant which the bulk of the novel explores into a present of extreme polarities and struggle; a present of strikes, hunger marches and swastikas (*Gay Hunter*, p. 10). William Malcolm attacks the novel for staying so long in a possible future that he finds irrelevant when there's so much to worry about at home;<sup>27</sup> this is harsh, especially given the quasi-fascism that Gay finds there, a recapitulation of the fascism that (according to historical accounts she listens to in the future) conquered in the West in the twentieth century. She comes back to the living England of her own life-time" and sees the "glow of London" where the great issues of political control remain undecided (*Gay Hunter*, pp. 183-4). Other novels go more conventionally forward in time, but make a point of covering a couple of decades or so before ending up in the reader's present. *The Thirteenth Disciple* (the novel which burns out the nineteenth century) begins just before the onset

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<sup>25</sup>For an explicit summary of this Anarcho-Communism, see his letter to Eric Linklater, 10 Nov. 1934. NLS acc. 10282.

<sup>26</sup>Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), pp. 230-31.

<sup>27</sup>William Malcolm, *A Reformer and Blasphemer* (Aberdeen, 1984), p. 113.

of the twentieth, and follows Gibbon's semi-autobiographical creation Malcom Maudslay through existences as failed lad o' pairts, First World War soldier, and non-aligned thirties radical. His death in central America, searching for Diffusionist truth (again) seems unnecessary; a son, though, is born to him just after his own demise.

*Grey Granite*, the climactic third part of *A Scots Quair*, is artistically superior to the above novels; it shares with them, though, a concern with the present; the *Quair* started in 1911 with its heroine Chris Guthrie aged 15; she's now 38 in 1934; Gibbon tries to sum up the Scottish city of his own present. He assumes that the march of Communism is the march of HISTORY in capitals, even though this is a movement that Chris, Ellen, and even the Communist leader's wife Mrs. Trease are immensely skeptical about. An incidental bus that Ewan rides on is the "chariot of Time let loose on the world roaring down long fir-darkened haughs of history into the shining ways of tomorrow"—compare the hero's less politically developed bus in *Stained Radiance*, the "chariot of God."<sup>28</sup> Motion into the future is emphasized in such instances by motion in space; the same thing occurs in *Image and Superscription* where the hero powers away from the book's final struggle into further extra-textual ones on a high-performance motorbike. Gibbon risks getting it wrong by being so specific about the present. Walter Scott, whose historical novels do not reach his own present, does imply unmistakably in *Heart of Midlothian* and *Waverley* that the Scottish future lies in cooperation with England. However unpleasant Scott's line may be, it is more accurate than Gibbon on the future and Communism. On the other hand, Scott avoided the crucial issue of the Highland Clearances, which were happening as he wrote. His powers of prediction aside, Gibbon engages impressively and accurately with the social privations of the thirties, and expends much rhetorical energy on emphasizing this importance of the here and now.

There's a sense, though, in which Gibbon lets down his argument about the present moment being so absolutely critical. Historians have to make their own decisions about what to treat as the same things over time and what things to treat as different; taking only the *Quair* and *Spartacus*, one finds the Israelites' Samson, the army of Spartacus, the Covenanters, Kinraddie's crofters, Segget's spinners, and Duncairn's keelies constituting one large category: the oppressed. The same struggle is going on all the time; there is Ewan in the jail cell, for instance, who is part of "that army itself—that army of pain and blood and torment that was yet but the raggedest van of the hordes of the last of the classes, the ancient lowly," victims of "the enslavement and oppression of six thousand years" (even though his diachronic link with the oppressed from the past contrasts with his lack of synchronic link with the Duncairn keelies, who,

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<sup>28</sup>*Grey Granite* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 153; *Stained Radiance: A Fictionist's Prelude* (London, 1930), p. 9.

Jim Trease says, aren't the real working class.) So there's a sense in which perhaps the urgency of the present moment which this paper has emphasized is compromised by the suggestion in Gibbon's writing that the same battle will always go on—and Communist chief Jim Trease admits that capitalism might go on and sustain ten million unemployed.

This problem may not be fully resolvable; the beginnings of a resolution can be made by some comparisons between Gibbon's ideas and Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Benjamin shows a passion to keep the memory of the past alive and to revive things forgotten:

to articulate the past historically...means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.<sup>29</sup>

Particular memories Gibbon is interested in are those of Spartacus's rebellion and of the Covenanters of 1685. More generally, he tries to evoke in *Sunset Song* and his essay on Scotland's "Antique Scene" the history of the Scottish common people who had no history. He revives history through the physical concreteness of the standing stones as place of ancient sacrifice and modern war memorial and by the Covenanters' graves at Dunnottar. Walter Benjamin's angel of history sees a storm blowing continually from paradise that creates the wreckage referred to as history (which the angel sees as a continual catastrophe); Gibbon's account of the history of civilization is also an account of the history of barbarism; Benjamin's eighth thesis claims that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the present state of emergency is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin, p. 248); that Fascism is the latest form that crisis and oppression take. Gibbon sees states of emergency when he looks at Spartacus' rebellion, the Covenanters' rebellion, the First World War, the twenties and the thirties; for him, too, emergency is not the exception but the rule. Ewan's sense of emergency in *Grey's Granite* is enhanced with a sense of cumulative past emergencies and parallel situations. The present, always the greatest moment of crisis, contains the essence of the crises of the past. Modernity's urgency is, then, not at the expense of history. Though Gibbon gestures at putting bits of the past in the dustbin, he is far more concerned to gather up that which he deems to be history and include it in his account of present state of emergency.

*Nene College*

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<sup>29</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (London, 1992), p. 247.