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Hanne Tange

Grassic Gibbon's Art of Community:  
*A Scots Quair* and the Condition of Scotland

When Lewis Grassic Gibbon's trilogy *A Scots Quair* appeared between 1932 and 1934, Scottish artists and intellectuals were engaged in an ambitious campaign to reevaluate their national heritage. Since the early 1920s, when the manifestos by Hugh MacDiarmid had launched the notion of a Scottish cultural renaissance, supporters of the revival had considered a negotiation of Scottish history and space essential to their project. The real Scotland, they stressed, had for too long been misrepresented by flawed nineteenth-century imagery. The Renaissance idea of the nation was to be cleared of all past romanticism and sentimentalism, which is to say that the iconographic landscapes and mythologies created by Walter Scott and his followers were no longer acceptable. In his 1934 portrait of the nation, *Scotland and the Scots*, William Power provides the following account of the reevaluation:

At the back of all [the younger writers] write is a critical synthesis. By slow degrees they are scaling off from the picture of Scotland all the spurious, excrescent Scotlands that have been imposed upon it since the days of Mary Stuart and John Knox—the Scotlands of fanaticists, sadists, flunkeys, renegades, careerists, romanticists, sentimentalists, buffoons, snobs, exploiters, hucksters, game-preservers, and “heids o’ depariments”—and revealing the essential, the European Scotland, the Scotland that is a product of immemorial racial experience, of authentic spiritual and intellectual processes, of geographical position, of soil and climate, and of scenery.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William Power, *Scotland and the Scots* (Edinburgh & London, 1934), p. 26.

The search for a modern, authentic Scotland took many forms. A favorite genre among Scottish inter-war writers was the travelogue, but also poetry, drama, non-fiction and fiction were characterized by the desire to rewrite the nation. One of the most successful reinventions of Scotland was Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*. In the narratives *Sunset Song* (1932), *Cloud Howe* (1933) and *Grey Granite* (1934), Gibbon evoked the history of Scottish modernization through the village of Kinraddie, the small town Segget, and the city of Duncairn. The three communities were rooted in Gibbon's home region of the Mearns, but the experience conveyed was universal in implication.

The present discussion examines Lewis Grassie Gibbon's construction of the Scottish community in relation to the Condition of Scotland theme. I define the Condition of Scotland motif as a general discourse about the state of the national characteristic of Scottish poetry, fiction, and non-fiction between 1919 and 1939. As a replacement for the nineteenth-century images denounced by the moderns, associates of the Scottish Renaissance presented what they themselves perceived to be an acute analysis of the political, economic, social, and cultural condition of Scotland. At their time of writing, the Depression had paralyzed the industrial Central Belt, while the rural Lowlands and Highlands were suffering from the long-term effects of a lack of opportunity, depopulation, physical stagnation, and spiritual decay. The general mood of the nation was pessimistic, which brought the intellectuals to the conclusion that Scotland was a country in eclipse. Politically, the 1707 Union had deprived the Scots of their say over Scottish matters. Economically, the early 1930s offered limited prospects of industrial regeneration, and rural Scotland was dismissed as a lost cause. According to Edwin Muir, Scotland was becoming a space devoid of life:

I should like to put here my main impression, and it is that Scotland is gradually being emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth, industry, art, intellect, and innate character. This is a sad conclusion; but it has some support on historical grounds. If a country exports its most enterprising spirits and best minds year after year, for fifty or a hundred or two hundred years, some result will inevitably follow. England gives some scope for its best; Scotland gives none; and by now its large towns are composed of astute capitalists and angry proletarians, with noting that matters much in between.<sup>2</sup>

The Condition of Scotland books left the impression that Scotland had lost its way somewhere along the road towards modernity. The dismal state of the nation was the inevitable conclusion to a long-term decline, which explains the inter-war writers' preoccupation with historical change. What the Scots needed, the Renaissance authors stressed, was a restored faith in their own capacity, for only the confidence of a resurgent country would warrant the suc-

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<sup>2</sup>Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 3-4. Henceforth Muir.

cess of the revival. Hence the Condition of Scotland genre was meant to inspire Scots to take action—to engage in a campaign that would turn a tragic past and a dismal present into a splendid future. There was a visionary aspect to Scottish inter-war literature that would redeem the negativism.

Lewis Grassie Gibbon's construction of the fictional community in *Sunset Song* may have been inspired by the inter-war concern with authenticity, for in the prologue "The Unfurrowed Field" the author provides a detailed introduction to the history and geography of Kinraddie. The preface combines the universality of mythical history with a past peculiar to the Mearns. The narrative begins with Cospatrick de Gondeshil's slaying of the fabulous gryphon, then jumps to the Scottish Wars of Independence when William Wallace laid siege to Dunnottar Castle. Gibbon continues with the stories of the Mearns Covenanters and James Boswell's adventures at Kinraddie House before ending in the nineteenth century when the local laird cleared the peasants off the land, creating a small number of large, profitable farms. The contrast between the tiny crofts of the old peasantry and the large steadings of the capitalist class is reinforced by the geography of Kinraddie. In "The Unfurrowed Field" Gibbon invites the reader on an imaginary tour round the village, in the course of which he describes the members of the community, the quality of their soil as well as their status within the society. Farmers such as Ellison at the Mains and Gordon at Upperrhill, Gibbon stresses, are seen as outsiders to Kinraddie. While they have no place within the ancient order of rural Scotland, they represent the future of Scottish farming because their machines and big-scale production echo the competitive standards of the industrial age. The crofters John Guthrie, Chae Strachan and Long Rob, on the other hand, embody the self-sufficiency, co-operation, and tradition that have been the strength of the Scottish peasantry for generations. Such collectivism cannot survive the arrival of a capitalist system founded on an individualist ethos, and as the novel progresses, their concept of society is eroded until at the end it has become a thing of the past. "The ancient, strange whirlimagig of the generations that enslaved the Scots peasantry for centuries is broken," the novelist writes in his essay "The Land," encapsulating this process of inevitable change.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of "The Unfurrowed Field" Gibbon observes on the nature of his imagined community:

So that was Kinraddie that bleak winter of nineteen eleven and the new minister, him they chose early next year, he was to say it was the Scots countryside itself, fathered between a kailyard and a bonny brier bush in the lee of a house with green shutters.

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<sup>3</sup>Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene* (London, 1934), p. 302. Henceforth Gibbon.

And what he meant by that you could guess at yourself if you'd a mind for puzzles and dirt, there wasn't a house with green shutters in the whole of Kinraddie.<sup>4</sup>

The paragraph offers an interesting comment on *Sunset Song's* position within Scottish literary tradition. The term "kailyard" applies to a nineteenth-century type of fiction that had imagined Lowland Scotland as a rural paradise cut off from the disruptive influence of time and presided over by the holy trinity of laird, minister and schoolmaster. To writers of Gibbon's generation, Ian MacLaren's *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* (1894) was synonymous of this genre, while George Douglas Brown's 1901 novel *The House with the Green Shutters* represented the break with the kailyard tradition. By placing his fictional landscape between the conflicting modes of MacLaren and Brown, Gibbon underlines his reliance upon, as well as his independence from, his nineteenth-century predecessors, ensuring that his own idea of the nation transcends such parochialism. At the same time, the conclusion to "The Unfurrowed Field" emphasizes the imaginary qualities of Grassic Gibbon's landscape. Through the reworking of his native speech, geography, and history, he created a fictional community so close to the reality of the Mearns that many of Gibbon's contemporaries mistook the fiction for fact. The location of Kinraddie was almost identical with the novelist's home village of Arbuthnott.<sup>5</sup> On a similar note, Thomas Crawford's notes to the Canongate edition of *Sunset Song* show to what extent Gibbon employed events and personalities from the history of his region. Thus in "Seed-Time" Chris Guthrie visits Dunnottar Castle, which brings her to reflect upon the tragic fate of her Covenanting forefathers (*Sunset*, p. 125). The geographical and historical verisimilitude increases the strength of the imagined community in *Sunset Song*, providing Kinraddie with the details that make it a plausible landscape. Yet Gibbon is eager to stress the fictionality of his space, admitting that he is indeed playing around with the facts. Ian Carter concludes that it makes little sense to compare Gibbon's demography to that of the real Mearns: "Kinraddie and Arbuthnott are not necessarily identical: Arbuthnott lies in geographical space, while Kinraddie lies in literary space—in a tradition of writing about the Scottish countryside."<sup>6</sup> In short, the village of Kinraddie is created by the fusion of real places, authentic history and personal recollections, but because of the way Gibbon

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<sup>4</sup>Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Sunset Song* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 24. Henceforth *Sunset*.

<sup>5</sup>See Ian Campbell, "Lewis Grassic Gibbon and the Mearns," in Graeme Cruickshank, ed., *A Sense of Place: Studies in Scottish Local History* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 15. Henceforth Campbell.

<sup>6</sup>Ian Carter, "Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* and the Peasantry," *History Workshop*, 6 (1978), 174.

puts all his pieces together it emerges as one of the strongest inter-war images of Scotland.

To the novelist's achievement in terms of geographical and historical authenticity should be added the stylistic device that enables his community to speak. In his 1934 essay "Literary Lights," Gibbon defined his choice of a mixed Scots and English medium as an attempt to "mould the English language into the rhythms and cadences of Scots spoken speech, and to inject into the English vocabulary such minimum number of words from Braid Scots as that remodelling requires" (Gibbon, p. 205). The result is a synthetic Scots, which, in the words of Ian Campbell, enables the English reader to "comprehend the majority of the language, since intrusion is minimal," yet allows a Scottish audience to benefit from "familiar sentence-patterns, or ambiguous words such as 'brave' and 'childe' which mean one thing to a Scot, another to an English reader coming new to the prose."<sup>7</sup> In combination with the author's stream of consciousness, this vernacular vehicle leaves the impression of a communal narrator. Certain sections of *Sunset Song* are clearly told from the point of view of protagonist Chris Guthrie, others by an anonymous Kinraddie voice, but ever so often, the two perspectives blend into one. The implications are two-fold: on the personal level, it identifies Chris as a member of her community rather than the detached outsider she becomes in *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, where the barriers between individual and society are less easily overcome. In social terms the manner in which the different voices of the community combine together create the image of a homogeneous world where co-operative forces prevail. As a narrative strategy the Grassic Gibbon style thus reflects the innate character of Kinraddie.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that *Sunset Song* portrays a world in transition. In "The Unfurrowed Field," Gibbon described how the last of the Cospatric lairds had improved his estate through enclosures: "on the cleared land he had bigger steadings built and he let them at bigger rents and longer leases" (*Sunset*, p. 5). The laird's maneuvers are significant on two levels: on the one hand, they underline the transience of Kinraddie. Edwin Muir notes that a characteristic of the Kailyard was the escape to "Scotland's past, to a country which had existed before Industrialism (Muir, pp. 67-8). Thus the Kailyard was set in a Scottish landscape which appeared to have stepped out of time, and which consequently offered a myth of endurance. By stressing the dynamic aspects of Kinraddie, Gibbon defies that myth of timelessness. Although Chris seeks a vision of permanence to place against the rapid flow of history, the only reality left at the end is change, which leaves no room for Kailyard nostalgia. Within the socio-historical frame of *Sunset Song*, on the other hand, the laird's clearances mark the beginning of a transformation from the ancient system of small-holding to the rising order of capitalist-farming.

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<sup>7</sup>Ian Campbell, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 53.

“As the son of a tenant farmer in Kincardineshire,” David Craig observes, “[Gibbon] was placed to write the final account—in *British* literature—of a people whose place of work and working-team was one and the same as their own homes and families.”<sup>8</sup> The first character to recognize the impact of this historical process is John Guthrie. In “Drilling” Guthrie’s encounter with the malicious gossip arising from Jean Guthrie’s suicide brings him to reflect on the future of rural Scotland:

Now also it grew plain to him here as never in Echt that the day of the crofter was fell near finished, put by, the day of folk like himself and Chae and Cuddiestoun, Pooty and Long Rob of the Mill, the last of the farming folk that wrung their living from the land with their own bare hands. Sign of the times he saw Jean Guthrie’s killing of herself to shame him and make of his name a by-word in the mouths of his neighbours, sign of a time when women would take their own lives or flaunt their harlotries as they pleased, with the country-folk climbing on silver, the few, back in the pit, the many, and a darkness down on the land he loved better than his soul or God (*Sunset*, pp. 75-6).

Though Guthrie’s religious bigotry undermines his reliability as a witness, his predictions reveal the author’s ambivalent feelings about modernization. The rise of large-scale farming at the expense of crofters such as Guthrie is a negative development. *Sunset Song*’s positive figures such as Chae Strachan, Long Rob, and Chris’s first husband Ewan are associated with crofting, but they have all disappeared by the end of the First World War. In addition to killing off the peasantry, this provides conditions favorable to a capitalist take-over. As a result, big-scale producers like Ellison and the Gordons thrive, while the rest of Kinraddie is wasted. On the positive side, this might reform the behavior of members of the community, whose malicious gossip does not live up to the moral standards of a Kailyard idyll. The co-operative and egalitarian tendencies of rural Scotland are underlined in the section in *Sunset Song* where all the residents of Kinraddie cooperate in an effort to save Peesie’s Knapp from the fire, but there are also aspects of the old order that are less than ideal.

The different strands of *Sunset Song* are brought to their conclusion in the epilogue which, like the prelude, carries the title “The Unfurrowed Field.” Once again the author makes a fictional journey to examine the character of Kinraddie; but where in the introduction Gibbon had emphasized the continuity of the landscape, he now dwells upon images of a broken tradition. The crofts of Peesie’s Knapp, the Mill, and Blawearie are abandoned, the oldest inhabitant of the community, Pooty, has been taken to the madhouse, and in place of the ancient songs performed at the wedding of Chris and Ewan Tavendale, the young generation has adopted Dixie tunes. In the sermon commemorating Chae Strachan, Long Rob, and Chris’s Ewan, who had died in the First World

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<sup>8</sup>David Craig, “Novels of Peasant Crisis,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2 (1973), 51.

War, the new minister Robert Colquhoun says “*With them there died a thing older than themselves, these were the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk*” (*Sunset*, p. 256). In spite of its elegiac tone Colquhoun’s sermon should not be misread for nostalgia. Gibbon recognizes that his narrative evolves within a closed historical epoch, that there can be no return to the world it portrays. The crofters have disappeared, the capitalist-farmers have taken control, but according to the minister, not even they will prevail:

*Nothing, it has been said, is true but change, nothing abides, and here in Kinraddie where we watch the building of those little prides and those little fortunes on the ruins of the little farms we must give heed that these also do not abide, that a new spirit shall come to the land with the greater herd and the great machines* (*Sunset*, p. 256).

Robert Colquhoun will take Chris, the final survivor of the peasantry, out of Kinraddie to the burgh of Segget, which reflects the ongoing modernization. The old Scotland is dead at the end of *Sunset Song*, but a new vision has yet to emerge.

With *Cloud Howe* Gibbon approaches the situation of contemporary Scotland. The novel is set in the burgh of Segget, which represents a transitory phase between country and city, bringing together the rival systems of agriculture and industrialism. Chronologically, the narrative follows the development of Scotland from the end of World War One to the late 1920s, when economic conditions were deteriorating, while political priorities shifted from national reconstruction to class war. The crucial event of the period was the 1926 General Strike, which occupies a central position in *Cloud Howe* as well as in other Renaissance works such as Hugh MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. On the importance of the strike to writers of Gibbons’ generation Samuel Hynes observes:

[The] comparison is to a war; but this one is a *political* war. The political Thirties may be said to have begun here, for this generation at least. And with the intrusion of politics, and especially of left-wing politics, into the intellectual lives of the young, Modernism changed direction, and became something else—a literature of engagement that faced forward, towards the next world war.<sup>9</sup>

With reference to the Condition of Scotland theme, one should note Gibbon’s dedication of *Cloud Howe* to nationalist and journalist George Malcolm Thomson, the author of such studies of Scotland as *Caledonia* (1927) and *Scotland That Distressed Area* (1935). A reference to *Caledonia* in a letter from Gibbon to his old schoolmaster Alexander Gray proves the novelist’s awareness of the

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<sup>9</sup>Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London, 1992), p. 422.



work.<sup>10</sup> Gibbon incorporated a reference to Thomson in *Cloud Howe* in order to stress the connection between the Condition of Scotland genre and the political, economic, and social analysis offered in the second part of *A Scots Quair*.

Like *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe* attempts to expose the Scottish experience through a single community. In terms of social history, Segget represents a more modern society than Kinraddie, which is to say it has fully embraced the principles of capitalism and industrialism that were only beginning to make an impact on rural Scotland in the previous narrative. In the manner of "The Unfurrowed Field" in *Sunset Song*, a prologue in *Cloud Howe* establishes a place for the burgh within the history and geography of the Mearns. A description of the landscape is followed by a historical survey, which explains the growth of Segget from the Middle Ages to the present. *Cloud Howe's* "Proem" is shorter than the prelude of *Sunset Song*. Whereas in *Sunset Song* all characters were placed within the community, the population of Segget is not examined in any great detail. Whereas Kinraddie was presented as a relatively homogenous society, Segget is a divided world where each town-dweller cares little about his or her neighbors. Accordingly, Segget's communal narrator focuses primarily on the less-than-ideal behavior of the burgh inhabitants," and although that provides a basis for the comic interludes that occasionally interrupt the main flow of the narrative, it does not create an image of Segget that matches that of Kinraddie.

Gibbon's history of Segget is dominated by internal disunity. The fragmentation dates from the arrival of industrialism, which, in addition to a new economic system, introduced new machinery, new inhabitants, and the first symptoms of class war:

[The] jute trade boomed, the railway came, the two jute mills came, standing out from the station a bit, south of the town, with the burn for power. The Segget folk wouldn't look at the things, the Mowats had to go to Bervie for spinners, and a tink-like lot of the creatures came and crowded the place, and danced and fought, raised hell's delight, and Segget looked on as a man would look on a swarm of lice; and folk of the olden breed moved out, and builded them houses up and down the East Wynd, and called it New Town and spoke of the dirt that swarmed in Old Town, round about the West Wynd.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1920s, the process of disintegration has been completed. The town has split into two separate political, economic, and social communities, which are no longer able to make contact with one another. Gibbon stresses the separation through his choice of language and narrative technique. Where all Kin-

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<sup>10</sup>Letter of 13 June 1929. National Library of Scotland, MS. 26109.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Cloud Howe* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 6. Henceforth *Cloud*.

raddie shared one vernacular idiom, the dialogue now shifts between dense Scots, Anglo-Scots, Standard English and laird Mowat's public school accent, with a consequent failure of communication. Segget voices are individualized and competitive where in *Sunset Song* Chris and Kinraddie blended into one another. In the opening pages of "Stratus" one finds the points of view of Chris and her son Ewan as well as those of various Segget burghers, and while these may complement each other, they never fuse into one (see *Cloud*, pp. 109ff).

As a representative of the Kirk, Colquhoun embodies the positive aspects of Calvinism, according to Gibbon. "There are few such pleasant people as the younger ministers of Scotland," he notes in his essay "Religion," and he would probably place the Segget minister within this category of "free-hearted and liberal, mild socialists" (Gibbon, p. 318). Colquhoun belongs to the establishment, but his sympathy lies with the spinners as he tries to span the communal divide. Yet his hopes for a reformed society, built on his twin principles of Christianity and socialism, founder on his failure to communicate. In the midst of a Scots-speaking world Colquhoun stands aloof as a speaker of Standard English, making him unable to enter into a dialogue with the factions of Segget. The middle-class complains about the socialism they hear in his sermons, while the spinners call the minister "Creeping Jesus," suggesting that he substitutes religion for social justice (*Cloud*, p. 174).

The developments of minister and town converge in "Stratus" when the 1926 General Strike hits Segget. Not surprisingly, the spinners support the action of the miners in the hope it might draw the politicians' attention to their difficulties. Instead of a campaign for necessary change, the workers plot to blow up the railway bridge. Encouraged by the laird, on the other hand, the Segget establishment is determined to suppress the workers. Their middle-class militancy is meant to maintain the status quo. The outsiders Chris, Colquhoun, Ake Ogilvie, and the trade unionist Jock Cronin struggle to bring the two factions together, but when the Strike collapses, the spinners turn against Cronin and Colquhoun:

The spinners and station folk wouldn't believe it when the news came through that the Strike was ended, they said the news was just a damned lie... Syne they heard how the leaders had been feared of the jail, and the whole thing just fell to smithereens in Segget. Some spinners that night went down the West Wynd and bashed in the windows of the Cronin house, and set out in a birn to come to the Manse, they said the minister had egged them on, him safe and sound in his own damned job, and they'd do to the Manse as they'd done to the Cronins (*Cloud*, p. 155).

Once again, the misunderstanding is due to a failure of communication between the minister, the spinners, and Segget as a whole. While Colquhoun may have held the right ideas for Segget, and Scotland, he proved incapable of turning his words into action.

Of the three novels in *A Scots Quair*, *Cloud Howe* offers Gibbon's most discerning commentary on the condition of Scotland. As an image of the nation Segget works better than the alternatives of country or city, for, although it represents a transitory stage in the process that is moving the Scots from rural Kinraddie to urban Duncairn, it accommodates more aspects of Scottish life than the other spaces. The farm of Meiklebogs coexists with the railway and the mill; the old aristocracy confronts a rising proletariat; the ideas discussed range from the old-fashioned outlook of the Segget conservatives to Colquhoun's socialism and Mowat's fascism. Thus Segget contains the old Scotland as well as the symptoms of a new, which makes it possible to see the town as a microcosm of Scotland. If on a symbolic level, Segget speaks for the nation, it is a Scotland in decline. Politically, the town suffers from the polarization, which in the 1930s would drive the proletariat towards communism, the middle-class to the extreme right. Economically, the mill closure is symptomatic of the recession that since the early 1920s had caused a fall in production, rising unemployment, and a loss of faith in the capacity of Scottish industry. As regards the social situation, a comparison between Gibbon's narrative and Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey*, which in a sense provides a factual companion to *Cloud Howe*'s fiction, points to the fact that poverty, malnutrition, and ill health were the reality of inter-war Scotland. In places Gibbon seems almost hysterical in his emphasis on the plight of the workers, but Muir's account of Glasgow is equally bleak. Gibbon's condemnation of Segget may be justified on the grounds that the town should have acted upon its economic and social deterioration. Because of the community's failure to respond, conditions degenerate to such a degree that only a revolution can resolve the situation. In his last sermon Colquhoun calls for "a stark, sure creed that will cut like a knife, a surgeon's knife through the doubt and disease" (*Cloud*, p. 210), thus anticipating the communism of *Grey Granite*.

*Cloud Howe* ends on a sad note. While making his final appeal for solidarity between the classes, the minister dies in the pulpit. His death deprives the community of its spiritual leader, while the mill closure undermines the economic foundation of Segget. Yet an alternative vision for Scotland has not emerged, which is to say that the reader is left in an ideological vacuum. In the concluding paragraph Chris looks down upon the town, contemplating:

Then that had finished; she went slow down the brae, only once looked back at the frown of the hills, and caught her breath at that sight they held, seeing them bare of their clouds for once, the pillars of mist that aye crowned their heights, all but a faint wisp vanishing south, and the bare, still rocks upturned to the sky (*Cloud*, p. 212.).

In comparison with the epilogue of *Sunset Song*, the tone of *Cloud Howe* is strangely passive. While Colquhoun becomes increasingly involved with the condition of Segget, Chris distances herself from all religious and ideological commitments. On the communal level, the resignation is a symptom of

Segget's inability to produce a sustainable vision. The laird's fascism is denounced, while Colquhoun's Christian Socialism cannot survive his death. Jock Cronin exchanges his radicalism for the bread-and-butter politics of established Labour, and the liberalism of Chris and Ake Ogilvie is confined to the Scotland that had disappeared with the peasantry. As *Cloud Howe* closes, Gibbon has to abandon the old Scotland altogether in order to embrace a myth of national regeneration.

The modernity of Duncairn, the setting of the final part of *A Scots Quair*, is emphasized from the beginning of the narrative. In comparison with *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*, which were introduced by prologues locating Kinraddie and Segget within the history and geography of the Mearns, *Grey Granite* begins *in medias res*, and in the light of the previous narratives that has two implications: on the one hand, it implies that the narrative has reached the author's present. *Cloud Howe* had finished without an epilogue, which suggests that the final chapter could have been set in the Scotland of the early 1930s. The absence of an introduction to *Grey Granite* would suggest that it focuses on the modern age and therefore has no need for a historical frame. The lack of a prologue may also be explained with reference to Gibbon's geography, while *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe* were set in very particular environments, Duncairn could be anywhere. In his "Cautionary Note" to *Grey Granite*, Gibbon describes it as the industrial capital the Mearns people failed to build, but it might well have been Glasgow, Manchester or Liverpool.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that Gibbon never completed the "Curtain Raiser" that should have introduced the novel. An added historical dimension would have undermined the universal significance of the location, revealing it as the Aberdeen Ian Campbell claims it to be (Campbell, p. 18).

As the conclusion to Gibbon's fictional history of Scotland, *Grey Granite* works on several levels. In terms of space, Duncairn marks the end of the process that has transferred the majority of Scots from a rural into an industrial environment. Chronologically, the narrative picks up at the point where *Cloud Howe* ended, following the story of modern Scotland through to the novelist's own present. As regards style, Gibbon recognized that *Grey Granite* represented his greatest challenge, writing in "Literary Lights":

[The] scene so far has been a comparatively uncrowded and simple one—the countryside and village of modern Scotland. Whether his [Gibbon's] technique is adequate to compass and express the life of an industrialized Scots town in all its complexity it yet to be demonstrated; whether his peculiar style may not become either intolerably mannered or degenerate, in the fashion of Joyce, into the unfortunate unintelligibilities of a literary second childhood, is also in question (Gibbon, p. 205).

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<sup>12</sup>Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Grey Granite* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. viii. Henceforth *Granite*.

The reference to Joyce is interesting for, according to Emer Nolan the Irish modernist had allowed his Dublin to define itself through gossip, slang and story-telling.<sup>13</sup> Gibbon had used similar devices in the initial parts of his Scots trilogy where the communal voice of *Sunset Song* and the comic interludes of *Cloud Howe* evoked the nature of Kinraddie and Segget. However, in *Cloud Howe* the voices become increasingly competitive and individualized, suggesting that the homogeneity of the old Scotland was breaking down. This trend continues throughout *Grey Granite* where the narrative dissolves into disconnected paragraphs told from the contrasting perspectives of Chris, her son Ewan, Ma Cleghorn, the press, the police, the provost, and the workers. This fragmentation has two implications for our understanding of Duncairn: on one level, it reflects a society where communication across political, social and economic boundaries is no longer possible. This theme picks up from *Cloud Howe* where Gibbon used similar means to convey the disunity of Segget. A second, more wide-ranging interpretation sees the dissolution of the narrative as a representation of the impact of modernization. With modernity comes a growing individualism, which again puts the emphasis on the single human being rather than the collective vision of society. As a result the different members of the community can no longer speak as one voice.

Besides being a society cut across by political, economic and social divisions, Duncairn represents a denationalized space. The move to a modern, industrial environment can only come at the expense of the Scottish element for, as Muir notes, industrialism is an international trend that pays little heed to the peculiarities of Scottish culture (Muir, pp. 102-3). In *Grey Granite*, the ancient lament "The Flowers of the Forest," which Chris had sung at her wedding in *Sunset Song*, has been substituted by American dance tunes. The joiner, blacksmith, and tailor of Segget are made redundant by the mass-production of the Duncairn factories. Goods are provided by Woolworth's, and the cinema has replaced the ceilidh. As the personification of the old Scotland, Chris watches the change with sadness. She cannot relate to a denationalized, consumer-oriented society, and, as the narrative develops, she becomes increasingly disconnected from the history evolving around her. Chris's peripherality is underlined in "Spheene" when Ma Cleghorn takes her to an American movie:

Chris felt sleepy almost as soon as she sat, and yawned, pictures wearied her nearly to death, the flickering shadows and the awful voices, the daft tales they told and the dafter news. She fell asleep through the cantrips a creature was playing, a mouse dressed up in breeks like a man, and only woke up as Ma shook her: *Hey, the meikle film's starting now, lassie, God damn't, d'you want to waste a whole nine-peeny ticket?* (*Granite*, p. 85).

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<sup>13</sup>Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London and New York, 1995), p. 87.

Whether or not Chris appreciates it, Mickey Mouse, mass culture, and consumerism represent the future of Scotland in *A Scots Quair*. The central development in *Grey Granite* is the ideological maturation of Ewan, not his mother's struggle to maintain a sense of Scottishness in a world disconnected from national history and geography. Chris moves to Duncairn because of Ewan's decision to take up an apprenticeship rather than go to university; where the transition proves difficult for Chris, Ewan thrives in an urban environment.

Immediately upon his arrival at Gowan and Gloag's Ewan experiences the symptoms of class war. Ewan's fellow apprentices read his detachment as a sign of social superiority and decide to use this opportunity to get their own back at the middle-class. Eventually this resentment results in a physical encounter, which leaves Ewan wounded. At first, Ewan fails to make sense of his situation. However, when he returns to Gowan and Gloag's at the end of his sick-leave, Ewan makes a conscious effort to bridge the gap between the working-class boys and himself, inviting them to join him in conversation or for lunch at the docks. The other apprentices respond to Ewan's gesture by opening their world to him. Gradually he is introduced to the social, economic, and political state of working-class Duncairn, discovering a city paralyzed by the Slump. To the individual Duncairn workman the international crisis means more than the statistics quoted by politicians and intellectuals. In the slums falling production, factory closures, and unemployment manifest themselves in the form of deteriorating living conditions. Despite the squalor he sees Ewan discovers a positive dimension to working-class life. Towards the end of "Epidote" he chances upon a procession of the unemployed organized by the communist leader Jim Trease, and this powerful expression of solidarity convinces Ewan of the need for action. He accepts that strikes, protest meetings and hunger marches are necessary parts of the campaign to draw the attention of Duncairn's political and economic leaders to the plight of the workers.

Gibbon clearly sees Ewan as the personification of the new Scotland. In his closing sermon in *Cloud Howe*, Robert Colquhoun had stressed the need for a radical solution to the contemporary situation, and as *Grey Granite* unfolds it becomes obvious that Ewan's radicalism offers just that. A key moment in his development occurs in the chapter "Apatite" when he is arrested because of his involvement with a strike at Gowan and Gloag. In the cell Ewan experiences police brutality and awakens to a new solidarity with the underprivileged, seeing himself as part of a great, proletarian crusade:

And a kind of stinging bliss came upon him, knowledge that he was 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 trampling the ways behind it unstayable: up and up, a dark sea of faces, banners red in blood from the prisons, torn entrails of tortured workers their banners, the enslavement and oppression of six thousand years a cry and a singing that echoed to the stars (*Granite*, p. 137).

Ewan's potential as a revolutionary leader is recognized by Jim Trease. Trease points out to Ewan his role as history-maker, which leads the young radical to the following conclusion: "A hell of a thing to be History!—not a student, a historian, a tinkling reformer, but LIVING HISTORY ONESELF, being it, making it, eyes for the eyeless, hands for the maimed!" (*Granite*, p. 148). With these words Ewan accepts his responsibility for the future of Scotland. Only through action can the decay be halted, and as *Grey Granite* closes, Ewan leaves Duncairn at the head of a hunger march that will take him to London and a position at the communist headquarters.

In spite of its ideological clarity *Grey Granite* does not satisfy the reader. The success of the fiction depends on the strength of Ewan as a protagonist and carrier of the political message, but even if he convinces us as a reformer, he falls short on the emotional level. When his girlfriend Ellen, who has been pressured by the school authorities to compromise her radical politics, asks for his sympathy, Ewan retorts: "Go to them then in your comfortable car—your Labour Party and your comfortable flat. But what are you doing out here with me? I can get a prostitute anywhere" (*Granite*, p. 1985). On this denial of Ellen, Deirdre Burton observes in "A Feminist Reading of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*":

The final scene between Ewan and Ellen creates still more obstacles in the way of an easy alignment with Ewan's way of thinking and his actions. Certainly, Ellen is selling out politically.... Nevertheless she is the person who introduced Ewan to socialism in the first place, who helped him through a mental and physical crisis after the police torture, who has remained honest in all her dealings with other people. She does not, it seems to me, deserve the treatment she gets from Ewan.<sup>14</sup>

Ewan's unsympathetic response when Ellen asks him to make an emotional rather than in intellectual commitment may not be incompatible with Gibbon's politics, but it undermines the effectiveness of his vision. Thus *Grey Granite*, which should have brought to life a Scotland that was urban, industrial, and radical, fails to persuade the reader who cannot identify with the protagonist.

Gibbon's ideological confusion is reinforced by his ambivalent conclusion to the trilogy. In the final pages of *Grey Granite*, Chris and Ewan are sent in opposite directions, leaving the reader two alternative answers to the contemporary crisis. On the one hand, Ewan departs Duncairn as the leader of a hunger march destined for London. As a character Ewan embodies the radicalism that Gibbon has been preparing for throughout the trilogy. The events of *Grey Granite* have demonstrated Ewan's ability to speak for the working-class, while his communism promises the economic redistribution and social justice

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<sup>14</sup>Deirdre Burton, "A Feminist Reading of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*" in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1984), p. 44.

that the novelist considers essential to the future of the nation. Yet the revolution can only succeed at the expense of the Scottish element. Communism is an international not a national creed, and by transferring Ewan from Duncairn to London, Gibbon underlines the irrelevance of Scotland to his ideological vision. Chris, on the other hand, abandons the modernity of Duncairn in favor of a return to native values. With the departure of Ewan and Chris's third husband Ake Ogilvie, she has been left alone in a world to which she cannot relate. She decides to move back to her childhood croft at Echt where she hopes to restore her connection to the land. From the summit of the Barmekin she reflects on her life in Kinraddie, Segget, and Duncairn, recovering the essential connection that has maintained her throughout her trials. In comparison to Ewan, Chris represents a passive vision. She accepts the process of modernization rather than act upon it, thus offering no hope of change for Scotland. Gibbon chooses to end *A Scots Quair* in the company of Chris, which suggests that the writer had found his own Scottishness hard to shed, sharing with his female protagonist an emotional attachment to Scotland that is incompatible with Ewan's politics.

With regard to the Condition of Scotland theme, there is an essential problem with Lewis Grassic Gibbon's conclusion to *A Scots Quair*. For while *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe* contained very successful analyses of the political, economic, and social situation in Scotland, *Grey Granite*, which as the final volume should have conjured up a vision of national regeneration, ends in negativism. Ewan has moved on to London, Chris returns to the land, and Duncairn—the community symbolizing modern Scotland—is left in a vacuum. To many of Gibbon's contemporaries, such a pessimistic ending would have been unsatisfactory. The justification for the Condition of Scotland authors' dark accounts of the nation was their use of numbers to argue the case for a revival. Hence, the factual surveys were accompanied by a visionary part as Edmund Stegmaier observes:

My enumeration of terms such as "stir up", "rouse" and "awaken" indicates that these writers are not content merely to draw the line after presenting the factual side of things. Precisely because of the depressing statistical data they demand that the Scottish people discover a new consciousness in the idea of a better future. And the writers themselves provide an impetus towards the fulfillment of this demand.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly enough, it is the use of facts in *A Scots Quair* that leaves Grassic Gibbon without a vision. In order to construct a more authentic Scottish landscape the novelist employed a number of geographical, historical and stylistic details, which enabled the readers of *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe* to identify Kinraddie and Segget as communities rooted in the author's personal

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<sup>15</sup>Edmund Stegmaier, "'Facts' and 'Vision' in Scottish Writing of the 1920s and 1930s," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 9 (1982), 72.



experience. However, in *Grey Granite* Gibbon reached his own present, beyond which he could not move without abandoning his realistic approach. Whether or not Gibbon wanted to end *A Scots Quair* with a communist takeover, Ewan's revolution had not occurred at the time of writing, and any attempt to fictionalize such events would have removed the trilogy from the realistic mode to that of romance. Rather than risk the effects of that, Gibbon chose to end with Chris's return to the land. As a result, *Grey Granite* ends with the image of a Scotland that has returned to the past rather than an emerging nation.

To conclude, I would classify Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* as a Condition of Scotland text on account of its verisimilitude and its socio-economic concerns. Where the Mearns trilogy falls short is on the visionary level, for in contrast to standard representatives of the genre such as George Malcolm Thomson's *Caledonia* or George Blake's *The Heart of Scotland*, *A Scots Quair* offers little prospect of future regeneration. I have ascribed this lack of vision to the novelist's realism. Other Condition of Scotland authors were writing political propaganda, but Lewis Grassie Gibbon's account took the form of a realistic novel, and in the end that made it impossible for him to look beyond his own present.

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