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Reviews

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I suppose that, given the two entities "Scotland" and "the short story," some publisher was bound, some day, to commission an anthology that forced a union between the two. Anything can be anthologised — *My Twenty-one Best Dog Stories*. The question is whether the chosen field is rich enough to yield a crop of any weight once the slight, ephemeral material has been sorted out and discarded. The twenty-two stories J. M. Reid has selected have to stand for 140 years' work in shorter fiction by Scottish authors. Six, or over a quarter, involve the supernatural. Three of the rest are mild domestic sketches (those by Cunningham Graham, McNair Reid, and Dorothy Haynes) rather than imaginative creations. Neil Munro's *Hurricane Jack* and Ian Hamilton Finlay's *The Money* are wee anecdotes, suitable enough to fill a page of *Punch*, but what are they doing among the *World's Classics* (to which this book belongs)? Of the longer pieces, Fred Urquhart's *The Last G.I. Bride Wore Tartan* is garrulous, loose, and uncreative in its use of a modern vernacular, and often unpalatable as a story; on any evaluation it was not worth one-eighth of the total story text. J. M. Barrie's *The Courting of T'nowhead's Bell*, though much meatier than almost all the work by living writers, is still in effect an insult to the countryfolk of Scotland in its cult of the gypit — villagers presented as so dumb and thick that they move through life in ludicrous slow-motion. Perhaps Barrie was stylising the Angus village into pure farce, as P. G. Wodehouse later did for the Stately Homes of England and their denizens. If so, the story no more deserves reprinting than would Wodehouse in an anthology of England's best.

A more detailed example will suggest the standard that I am appealing to. Eric Linklater's *The Goose Girl* is among those I have relegated to the supernatural class. Why "relegated"? Is an eery story necessarily second-class work? Perhaps not (though I can think of no exceptions); but my specific criticism of Linklater's story is this: it tells of a man's love for a beautiful girl who turns out to be not human at all, a flawless creature from the animal kingdom. It is most adroitly told and full of lifelike detail from the real world of the Orkneys. Yet what should have been the heart of the subject — the man's deep emo-

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tional involvement with the woman, which is so terribly misplaced and hapless in the end — is sketched in a few pale touches: "The weeks passed with nothing to spoil our happiness . . . I came, I suppose, to take my good fortune for granted, and my happiness perhaps lost something of its fine edge . . ." The author's concern, in fact, has not been with the inner human realities of such a situation but purely with a fantastic happening for its own sake. As such, the piece can appeal to us as highly skilled entertainment, but it scarcely begins to be literature.

The criterion of "literature" implied here can best be made good from inside the anthology itself. The best story is surely Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Smeddum*, which comes from that amazingly rich and powerful miscellany by Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene* (1934). *Smeddum* tells of a smallholder's wife who brings up nine children "on that ill bit croft that sloped to the sea." Although it is only eleven pages long, its strong flow, the biting reality of every detail, are such that we feel we have been witnessing a life. The land and the work on it are potently evoked:

Be that as it might, her man new dead, Meg wouldn't hear of leaving the toun. It was harvest then and she drove the reaper up and down the long, clanging clay rigs by the sea, she'd jump down smart at the head of a bout and go gathering and binding swift as the wind, syne wheel in the horse to the cutting again. She led the stooks with her bairns to help, you'd see them at night a drowsing cluster under the moon on the harvesting cart.

The hearty, fleering humour natural to that hard old crofting life of the north-east is always ready just below the surface, and this is conveyed (as throughout *A Scots Quair*) in a prose that catches unerringly the Scots of the north-east—broad, economical, coming down sharp on the nail every time:

Then word got about of her eldest son, Jock Menzies that was fee'd up Allardyce way. The creature of a loon had had fair a conceit since he'd won a prize at a ploughing match—not for his ploughing, but for good looks; and the queans about were as daft as himself, he'd only to nod and they came to his heel; and the stories told they came further than that. Well, Meg'd heard the stories and paid no heed, till the last one came, she was fell quick then . . .

What is more, the story has a cumulative rhythm that beautifully reinforces the theme. One child after another leaves home and finds or fails to find the right place in the world, till finally they reassemble at the croft to pass judgement on the last unmarried daughter (a wonderfully blithe and independent figure), and self-righteousness is routed with a final comic-ironic fling worthy of Burns.

In a word, what such a story has is a concern with life itself and a medium or idiom fitted to it; the one grows out of the other, the form is not at all a stock literary mould mechanically put to use for the ump-

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teenth time, as one too often feels with Thomas Gillespie's *The Fair Maid of Cellardykes* (the goody-goody Victorian moral story), or R. L. Stevenson's *The Isle of Voices* (the tropical fairy-tale à la *Arabian Nights*), or Neil Munro's *The Lost Pibroch* (the sad legend from the Celtic Twilight). I cannot understand why Mr. Reid, if he wanted to show the world the cream of our stories, did not drop the feebler pieces which he has presumably included because "you can't leave out John Buchan, or George Macdonald, or Barrie" and thus made room for another of Gibbon's, perhaps *Sim* or, if that were too like *Smeddum* (though it is much more sombre), then *Forsaken*, that searing story of Jesus resurrected into the Scotland of the Slump. (And as there was no objection to two stories by the same writer, surely Stevenson's weakly fanciful *Isle of Voices* should have made way for *The Two Drovers*, in which Scott at least attempted a fictional confrontation between the two Scottish societies, Highland and Lowland.)

Gibbon is part of the standard for modern Scottish fiction in that he is, it seems to me, unequalled by anyone else except the Scott of *The Heart of Midlothian* and George Douglas Brown. But there are slighter items in this anthology which can also stand for the genuine, the truly focussed on life, against the fantasy however brilliantly brought off, e.g. *Wandering Willie's Tale* or Stevenson's *Thrawn Janet*. George Scott-Moncrieff's *Number Two Burke Street* captures delicately the cheerless, dusty life of a middle-class byway in Presbyterian Edinburgh: on its smaller scale it is an image of our society as accurate and revealing as the image which George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* gave of the provincial religious community in England a century ago. And Morley Jamieson's *Madame X* is a most compassionate and touching story, the tragedy in little of an "ill-matched" couple who are devoted to each other yet cruelly forced apart at the very end; its pace and shape seem just right. This is what the short story ideally is: a phase in a life so chosen, so entered upon and left at such a point, that the implications stretching away before and after the chosen phase are suggested all the more poignantly for not being actually presented. Henry James's *Four Meetings* or *The Real Thing*, Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, D. H. Lawrence's *The Horse-dealer's Daughter* or *Fanny and Annie* or *Samson and Delilah*, T. F. Powys's *Mr. Handy's Wife* or *The Lonely Lady*—these seem to me the works that give the standard in this field, and the sad yet expected disappointment of this anthology is that it found so little Scottish work of such a quality.

If it had been recognised that "the Scottish short story" did not, as a *genre*, qualify for anthologising as a body of mature art-literature, the

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way would then have been open for a book of stories that at least typified the vitality and variety of our popular culture. Mr. Reid is hinting at this when he says in his Introduction that "Perhaps a book of Scottish short stories should really begin with a selection of folk-tales from Gaelic and Scots" (p. ix). This doubt, if it was really there, should have been acted on. Mr. Reid should have gone to some of the recent collections of Gaelic folk-tales in translation, John Lorne Campbell's or R. Macdonald Robertson's *Selected Highland Folk-tales* (Oliver & Boyd, 1961). He should have included something by Dougal Graham, the Glasgow town-crier from the middle 18th century, who is said to have composed straight into type and thus belongs at least half to the oral tradition. *The Young Coalman's Courtship to a Creel-wife's Daughter* or *The Ancient and Modern History of Buckhaven* are much more ragged than most of Mr. Reid's choices, yet they also have a palpable drive and authenticity that shows up Thomas Gillespie and John Buchan, for example, for the stuffy fakes that they are. Mr. Reid was right to pick a piece (Crockett's *The Lammis Preaching*) that typified the extraordinary dominance of religion and the ministry in our literature; but we would have got a glimpse deeper into what Scottish Christianity was if he had excerpted that gem of vernacular story-telling, the tale of the devil coming to Auchtermuchty, from James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The stark, ballad-like tales of Orkney that George Mackay Brown has recently been publishing in *Lines Review* and the *New Saltire* would surely have represented today's Scottish fiction more adequately than some of the slight pieces mentioned at the start, and they would have shown the astonishing stamina of the folk idiom even yet.

The book I am sketching here would have seemed scrappy and "primitive" compared with what Mr. Reid has attempted. But it could have been a more valid piece of work because it would have been more in line with the cultural levels that Scotland has actually reached: that is, a very ample and vital oral-popular culture which lost its national basis before it could evolve a distinctive, full-dress, modern literature.

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