


5-1-2017

'A Thin and Tattered Veil': Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Church of Scotland

Ian Campbell
University of Edinburgh

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Campbell, Ian (2017) "A Thin and Tattered Veil': Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Church of Scotland," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, 115–123.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

**“A THIN AND TATTERED VEIL”:
LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON AND THE CHURCH OF
SCOTLAND OF HIS TIME**

Ian Campbell

A Scots Quair, Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s masterful trilogy of novels depicts decades of irreversible change in his native Scotland and above all the North-East to which he belonged. Gibbon draws the reader into an agrarian village in 1911, at the outset of *Sunset Song* (1932), showing the destruction of the village and its way of life by the First World War. The continuing effect of the war, and the creeping change in Scottish country life that followed in the 1920s, occupy *Cloud Howe* (1933), the neglected but accomplished sequel to *Sunset Song*. In the third novel of the trilogy, *Grey Granite* (1934), Gibbon moves the action (and with it his heroine whose life has occupied all three books) to the city, unmistakably to Aberdeen despite his straight-faced denial in the preface. In life, Gibbon (born James Leslie Mitchell in 1901) had moved with his family from rural Aberdeenshire to Arbuthnott in the Mearns, then to Aberdeen before moving on to an adult career in Glasgow, in what was then Persia (serving in the armed forces), then to London and to the new garden suburb of Welwyn Garden City where, married and starting a family, he had a tragically brief but productive writing career before his death in February 1935.

Recently voted—not for the first time—the most popular book in Scotland, *Sunset Song* has achieved widespread popularity far beyond the countryside which inspired the author, and television and film adaptations have brought it wider popularity still. The attraction of its central character Chris, along with the picture of a changing countryside ravaged by the First World War, have achieved this success, while perhaps overshadowing the extraordinary fluency with which Gibbon continued the story, and his analysis of change in his native Scotland, in the second and third parts of the trilogy. A facet of that analysis little studied so far, but the central concern of this paper, is the author’s relationship to the national Church of his country, and his depiction throughout the trilogy of the change which was overtaking the Church of Scotland after the war, and into the years of

the Depression which had ravaged urban Scotland and which inspire the angry picture of Aberdeen in *Grey Granite*.¹

The Church of Scotland is not only present throughout the *Quair* but appears in many of the author's other writings. The autobiographical novels, published under the Mitchell and Gibbon names, carry repeated signs of the repressive atmosphere he felt in his yearly years, transferred for instance to his description of the young Mungo Park reacting to "this code of suppression, of non-joy in the Sabbath, of the hearty eating of tiresome food, of conventionality of expression and demand" which sat lightly enough on most; "On Mungo, as on many another imaginative child, it fell like a stifling black blanket."² Thea Mayven, in *Stained Radiance*, reflects something of her creator's early years: "She read much, but guardedly, gaily, unconvincedly. She looked upon religious emotion as hysteria, and upon God and His existence as improbable unpleasantnesses."³ It is hard not to read something of the rebellious teenager he must have felt himself in his fictional picture of a budding journalist Malcom Maudslay:

On Sunday he went to Leekan kirk.... A young man of bulbous throat and glinting spectacles won Malcom's appreciation because of the speed at which he spoke. It was exactly the right speed and the youngest Maudslay covered the blank pages of two Bibles and a hymn-book with a shorthand report of the sermon.⁴

Repeatedly in his fiction Gibbon turns to pictures of those who did not conform, to John Shaw in *Image and Superscription*, "reading openly and aloud from the writings of Bradlaugh and Ingersoll" to the scandal of his village,⁵ and to Gay Hunter and her restless but undifferentiated unease with her own times,

What a world! Hellnblast, what a world!—as Daddy used to say in moments when it vexed him overmuch. The cruelty, the

¹ Alongside the wider historical and sociological scholarship on secularization, there is an extensive literature specifically on change in the twentieth century Church of Scotland, among the most approachable being Harry Reid, *An Old Kirk in a New Scotland* (2002), *Reformation: the Dangerous Birth of the Modern World* (2010) and *The Soul of Scotland: Celebrating Scotland's Spiritual Richness* (2016), all published by St Andrew Press, Norwich; and see also Steve Bruce, *Scottish Gods: Religion in Modern Scotland 1900-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), Andrew Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity: The Story of Scotland's Churches 1560-1960* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), and Steve Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church* (Norwich: St Andrew Press, 2016).

² J. L. Mitchell, *Niger: The Life of Mungo Park* (Edinburgh: Porpoise Press, 1934), 14.

³ J. L. Mitchell, *Stained Radiance* (London: Jarrolds, 1930), 17-18.

⁴ J. L. Mitchell, *The Thirteenth Disciple* (London: Jarrolds, [1931]), 66

⁵ J. L. Mitchell, *Image and Superscription* (London: Jarrolds, 1933), 18

beastliness, the hopelessness of it.... All the poor folk labouring at filthy jobs under the gathering clouds of war and an undreamed tyranny—what had they to live for?⁶

In his mature writing, Gibbon picks up these themes, and makes them part of a penetrating analysis of a country in the throes of change, encompassing not only the appalling conditions of the workers in the Aberdeen shipyards and the Glasgow slums, but also the spiritual poverty of a country reeling in shock from the war. Throughout his analysis in the unjustly neglected second and third parts of *A Scots Quair* he hammers home his theme—his country coming to terms with the irrevocable change it faced. In the minister’s words unveiling the war memorial to the dead of Kinraddie at the end of *Sunset Song*, “These were the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk.” His next sentence is the rationale of this paper:

It was the old Scotland that perished then, and we may believe that never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old curses and the old benedictions, rise but with alien effort to our lips.⁷

The occasion, notably, is voiced by the minister, for at the end of *Sunset Song* he is still the obvious spokesman for Kinraddie, the prominent lay figures having been killed in France (Chae, Rob, Ewan), and he is listened to respectfully. In a piercing comment, Gibbon notes the generational change, for while during the piping of *The Flowers of the Forest* round the war memorial the older people wept, “the young ploughmen they stood with glum, white faces, they’d no understanding or caring, it was something that vexed and tore at them, it belonged to times they had no knowing of?” (*SQ* 255-56).

The minister is a key figure in Grassic Gibbon’s strategy describing the decades of change from the beginning (1911) to the end (1934) of the *Quair*. In *Sunset Song*, Kinraddie attends the Church, naturally, without much protest (the community is shocked by Long Rob’s profane religious disbelief), and the quite wonderful evocation of the old Arbuthnott Church, begun in 1242, is testament enough to the long hours the author had spent there as a child, whiling away long sermons by memorising each detail of furnishing and stained glass. Writing in Welwyn Garden City, he can bring the Church building and its detail to mind effortlessly, as well as the community which still revolved, hesitantly, round Church and minister.

Liberated from family discipline, however, Gibbon moved to the cities, to overseas travel and life in the armed forces, and finally to a thoroughly secular life in London and the suburbs. The same pattern overtakes Chris

⁶ J. L. Mitchell, *Gay Hunter* (London: William Heinemann, 1934), 22

⁷ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006), 254. Subsequent citations in parentheses in the text as *SQ* and page numbers.

Guthrie in the trilogy. Liberated from the stifling (and dangerously aberrant) religious influence of her father, she finds herself in the unfamiliar but challenging environment of minister's wife in *Cloud Howe*, and after the death of Robert in the pulpit she also begins a thoroughly secular life in the lodgings she keeps with Ma Cleghorn in Duncairn. Asked by her minister second husband, Robert, whether she believes in the Church life she is living, "she bent her head as she answered, *No*, not looking at him; but his laugh was kind. *You will sometime, however you find Him*" (SQ 347).

Entertaining the churchfolk of the parish, she underlines the gulf between her world and theirs:

I wasn't always a minister's wife. I was brought up on a croft and married on one, and I mind what a nuisance we thought some folk, visiting and prying and blithering about socials, doing everything to help us, or so they would think – except to get out and get on with the work! (SQ 365).

Cloud Howe shows the slow but steady growth of a gulf between Chris and Robert; while Ewan (son of her first marriage) attends the Church, he openly admits to not sharing his stepfather's religious beliefs.

Cloud Howe is an unexpected novel. Clearly, Grassic Gibbon had grown away from any belief in the Church of Scotland, but for Robert his character, in Manse and pulpit and parish, he has a strong sympathy—not least since he makes him a committed socialist, sharing his creator's impatience with the growing Depression which sucks the life out of Segget. *Cloud Howe* charts the slow but inevitable collapse of Segget as a Christian parish, and pinpoints the main reasons: the gulf between the older residents and the newer spinning families who work in the mills, the growth of the motor car and improved transport, the steady decline of the traditional respect for the Church and its incumbent. The jocular tone does not hide the brutally honest analysis:

Would a man go up to the kirk of a Sabbath to sit down and hear himself insulted? You went to kirk to hear a bit sermon about Paul and the things he wrote the Corinthians, all of them folk that were safely dead; but Kinraddie's minister would try to make out that you yourself, that was born in Fordoun of honest folk, were a kind of Corinthian, oppressing the needy, he meant those lazy muckers the ploughmen. No, no, you were hardly so daft as take that, you would take the mistress a jaunt instead, next Sunday like or maybe the next, up the Howe to her cousin in Brechin that hadn't yet seen the new car you had bought (SQ 280).

The ploughmen, suspecting the minister of siding with the rich, desert in their turn: the weaving families from the city lack the countryfolk's tradition of churchgoing: the few rich families regard the minister as a dangerous socialist. Perceptively, Grassic Gibbon includes the splitting-up

of the Scottish Church into conflicting sects and sub-groups, even in rural Segget. *Cloud Howe* is the painful chronicle of the divorce of a community from its Church and its minister, with the added twist that the poison gas Robert experienced in the wartime comes back to kill him in the climax of the novel, while he is in his pulpit preaching the need for a “sharp, sure creed” of social justice that the times desperately need (*SQ* 471).

Read in this way, *Cloud Howe* becomes a powerful document charting the relationship of Church to community in a disturbed and disturbing decade—observed from inside a Manse (where she never feels quite at home) by a detached observer—a Chris who is slowly alienated from a husband she watches flog himself to an early death. At an early stage of writing, Grassic Gibbon had toyed with the idea of having the Church of Scotland expel Robert for his socialist views at the General Assembly, but he was content in the final version to let the poison gas do its work.⁸

Grey Granite goes much further. Its picture of Aberdeen is of a thoroughly post-Christian world where the priorities are social unrest, the threat of war, poverty, Depression, unemployment, trade union troubles. In this setting, the Church is reduced to one pantomime parodic character, the idiotic Rev. MacShilluck, and the comic interplay with his housekeeper.

The Reverend MacShilluck gave a bit of a cough and said . . . Ahhhhhhhhhh, a fine thing the War in many a way. Did I ever tell you the story of the nurse and the soldier who was wounded in a certain place, my Pootsy? And the house keeper, who'd heard it only a hundred times, standing and sitting and lying down, upstairs and downstairs and ben in the kitchen and once in the bathroom, shook her bit head and made out she hadn't—she'd her living to look after and she'd long grown used to that look that would come in MacShilluck's eyes, a look she'd once thought in a daft-like minute that *stank* with the foulest of all foul smells (*SQ* 596).

Reduced in this way to parody, the Church of Scotland is simply written out of *Grey Granite*, as irrelevant as the Episcopal congregation Miss Murgatroyd attends to mark a social rather than any religious distinction. In all parts of the *Quair* Grassic Gibbon's fiction picks up and reflects the traditional Scottish fascination in fiction with the minister and his putative sex life—*The Speak of the Mearns* is an interesting case, with the added spice that there are two ministers, Established Kirk and Free Kirk, to gossip about—but in *Grey Granite* MacShilluck is a two-dimensional character of no value and no importance. His dismissal from the picture of contemporary Scotland echoes Gibbon's own relegation of the Church of Scotland to the sidelines. Young Ewan, grown to manhood, may be allowed a moment's nostalgia—“Do you mind Segget Manse and the lawn

⁸ Private information.

in Spring?" (SQ 670)—but has left religion behind and (like his creator) focused on the immediate social injustices of the times. And Chris, for her part, is content to say that "*The world's sought faiths for thousands of years and found only death and unease in them*" (SQ 670). At the end, she finds her faith in "that Change who ruled the earth, Change whose face she'd once feared to see, whose right hand was Death and whose left hand Life" (SQ 672).

Grassic Gibbon's essays, reprinted in *The Speak of the Mearns*, are a vivid illustration of his view of the Church of Scotland, and its place in the history of his contemporary Scotland. *Scottish Scene*, a deliberately provocative collection that he co-authored with Hugh MacDiarmid in 1934, includes an essay on "Religion" with a quite extensive discussion of the contemporary Church of Scotland, still settling from its reunion with the Free Kirk of 1929. To someone implacably opposed to the kailyard and its comfortable image of a solidly Christian (and rural) Scotland, religion was something to be subjected to close and hostile analysis.

Behind those couthy tales of ministers and kirks, beadles and elders, sessions and sextons, a system operated with a ruthless efficiency for three long centuries. In Scotland the human mind and the human body were in thrall to what the orthodox would call a reign of religion, what the Diffusionist historian recognizes as the reign of a cultural aberration, what the political student might apprehend as a reign of terror.⁹

With deliberate overemphasis Gibbon depicts a Church of Scotland as "a thin and tattered veil upon the face of the Scottish scene," on Sundays a "kirkwards trickle of the folk" disguising the slow death of real religious feeling, the General Assembly once a year giving the illusion of a powerful Scottish cultural force which in reality is dying (*SoM* 188-90).

Always a skilful controversialist, Gibbon is careful to balance out his condemnation of the institution with praise for the younger ministers of his time.

They are (the most of them) free-hearted and liberal, mild socialists, men with pleasant wives who blush over the books of such writers as myself, but read them nevertheless and say pleasant things about the pleasant passages... [Yet] The old fires and the old fears are gone. Men and women sit and listen with a placid benignancy ... and they are quite unstirred (*SoM* 189).

For himself, Gibbon claims

The present writer has no hand in bringing about the decay of Religion; nor, alas, is he likely to have any hand in planning its

⁹ Quoted from Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *The Speak of the Mearns* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 185. Hereafter page numbers in parenthesis after each quotation, preceded by *SoM*.

succession. That succession lies with great economic and historical movements now in being—movements which may bring to birth the strangest of progeny on which we may look aghast (*SoM* 194).

Already aware (as several references confirm) of the growing danger of Fascism, and the threat of another war which hangs over *Grey Granite*, he concludes that he sees “in place of Religion—Nothing”. Individuals may “guide, if they cannot generate that storm” of history, but Grassic Gibbon the Diffusionist pins his hopes on Natural Man. (*SoM* 195).

This discussion of Church of Scotland in *A Scots Quair* opens out the realisation of a remarkable parallel in earlier Scottish fiction. John Galt’s *Annals of the Parish* (1821), long undervalued as a lightweight, amusing or even early kailyard account, can be seen in a more critical reading as performing the same kind of critical analysis of its Scotland and its Church that Gibbon later was to offer in *A Scots Quair*. At the outset of *Annals* Galt describes a Scottish community, Dalmailing, with the Church of Scotland at its heart, a central force so potent that the new minister’s “placing” in the pulpit by the landowner (rather than election by the members of the congregation) results in open riot. Like Pringle’s Garnock in *The Ayrshire Legatees*, or even Pawkie’s Gudetown in *The Provost*, the Church and its minister are depicted as have a crucial role to play in offering guidance, articulating social values, and preserving tradition.

What makes *Annals of the Parish* a fascinating document is Galt’s splendid employment of a central narrator who can convey the kind of breakneck social change we see in *A Scots Quair* without himself quite understanding the changes he lives through. While Chris Guthrie, though politically unaligned and deeply self-contained, can see the world around her change and to some extent respond to those changes, Galt’s Rev. Balwhidder keeps a diary of five decades of events he largely fails to understand. In his little world, the Laird is replaced by the mill owner, the famers are supplemented by a new mill-working population, local trade and transport may be revolutionised, American wars and French revolutions may be a distant sound, but with splendid tact Galt keeps Balwhidder’s focus narrowly determined on the provincial, allowing any reader alert to the evidence that seeps through the minister’s account to piece together some picture of the changes that rocked Scotland, Britain, the world during the fifty years of the *Annals*. A single example: the diary of 1790, and Balwhidder’s discovery of a bookshop opened in his parish.

Upon conversing with the man, for I was enchanted to go into this phenomenon, for as no less could I regard it, he told me that he had a correspondence with London, and could get me down any book published there within the same month in which it came out . . . But what I was most surprised to hear, was that he took in a daily London newspaper for the spinners and weavers, who paid him a

penny a week apiece for the same; they being all greatly taken up with what, at the time, was going on in France.¹⁰

Here is a rich texture of allusion outside the narrator's own comprehension: Balwhidder may not be interested in French politics, but the new working classes are. They get their news not from the pulpit but from London, and value it highly enough to pay for it from their miserable wages. They want fresh news, whereas Balwhidder is content with the old familiar ways. Their radical lives and ideas are simply beyond the minister's comprehension, yet Galt allows the reader to see something of the complexity of the political life of 1790 through this single diary entry, a technique he uses throughout the fifty years of Balwhidder's ministry to give some indication of the top-to-bottom changes Scotland has seen between 1760 and 1810.¹¹

Against this example, *A Scots Quair* can be read in yet another way. The story of Chris Guthrie maturing from farmer's daughter to farmer, wife, mother, widow, to minister's wife, widow, to the keeper of lodgings in Aberdeen, to a return to farming life in her native countryside as her son leaves for London and political engagement is far more than an account, however moving, of her life-experiences. In this discussion, it proves a means of exploring the changes which tear apart a farming community, which dramatically impoverish a small spinning community, and which leave Aberdeen inert and hopeless as the wider Depression grips the industries on which the city depends. While the reader experiences these sweeping events through the story of Chris (and to a lesser extent Ewan), the reader has the opportunity, akin to the opportunity Galt gave his readers, to look beyond the immediate account of a character's experience and enrich it through oblique reference. A single example: in *Sunset Song* the war is a distant distraction (Chris's husband Ewan refuses to discuss it, preferring to discuss the prices in the cattle market) till it directly impinges on Kinraddie: the first fatality and the first serious injuries bring it vividly home. The same Ewan, of course, will be sucked in to that distant war, and Chris will be widowed. The cutting of the trees which savagely ends centuries of arable farming in Kinraddie is a powerful central symbol, but it hints further at the irreversible changes throughout Scotland, and the spoiling of the country which that conflict brought about much further afield.

¹⁰ *Four Galt Novels: Annals of the Parish, The Ayrshire Legatees, The Provost, The Entail* (Edinburgh: Kennedy & Boyd, 2015), 69. For more discussion see my introduction, ii-xvi.

¹¹ For further discussion, see my "Double Vision", *Scotland 2014 and Beyond—Coming of Age and Loss of Innocence?*, ed. Klaus Peter Müller [Scottish Studies International 39] (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014), 273-85.

The Church of Scotland, as discussed here, emerges from *A Scots Quair* in much greater detail than Chris alone apprehends. In *Sunset Song*, the Church moves from its unquestioned central status in the community to something shifting and more peripheral, a movement amplified through Robert's experiences in *Cloud Howe*, before it dissolves in *Grey Granite* into virtual disappearance and irrelevance. Just as Balwhidder retires after fifty years of his annals without really appreciating the complexity of the change he has lived through and the decline of the Church he has served for that half-century, Chris's story allows us to appreciate some of the detail of her Scotland and its transformation far beyond her immediate experience, or even her husband's experience in the parish of *Cloud Howe*. In *Sunset Song*, her family life takes her to church regularly till marriage and motherhood displace any mention of it. In *Cloud Howe* Chris never really engages with the church; she is (by her own admission) very much a semi-detached minister's wife, and while she is a spectator to Robert's increasingly desperate attempts to bring a better life to Segget, she rarely shows any personal interest or involvement in church affairs. And in *Grey Granite*, significantly, what little mention there is of Church and Church affairs is almost exclusively made without the involvement of Chris, who has simply moved on.

The impoverishment of Scottish literature by Grassic Gibbon's early death in 1935 had many facets, but it was deeply regrettable that such a skilful writer was not present to comment on the continuing change—and decline—of Scottish Church life in the 1930s, and its responses to the challenges which followed. *A Scots Quair* is many things, and one of the most interesting is its oblique but masterful depiction of the gradual sidelining of what had for centuries been an inescapably central part of Scottish life and society, as the change which is the central theme of the whole *Scots Quair* continues its transformation.¹²

University of Edinburgh

¹² For further discussion, see the prefaces to the individual parts of *A Scots Quair* (2006), pp. vii-xxxviii; Uwe Zagratzki, "Gibbon's Libertarian Fictional Politics," in *The International Companion to Lewis Grassic Gibbon* ed. Scott Lyall (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2015), 60-75, especially pp. 65-66; and William K Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon, A Revolutionary Writer* (Edinburgh: Capercaillie Books, 2016), especially pp.152-58. Best of all, see Alison M. Jack's detailed and well-informed exposition "Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Cloud Howe* and the Matthean Christ," in *Scottish Fiction as Gospel Exegesis: Four Case Studies [The Bible in the Modern World, 28]* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 126-53.