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David E. Latane

Virginia Commonwealth University

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**Robin Jenkins, *The Thistle and the Grail* (1954)
with a comment on *Sunset Song***

I endorse the completely predictable choice of *Sunset Song* as Scotland's favorite book. It is a quintessence, the sort of book that when seen on a friend's table you say "are you reading *Sunset Song*, that's one of my favorite books!," a book that when a new clean copy turns up on a sale table you buy it and send to a friend without waiting for a birthday or Christmas.

Thinking of what is meant by "favorite" as opposed to "best" or "important" a number of omissions come to mind. Anne Donovan's *Buddha Da* has been a favorite with my students, and Iain Crichton Smith's *Thoughts of Murdo* is a favorite with me. I also find it somewhat disturbing that *The Wasp Factory* was a favorite with so many in Scotland that it was voted just below *Sunset Song*: Caledonian Antisyzygy in action? It's not a book I'm all that keen to reread, though it is one I'll never forget.

From the long list I propose an omission: there are no novels about Scottish football. This thought came to me as I was reading Robin Jenkins's *The Thistle and the Grail* for the first time, which I found to be better than Alan Bisset's *Pack Man*, or the stories about sectarianism and football such as Theresa Breslin's *Divided City*, or Alan Spence's *Its Colours They Are Fine*. Jenkins's story of the Drumsagart Thistle's pursuit of the Scottish Junior Cup is a marvelous compendium of *Roy of the Rovers* improbabilities, *Our Town* ethnography, critiques of gender relations, subtle and broad satire, and laugh outloud comedy. Only two players are characterized: old "Turk" McCabe, a violent center half just returned from England to attend his mother's deathbed, and the teenage wunderkind forward Alec Elrigmuir, who plays for love of his standoffish sweetheart. The cast of fans and townspeople, however, is large—young, old, hale, disabled, reputable and disreputable—but the story comes in and out of focus on Andrew Rutherford, the Thistle's President, a prosperous man with what we would now call impostor syndrome, whose position has been secured through his rich brother-in-law. The rise of the team—and yes, they do win the cup—is accompanied by the decline of his fortunes and marriage.

The third person narrator of *The Thistle and the Grail* is deadpan droll, often giving the Drumsagart collective view with a little snark: "All

surmises as to why Rutherford and his wife parted had been, of course, handicapped by the necessity of being disparaging to both. She was the sort of barren-minded woman any warm-hearted man would flee from; but few were willing to pay him that compliment” (255). The characters live in the dialogue, such as this exchange when centerback Turk returns to town:

Turk shook his head; he hadn't heard it; but he heard it now. Then he spat, with pensive cunning. "How's my auld lady?" he asked.

"Your mither, Turk?"

"Aye. Is she gone?"

"No, Turk, no. But she's going down the brae fast."

"On roller skates, eh?" Turk grinned at his wit and rubbed his knuckles against his few teeth.

"You'll find her sore failed, Turk."

"I was expecting that. She's no chicken. Still as nippy wi' her tongue? Still sharp in the temper?"

Tinto sadly shook his head. "Not just as nippy, Turk. Nell's too worn out. She's not often seen in the street now. Like me, she's got a stick."

"Is that so?" Turk was impressed; he grinned. "A stick?"

That I hope is enough of a carrot to encourage further reading of *The Thistle and the Grail*.

David E. Latané
Virginia Commonwealth University