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STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Lewis Grassic Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell). *A Scots Quair*. London. Hutchinson and Co. 1966. 496 pp. 30 shillings.

It is gratifying to note that the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *A Scots Quair* is being marked by its sixth reprinting, for such an event indicates that a new generation is being introduced to one of the greatest of Scottish novels. Adding to the pleasure for those who have known the *Quair* from its first printing is the continued appearance of Ivor Brown's original Foreword, a model document of its kind and one that grows in value as first hand knowledge of the author becomes overlaid in the public memory by the passage of time.

Brown attempts no clever interpretation or critical estimate; instead he confines his attention to biographical details that are helpful for the clearer understanding of Mitchell's intellectual milieu, including his ideas on collective myth associated with the effects of certain spots of ground on the human spirit. Helpful, too, are Brown's comments on the direction of *The Scots Quair*, comments that are important since they stem from discussions between the two men on the proper use of language in a work that is part regional fiction, part racial history, and part prophecy.

To the generation that grew up in the thirties the appearance of *Sunset Song* in 1932 created a stir with the pleased recognition that a new and powerful voice was being raised in Scottish letters. This impression was confirmed by *Cloud Howe* in 1935 with its masterful evocation of the spirit of Segget, the type of small Scottish burgh town close to the surrounding countryside but nevertheless removed sufficiently for its indwellers to have been subtly alienated from the land. If, after this, *Gray Granite* was something of a disappointment in comparison to its two predecessors, adverse criticism was quickly stilled with the news that the creator of the three pieces was dead at the age of thirty-four.

These are the three individual tales, then, that are brought together in *The Scots Quair*. At one level they supply the record of Chris Guthrie in youth, in maturity, and in old age, but behind that account of an individual life passed in early twentieth-century Scotland is a panoramic view of a society in each phase of its development as shown in farm, small town, and great city. Even so, Gibbon is not finished,

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for the transitions in the life of Chris Guthrie have correlatives in the greater vista of prehistoric and historic time. These are evoked by repeated mention of the Standing Stonies of Blaewearie, monuments of a vanished race destroyed in their innocence by more warlike intruders who collected surplus produce for trading purposes and ultimately established the kind of industrial society that had as its accompaniment folly and corruption.

One other feature of the latest publication of Gibbon's novel, though minor in itself, is important in emphasising the essential unity of the work. This is the employment of consecutive pagination through the three tales so that page references are no longer to *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe*, or *Grey Granite* but, as they should be, to *A Scots Quair*.

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