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Douglas Gifford

Scottish Fiction 1979



1979 saw thirty-nine new works of fiction from Scottish or closely related writers. This marks a substantial increase on 1978. Significant also is the fact that approximately fifteen of the thirty-nine were published by Scottish publishers (excluding Collins), whereas only five of 1978's thirty-two volumes were so published. But most encouraging is the fact that where in 1978 I thought that some seven new novels and three collections of short stories deserved serious appraisal, I find well over a dozen novels and four collections of short stories in this category in 1979. Whatever the other cultural effects of the failure of the devolution movement, it has not, obviously, dampened the urge of the Scottish fiction writer to new work--nor killed the possibility of his work being published within as well as without Scotland.

What immediately struck me on looking back over the year's work was the impact of the Western Highlands on so many writers--and this not in the usual sense of leading to work like that of Lilian Beckwith or even Elizabeth Sutherland, but to major work interpreting and assessing the deeper currents of Gaelic social history. To an extent this Celtic dominance of the year may be illusory, since two of the most important works published belong to much earlier periods. These are *Gillespie*, by John MacDougal Hay, first published in 1914, and *The Ministers*, by "Fionn MacColla" (Tom Macdonald), one of three un-

published manuscripts which Macdonald left when he died in 1975. Strictly, then, the first is not of 1979 because it is a republication, and the second rather falsely makes its presence felt long after its creation and its creator's death; but both events are so important for Scottish fiction that I make no apology for beginning with them.

Gillespie came out in Duckworth's "Leviathan" series in 1963, with an introduction by Robert Kemp. Canongate has used the Duckworth text and plates, but supply an excellent new introduction by Bob Tait and Isobel Murray. They rightly stress that what may appear as "over-writing" and melodrama in this huge drama of a West Highland village (based on Tarbert, Loch Fyne) and its exploitation by scheming, imaginative merchant, Gillespie Strang, is in fact writing in the tradition of symbolic fiction like *Moby Dick*. Gillespie is conceived like Ahab, and transcends naturalism and its limitations, being used for metaphysical effect, and indeed finally standing as mythic and symbolic representation of ideas beyond human manners or Jamesian psychological verisimilitude. *Gillespie*, with its Celtic gloom and fate, and its heavy use of landscape and weather to endorse tragic action, will not appeal to lovers of Jane Austen. But then neither will *The Master of Ballantrae* or *The House with the Green Shutters*, and Hay is working very much in this tradition. I think that Tait and Murray are a bit unfair in trying to separate *Gillespie* from *The House*, its predecessor in 1901. There is clearly a tradition in Scottish fiction of the brutal and materialistic father, destroying and destroyed by his sensitive son, which emerges with Galt's *Entail*, is developed by Stevenson, especially in *Weir of Hermiston*, and is brought to its apotheosis by George Douglas Brown in *The House with the Green Shutters*. And the parallels between *The House* and *Gillespie* are too frequent for chance. Beyond the symbolic tyrant figure in both, dominating similarly-named towns (Barbie/Brieston), both have that necessary connection between house and tyrant, whereby their houses become symbols for family and of place. Sensitive and weak mothers quoting the Bible, choruses of surrounding townsfolk, changing economic forces making, then undermining, the central figure--there are so many examples of Hay's debt to Brown that to me it is clear that he used his predecessor's dark vision and moved it into the Western Highlands, enriching Brown's more austere novel with the addition of a sense of landscape and place not unworthy of the Hardy of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The central figure is more subtle also. Gillespie has a genuine vision, as he looks forward to the new trawling and confounds his more lackadaisical and sceptical fellows. His epic plans command respect in a way that those of Gourlay did not, since he was

the luckier agent of economic change rather than the initiator or visionary. And Hay's additional characters are more vivid and moving than Brown's. Mrs. Galbraith, whose husband Gillespie has ruined and killed, becomes an Angel of Death in a complex and rich pattern of angel symbolism hovering over the book. Topsail Janet, the natural, fiercely loyal, pitying simpleton, fulfills something of the role of Pip to Ahab, cleansing and redeeming. The doctor has a humanity too that Brown's Barbie sadly lacked, and stands in massive opposition to Gillespie's evil. It is this redeeming and symbolic Goodness which Brown missed, which Hay gets, which the imagery of Angel's Wings--at first Wings of Death and Revenge, but transformed through time to Pity and Love--sustains. There is great poetic power in Hay's use of this visual and spiritual motif--as when Janet rescues the great Seabird. It is skilfully and sensitively used also, for Hay nicely suggests that the cage birds Gillespie has sneaked from the ship which brought plague to Brieston may literally and figuratively be Birds of Death. It is such scale and sensitivity of conception which make this a major work of British and Scottish fiction, and its republication is of immense importance.

I cannot say as much for Fionn MacColla's *The Ministers*. MacColla has for long been a tantalising figure in Scottish writing, with his two fine novels with their fifteen-year interval between them, *The Albannach* (1930) and *And the Cock Crew* (1945). Provoking comparison with writers like Gunn and Mackay Brown, he lost in the comparison because two-and-a-half novels were just too little to go on. And yet the question always remained--how good could he have been? *The Ministers* seems to me to answer this question rather negatively. Even his best work was marred by that tendency to shrill anti-English propagandising, and by his separation of brilliant scene setting from tedious argument. *The Ministers* may not express hatred of England, but it commits the same errors through other subjects--in this case the relationship of Art to Grace. The Reverend Ewan McRury is a twentieth-century minister in the far west of Scotland who has become something of a transcendentalist, a mystic and meditator who nevertheless keeps contact with reality--even enjoying French painting. Like the saintly protagonist of Robin Jenkins's *A Would-Be Saint*, the central figure poses the challenge to his sceptical fellow Christians--What does one do when confronted with an example of real goodness and grace in everyday action? Jenkins handled his situation through dramatic assessment and moral situation. MacColla--albeit with some deft and acid character sketches, such as those of Old Bando, gardener and handyman, warped and sly, his daughter Mina Bando, Peigie Snoovie, her sleekit lieutenant--gives in to pseudo-Socratic debate on the

nature of the Church's mission today, on Ecumenics, and finally, as McRury is tried by his minister peers on the score of his heretical eccentricity, on the topics of Art and Grace. The debates are never boring, but they aren't fiction. This is a pity, since the working-up of the characters of the ministers who are to try McRury is effective, bringing out their curious tiredness, remoteness from the modern Hydro-Electric, chip-shop reality of the Western Highlands. Reading the novel gives one the curious and frequent feeling of changing down-gear for the elaborately staged debates in cars, front-rooms of manses, church-halls. As always with MacColla, the argument wags the fiction.

Iain Crichton Smith has used his Lewis background in much of his work, with greatly varying results in terms of quality, as a comparison, say, of *The Village* (1976) with *The Hermit* (1977), or, finest of all, *The Black and the Red* (1973), will show. *On the Island* joins the best of his work. It is both a very fine volume of linked short stories in the manner of and standing favourable comparison with Gunn's *Young Art and Old Hector* (1942), and a poignant, gentle series of autobiographical episodes presented through a third person distancing which gives a marvellous effect of sympathetic detachment. None of the episodes is conventionally exciting; all are moments of perception of self and surroundings, when the boy moves up the scale of self-consciousness towards maturity through modest epiphanies. He conquers his fear of the iron staircase down the side of the pier; he talks in winter with a blind and lonely man; he sees, suddenly, the diminishing effect of poverty on his mother as his brother greedily demands toys from a shop window in Stornoway, and he senses her shame and her dignity and moves consequently closer to her and somehow away from her also. He sees her make a stand of real courage against the insensitive, bullying charity of her brother, yet at this point of communion is paradoxically committed through that very sensitivity of spirit to leaving her alone and going to school in Stornoway. The insights are on a level with Muir's *Autobiography*; the tone and stance are beautifully controlled. The book is easy to underestimate simply because it understates its own importance, which must eventually be seen as very high indeed.

To stand comparison with Smith at his best is achievement indeed. James Shaw Grant, also from Lewis, does this in *Their Children Will See*, his first collection of short stories (although he has contributed to the Scottish Arts Council annual volume). There is a curious deliberate flatness in the telling of these tales of the islands--but their success comes from the eventual elegiac and tragic notes that emerge despite the tone. These are stories of the Clearances after the

Napoleonic wars of haunting old music tracked to its source, of century-old feuds between island families; and they all re-create the past. Oddly, the one exception is the magnificent title story, where the blinded survivors of the French wars return. (What grotesque perspective Grant can achieve, as here, in his picture of the sinister chain of damaged soldiers leading each other across the moors of their island!) The island joy is shown in their great ceillidh--then marred with the news that the island is to be cleared, and, final and typical irony, with the prohibition of the ex-soldiers from going to the new country, since their physical injuries incurred in the defence of the old excludes them from being fit population for the new. The ending may seem affirmative, since some women-folk stay with them on the old island with the noble statement that their children will see; but the *real* resonance of the story is in fact tragic, since one recalls that their presence on their ancient island will now be either as shepherds or as permitted cripples. Fine ending of a fine race! The children may see--but will they stay with the sheep and memories? All this is done with the attitude at times of a sociologist, with the occasional short discussion of human tragedy put like a dead butterfly on a pin, with notes underneath. Shaw--for more than thirty years editor of *The Stornoway Gazette*--is using this tone not from detached lack of sympathy, but as one quickly gathers, because it's the only way he can stay detached from the love and the pain he feels in watching the passing of his race. Survey the titles: "Lament for Ensay" (another dying island), "Requiem for Seonaid"--and his theme is writ there large. This is a most impressive first volume, unpretentious, yet deeply poetic, and comparable with Smith or Brown.

A second novel on the Highlands in his *Invernevis* series is Lorn MacIntyre's *Cruel in the Shadow*. The first was *Blood on the Moon*--not to my mind successful in its over-melodramatic portrayal of the Invernevis family during the Jacobite Rebellions, since the historical setting seemed to lead MacIntyre into a curious mixture of Scott and Elizabeth Sutherland. But the movement towards the present has brought him to a much better perspective, which allows him to present a series of portraits of Faulknerian bleakness in what is almost deliberate pastiche, in the sense that one feels him "sending up" the stock figures of the West Highland aristocracy. Decadence has finally got to the vitals of his family. The old Laird is dying of syphilis, got in India; his wife tipsles towards alcoholism to evade his ruthless and embittered religious fanatic sister Carlotta, a suppressed lesbian. Like the idiot Benjie in *The Sound and the Fury*, there is a family scapegoat in mentally retarded but otherwise lovely Laura. One son has "gone native" (wise fellow!), marrying into real Highland local stock

and living on the estate's Home Farm. The only gleam of honour and goodness left is in Niall, the eldest son, priggish, unbending, but worthy in his attempts to pull the family together. MacIntyre's picture of him is impressive, since the author obviously deplors the privilege and corruption behind him, yet manages to let Niall emerge as a good man shaped by history. We feel the pressures on Niall to join up to serve Victoria's Empire, and we feel his confused urge towards a Good he can only dimly see. Underneath dreams of glory and typical Victorian show Niall has the sense to tackle his real enemy, Carlotta, to wrest control of the house from her, to play fair with servants, to bring cleanness back. He loses the dreams of glory, and other closer dreams die too with poor innocent Laura, skilfully associated throughout the book with the shining salmon scale her brother remembered at her throat as they played in pools in childhood, which is to be brushed off her clothes at her death.

By now it will be apparent just how much this West Highland fiction is filled with nostalgia, with preoccupation with exile, with the sense of a society in decline. It's interesting to note the paradox here--that, for example, Lewis alone lies behind three of this year's six Gaelic-orientated novels. One recognises the revival, the new wave of creativity--but one recognises that the revival works with images of decay and themes of elegy. Which aspect holds greater truth? The last of my six, Charles McLeod's *Devil in the Wind*, illustrates this well. Like Shaw Grant's, it is a first novel (by a Lewis headmaster), and part of the "Lewis Renaissance" of recent years. It can't compare with the rest, because it is not as well made or ambitious as the others; but in its balance of Glasgow reminiscences with the picture of Balantrushal village in Lewis there is the dual perspective in place which is in all these works. And dual in time, too; for the novel moves from the present, be it Glasgow anecdote or Lewis, back to the recurrent, brooding presence of Old Immortality, the monstrous standing stone which becomes a metaphor for Time and its mockery of human affairs. McLeod has behind his anecdotes (often very funny, but sometimes loosely related) a poetic sense of decay. For his main story is of a marriage in Lewis which almost didn't take place because of the Great Blizzard. One feels the puny significance of the people trying to achieve community against such a hostile setting; and the book repeats this effect when McLeod undercuts his tone of civilised merriment by revealing to us that the groom did not live for many years later. With Old Immortality as witness, he reminds us that in the midst of life we are in death--and this Celtic perception of Past haunting Present lies behind all the novels I have so far discussed.

As I widen the net to look at the rest of Scotland's contribution, I see the same preoccupations--admittedly less intense, but reminding how much the Northern mind dwells on the almost grotesque human defiance of time. Without wanting to labour that point, it is surprising how many of the rest of my significant novels depend on catching the harsh, the absurd and the colourful in time past. Moving directly to what I consider to be the most impressive and disturbing novel of the year from a new writer, and keeping these points in mind, consider *Scully's Lugs*, by Dundee art student Stewart Hutchison. The lugs are leather ears, joined by a strap with a silver buckle, of a waggoner who lost his ears through friction between them and the cobbles when his cart overturned on the steep brae between Kirkcaldy and Sinclairstoun. Scully disappears then from the story since his grotesque accident happened a century before our story of the triangular love affair of artist Malcolm Leslie, sailor David Sinclair, and Eva, which starts at school and lasts their lifetime. But Scully's lugs dominate the novel as *image*, and as haunting and eventually supernatural relic of the past, indicators of a weird Destiny working itself out round the three. Malcolm loses Eva at school to David, and his art/sculpture thereafter becomes obsessed with Eva and Ears and, it transpires, a desire for vengeance through them. At weird parties, in international exhibitions, he achieves fame through his avant-garde happenings and works which may look like anything from angels to sea-shells but which are in fact ears. And the book gives him its first half--the second shows the vengeance working itself out from David's point of view in the China Seas, as he finds out that Malcolm has modelled his wife naked in wax (inside a giant ear) and is driven almost crazy with jealousy. In the unnatural tempest which follows, he loses his life and, through the hurricane blowing in the glass of the bridge, his ears--as Scully before him. The little case with the ears is found amongst his effects. This *résumé* captures nothing of the strangeness of atmosphere of the book. There is tongue-in-cheek here, but sitting uneasily, though skilfully, beside real mystery, the bizarre unease. Hutchison won the Chambers Fiction Award for 1977 when he submitted this manuscript (Jeremy Bruce-Watt was joint winner). I think he may well have laughed to himself at this result, since I believe part of the book's essence to be mockery of literary/artistic pretentiousness. The book's blurb claims that the novel sweeps from Scotland to the China Seas "in an exploration of the motives and jealousies of the creative spirit." To pretend that there is a study of genuine creativity going on here is spurious, since the fact of the supernatural element cancels this out, for how can one argue on one hand the *creativity* of Malcolm

Leslie when he, just like Scully, or David Leslie's grandfather, who has custody of the ears for some time, or David, or Eva, are part of a web, a Fate which the ears emblemise? Scully's lugs are cursed, or baneful; they dictate what the protagonists do, argues at least a main part of the novel--thus effectively canceling any humbug pretention that the book is about "creative spirit." Nevertheless, the "creative spirit" may be under discussion--as butt, as target for sardonic mirth. And along with this entirely healthy activity the book has so much more subtle comedy, in its heavy historical setting of Dundee and its shipping, its many raconteurs, producing deliberate obscurity, its elusive ability to change theme in mid-sea, so that it's a love drama, a weird tale of haunting, a Sterne-like parody of accepted cliches about Art and Storytelling.

Although Dominic Cooper has, I believe, now terminated his years of working and living in Scotland, since these years contributed such fine novels with Scottish setting in *The Dead of Winter* and *Sunrise* it would be ungracious not to compliment him on his best work so far, *Men at Axlir*. It would be pleasing to think that Scotland was a necessary part of the germination of this Iceland-set novel--and not too far-fetched, since the bleakness, aridity, and massive grandeur of the book develop naturally out of his two previous novels. It is set in eighteenth-century Iceland when famine, volcanic eruption and the fact of being a poor and remote Danish colony had reduced the Icelanders to wan, ugly resentment and the sole instinct of survival. This acrid, desolate location dominates the book and its bitter, internecine events. The innocents, Sunnefa and her brother Jon, are found guilty of incest and are sentenced to death. But this true story is only the grotesque covering of the real and mysterious tale of hatred between two Sheriffs of a remote district, who pass their hatred down to their children, who use the case of Sunnefa to resolve their hate. As in his earlier novels, Cooper's vision of human life is absolutely bleak, without redeeming love or pity; and who can say that such a compelling black vision is not a fine achievement? The tale is of Shakesperian dimensions without the catharsis--though it is true that Cooper has overmany tellers of his already complex story to preserve clarity.

A similar tale, more simply told, is *The Edinburgh Pirate*, by Robert Crampsey, a fiction writer to watch--unpretentious in style, liking a strong, clean story, he has developed through the Collins *Scottish Short Stories* volumes to this, his first novel. Well-researched, sparing in the uses of that research, it tells of a notorious miscarriage of justice in Edinburgh at the time of the failure of the Darien Scheme, on

the eve of the 1707 Act of Union. An English ship is seized in the Forth, suspected of piracy; the Scottish people, incensed by the treachery of the English during the Scottish attempt to establish its own colonies, bays for their blood. Ogilvy, the honourable Chancellor Seafield, working towards what he sees as best for Scotland, Union with England, tries to find a compromise where Scottish rebellious fever can be soothed without too much compromise of justice. But two men die for this compromise--innocent of any crime. It is an austere, moving novel, told with the basics of setting and characterization--yet effective far beyond the limits of its 136 pages. If Crampsey still has an obvious fault, it lies in his rather wooden narrative and dialogue; but somehow, like Hardy's woodenness, this is finally transcended, and a higher pity and tragedy achieved.

I draw attention again to the Scottish novelist's preoccupation with the historical past, and the human absurdities and grotesque tragedies which occur therein. William Watson's second novel, *Beltran in Exile*, sustains this theme. Ten years later than his first experimental and fairly slight social comedy, *Better Than One*, it's a striking, stark historical novel about the break-up of the Templar Order of Knights during the years 1291-1314 when they lost their dominance in the Holy Lands. It is a violent, sensitive, poetic book; with Beltran the good man who sees that corruption has spoiled his beloved Order. He fights, a lonely figure, for sanity, integrity and above all, meaning in his life as a new ugly world is born. The style is impeccable--reflective, deeply serious, philosophical, yet economical, it mirrors its subject matter and the times exactly. Beltran becomes a sort of Everyman, with his quest ending in Scotland, where he finds he has to slay his fellow-Templars, symbolically killing the old order. The end is a deeply tragic avowal of a modern and tragic sense of personal responsibility, since he both literally and figuratively kills himself in so doing.

A more conventional use of time past takes place in Fred Urquhart's first of an intended series about a Scottish brother and sister in *Palace of Green Days*. Urquhart is one of the great Scottish fiction and short story writers; this charming and gentle tale is effortlessly crafted, the strength perhaps coming from an unmistakable feel of autobiography. Once again the nostalgia for the past, for a lost green past, moves the Scottish writer--it's fascinating how many of them have used the word "green," with all its traditional Scottish associations, in their titles: from *The Dear Green Place* to *A Green Tree in Gedde* to *Greenvoe*, or short stories like "Green-eden" (I don't consider *Green Shutters* to carry this elegiac significance:). Andrew and Jenny Lovat are the brother and

sister, children of a chauffeur who moves around the homes of the rich and aristocratic of Scotland (the "palaces," in one of its two senses in the title. The green palaces of memory, implies Urquhart, are more haunting, and eventually more real). This first part takes us from 1914 to 1925; using something of Galt's *Annals* technique and something of that of James's *What Maisie Knew*, distant and international events are filtered through local representatives and children's perceptions. Americans billeted in rural Scotland turn out not to be the avuncular figures, mythically attractive, that they seem. Jenny, the main consciousness of the novel, only dimly grasps the real tragedy behind the death of the genuinely decent American Indian landworker, just as she only dimly senses the disturbed sexuality lying behind her brother's effeminacy. There is again the dual perception as theme, with Jenny realizing that the immediate warmth of family love and security in the deep green recesses of timeless Scottish parks is an illusory Eden, to be yielded up for the world where the beloved alien turns out to have a wife and family already, or where children cheat and sexually assault each other. Reminiscent of the Jane Duncan "Friends" series, there is a deeper humanity and toughness. I look forward to the next in the series.

If I must single out one novel for greatest praise (leaving aside *Gillespie*), then I choose Robin Jenkins' disturbing, complex, awkward *Fergus Lamont*. Surely there can be no denying now that Jenkins is the most important single figure in the Scottish novel since the war? Yes, there are single, and occasionally a few novels by one writer, which rival single works by him--for example, Kennaway's *Household Ghosts*, McIlvanney's *Docherty*, Brown's *Greenvoe*, Smith's *Consider the Lilies*--and others of the same writers' works. But if one considers that Jenkins has given us works ranging from *The Conegatherers* to *The Changeling*, from *Guests of War* to *A Very Scotch Affair*, some twenty novels in thirty years, then the volume and scale of his achievement looms larger than anyone else's. His willingness to tackle unfashionable moral topics in a Hardy-like, sometimes apparently naive style, uncompromisingly unfashionable, has never wavered, right up to *A Would-Be Saint* (1978), his last novel, where he presented the complex, ambiguous figure of Gavin Hamilton, apparently of Christ-like goodness, but finally presenting the reader with an insoluble riddle concerning the deepest roots of the motivation to "goodness." Jenkins now presents a character of similar complexity but differing basic elements, again forcing us to reject conventional assessment and face the ambivalence of human motivation. Jenkins moves closer to Hogg's *Justified Sinner*'s autobiographical method here, since Fergus

tells his own story with much of Robert Wringhim's curious candour, adding only an implied plea for morally justified duplicity. He is a child from the slums of Gantock (Greenock), believing in his own instinctive superiority in rejecting their violence and insensitivity. At this stage he learns what either poisons him fatally for life or, depending on how we interpret the information, what motivates him upwards and outwards from Gantock--namely, that he is possibly the bastard child of the local Earl. Suddenly his feelings of superiority have substance. The knowledge (or simple Belief, like Robert Wringhim's belief in his own Election to Grace), together with hatred of his grandfather's puritanical lack of charity towards his mother, inspires (or corrupts) his imagination to create an image grotesquely out of place in slum Gantock--that of the kilted, posh-speaking, arrogant would-be soldier, which will, Fergus dreams, let him take his place with his beloved aristocrats. It's important at this point to stress that Jenkins does not mean us to dismiss Fergus easily for this apparently snobbish ambition; far from it, since the picture of Gantock is distinctly unsentimental and shows the town as something that anyone of spirit would want to escape from, in its mean claustrophobic squalor. Further, Jenkins introduces another element in Fergus--he is, in his essence, a poet; a poet who has had all natural spontaneity smothered, so that part of Fergus's ambition is the hidden motive that he means to speak out when his obvious targets have been reached. He marries from his officer status--no matter that the wife is an authoress of pious historical novels with the private morals of an alley cat. With the moment of achievement comes the realisation that he has destroyed part of himself in adopting the disguises he has--and the rest of the novel is about his painful redemption, through the love of a very different kind of woman. With her death, Fergus Corse-Lamont moves on a pilgrimage back to Gantock. Again, Jenkins avoids all temptation to sentiment; Gantock is as squalid as ever--"wanting in grace," as one of its embittered children tells Fergus at the end, just before the Germans bomb it flat. If the novel has a weakness it's in the difficulty the reader has in reconciling the two Ferguses--though I feel Jenkins surmounts this by having Fergus look back at the end of each section from world-weary, detached age to the passion that used to drive him, with the implication that he has learned, if not grace, humility and love. The movement towards that knowledge takes Fergus (once again the Green Place?) to the Hebrides and Kirstie; but the final movement of the novel takes Jenkins himself to what seems to me to be the point that *A Would-Be Saint* reached, and which is the final Jenkins statement. All his previous novels spoke *either* of redeeming grace or bleak scepticism about humanity, so that his work from

Guests of War to *The Changeling*, *The Conegatherers* to *A Very Scotch Affair* has moved between a kind of Tolstoy-like affirmation and a Hardy-esque pessimism, separate novels organising themselves on one or the other principle. *Fergus Lamont* pulls both possibilities into one novel, with Fergus the Scottish snob and social climber denying his real background, and Fergus the poet and martyr nevertheless remaining an antiszygy within him. There is a final detachment from both in his son's footnote which seems to me to give Jenkins himself a last word of withdrawal from either view. And there is one further level upon which the novel operates. Like Mungo of *A Very Scotch Affair*, Fergus is meant to stand for something archetypally Scots--or more especially Lowland Scots. The central characters may not be symbols, or allegorical representations of Education in Scotland, or Upper-class Scotland, but they have a referential and metaphoric value beyond themselves. This largeness of activity on Jenkins' part means that he is one of the very few writers in Scotland to take consciously the risks of working on this scale.

Where Jenkins takes the Western Lowlands as his social framework, a new novelist, Jeremy Bruce-Watt, joint winner with this novel, *The Captive Summer*, of the Chambers Fiction Prize for 1977, when he submitted his manuscript, chooses to tackle the chit-chat, the social affectation, of New Town Edinburgh with its old tenements and habitat interiors, gin-and-tonics and sales-of-work. Using some material which has appeared in *Scottish Short Stories* (Collins), he presents some summer episodes, in low key, of Gail Sutherland's summer of discontent with her marriage to her business-bore, boozy, fattening rugby player husband. Bruce-Watt successfully presents the Edinburgh New Town austere beauty of architecture and garden, as well as the sterility and implicit coldness. In terms similar to Alan Massie he sets his rather pathetic last chance love story amidst all the gently nasty forces which will destroy its chances. Although the book suffers from a tinge of magazine-like sentimental indulgence and a slight shallowness of emotional register and range, it's a real world portrayed, with a caustic eye that one would like to see looking at a wider frame of reference.

Similar in social setting (South Side Edinburgh and Grassmarket rather than New Town) is Joan Lingard's latest, *The Second Flowering of Emily Mountjoy*. Like Bruce-Watt she has a real insight into the essence of Edinburgh culture, local snobberies and social diversions. Here again through the consciousness of a wife approaching middle-age with a sense of somehow having missed chances we meet belated and pathetic love. Emily's is a young Edinburgh actor--and her sense of guilt and impending disaster is well conveyed. What does jar

is the melodramatic intrusion of the actor's mother, possessive to the point of paranoia, a dressmaker in the Grassmarket, who suddenly murders Emily's friend Louisa on suspicion of having designs on her son. Tragic irony is rather heaped on as we know that far from such designs, she was probably going to go off with Emily's husband, thus conveniently and agreeably to all allowing Emily to have her actor. That criticism stated, the novel has an ending of real dignity, as Emily loses all, although she may have fashioned a consciousness and a conscience out of the ruin of her life.

Of my choice of significant fiction for the year I'm left with two books of short stories and a few books that either try hard and fail or don't try hard enough and achieve limited but real success. Let me deal with the first of these three categories and Eona Macnicol's *A Carver of Coal*. This is a welcome return to the world of her *The Hallow'en Hero* collection. This volume deals with "any mining village in Scotland," though it's unmistakably the Lothians, cropping out through the book like a dark strata of coal, the dominating image of the collection. From the miner who grieves for his son by carving Christ in coal with his son's face, to the latchkey children of poverty and loveless parents, the atmosphere is exactly that of Bill Douglas' *My Childhood* series of films, with their identical location; these too are grainy, black-and-white stories shot through with the redeeming love of the observer. Macnicol usually chooses to let her observer be someone other than third-person narrator or herself--like the boy who is Gala King in "A Gala Arch," or poor Tom who looks after his brother and sister in Perth as the minister coaxes his tarty mother to visit her jailed husband to tell him she's pregnant by another man. Her situations are wide-ranging, but always to do with human relations. Only Fred Urquhart has the same sense of the pathetic and poignant in human affairs, and Macnicol finds situations almost at random and in plenty in her coal village, from unemployed wee Archie's insane desire to drive his own car (without insurance, road tax, MOT), to a pit collapse that restores love between two men, one of whom was contemplating murder until even further stress releases compassion from even darker depths, and a wedding where the father makes the celebrations go on even although the groom hasn't turned up.

Scottish Short Stories 1979 is another of a now familiar series, familiar in its flavour and range. It's successful as always; many familiar names are there--Arthur Young, Bob Crampsey, Richard Fletcher, Lorn MacIntyre, Deirdre Chapman. One of the achievements of this volume is that one can argue that these writers wouldn't now be approaching the point of having their own complete collections of short stories or

indeed novels without the first encouragement and incentives of this Arts Council idea. Others here like Mackay Brown and (at last!) Crichton Smith would write anyway. But I have, for all my liking of the collection, a reservation about the *range* of the stories in it. The blurb claims that the range is from "thriller to domestic comedy, from political allegory to romance," from "a Soho strip club and a suburban semi" to "an IRA hideout and a haunted seaside guest house." This is to suggest more richness of flavour and variety than actually exists. It may be appropriate that modern Scotland should be reflected in several stories of mild social satire and quiet regrets for childhood memories, old aunts, relatives of all sorts, holidays and schooldays--as though that excellent collection by Trevor Royle of eminent Scottish adolescences, *Jock Tamson's Bairns*, were re-writing itself as short stories. With the exception of Duncan McAra and Alistair Gray the book lacks romance, drama, excitement; there is little left of the flavour of the classic ballad and supernatural Scottish short story. It may be, after all, that Scottish fiction *is* now merging with British realism, with Margaret Drabble, the *Alfies*, the *Keses*.

Of the twenty-seven odd productions remaining, only a handful deserve critical attention. I don't know why John Herdman put such a slender collection of twelve short sketches in the absurd and surrealist manner together in the pamphlet *Stories Short and Tall*. These seem pieces suited to meetings for oral performance such as the Edinburgh *Heretics*, or as contributions perhaps to an anthology, rather than standing as a volume on their own. They have a humour, admittedly--but it is occasional and immediate, palling quickly, dating rather awkwardly between Goon and Python. I think Herdman is capable of much more substantial and sustained work than this--and his fiction seems to be getting *less* ambitious, if one charts the progress of the admirable *The Truthlover* through *Pagan's Pilgrimage* to this. Colin Macdonald's *All The Young Dudes* one can accept by comparison as the obvious trial runs of a young writer of some promise. A handful of typewritten pages and three stories, perhaps--but there is poetry and humour, a delicacy with words--best seen in the last story about Lennie, who used to go around putting coins in meters for parkers whose time had run out--and whose death starts a national movement, a quasi-religious attack on bureaucracy. Helen Adam's work is new to me, and is American-Scottish, in that order; but *Ghosts and Grinning Shadows*, two witch stories accompanied by the author's own bizarre collage illustrations places her firmly in a tradition of nineteenth-century horror which Poe and Margaret Oliphant and George Macdonald represent. She has some Gothic power, but the tales are *too* derivative on one hand and too forced on to a Scottish setting from an alien source to do

more than divert.

Four novels seemed to me to be considerable, but either lacking in final ambition or in that quality of seriousness (which has nothing to do with lack of humour!) which "places" fiction for me on a certain level of importance. I don't think I'm being rude to any of the four to describe them as authors who are not primarily concerned with reaching that level--in most cases they are commercially successful writers whose relationship with their audience demands a strong, though conventional, narrative line. Nigel Tranter's *Macbeth* illustrates this. He is not an experimentalist. He has researched and fictionalized most periods of Scottish history with romantic possibilities to offer, and that without cheapening, sentimentalising or distorting his material. His human types are restricted, his Wallaces and other heroes often resemble each other in dialogue and motivation, in their uniform manliness and manner. But his work is a service to Scottish culture; and this *Macbeth* firmly and capably refutes the Shakespearian picture of wife-dominated ambitious rebel. Here, presented with power and dignity, is another introduction to another Malcolm Canmore, and part of Tranter's great memorial, over many novels, for the ancient, maligned Celtic Church, tradition and society about to give way to Saxon and Norman distortion. Similarly Jan Webster's sequel to *Saturday City, Beggarman's Country*. In many ways impressive, in its survey of Scotland from the early nineteen-twenties to the present day, like Tranter, Webster has done her homework thoroughly, bringing events as disparate as the flu epidemic of 1919, the Donald Campbell speed attempts, the rise of Scottish Nationalism, the war poets, all into a harmonious whole. In this trilogy (the first was *Collier's Row*) she attempts to work on the same scale as, say, George Blake or Guy McCrone--and nobody else comes as close to them as she does, with the possible exception of John Quigley. The overall shape and movement of the story is impressive--but there is something prosaic and Galsworthian in her young women and their rapidly changed men-folk. And here the nostalgia, far from simply being a Scottish theme, becomes excessive--partly perhaps because Jan Webster has chosen to settle in Surrey. Scotland becomes not even the twilight country--it settles into outer darkness in the loss of values and tradition she perceives. Colin Douglas's continuing saga of the adventures of Dr. David Campbell has never been less than vivid, picaresque entertainment; and in *Bleeders Come First* he takes his hero into the casualty department of a major Edinburgh hospital as House Officer. His exploits are wry, realistic, without Cronin-style glamour or even success. In the end they are more moving and credible because of that. Douglas is not just good on medical types; his portrait of a

Pakistani vandrifer and relatives captures Scottish Asians comically and precisely, as does his superb tragi-comic portrait of eternally charming, long-winded medical failure and suicide, Dr. Hakeem Subdahir. Ghoulishly funny, muscularly told, Douglas has a talent the full potential of which he has yet to realise. And Elizabeth Kyle has for some time now turned out deceptively romantic stories of the Lowland Scottish well-to-do. I say "deceptively," since one always finds about a quarter of the way through that darker and nastier things are happening than one expects from what seems initially to be a lighter mixture. Her settings, too, are always evocative and frequently disturbing. Here, in *A Summer Scandal*, she recreates the end-of-century feel of the villas of Cowaland, their summer visitors, with more than a hint of deep-rooted animosities amongst the locals. Neil Campbell returns to his roots from a life time of merchant sailing, and Kyle excellently presents a study of a man resented by his snobby contemporaries for all the wrong reasons, while not disallowing the fact that there may be reasons for suspecting his moral fibre. He may be leeching off his wealthy nephew, but he certainly isn't his murderer--and much upper-class nastiness surrounds his court case and his "not proven" verdict. Again I see that tendency to elegy and nostalgia--and looking over much of Miss Kyle's work one realises that she is a much more important exponent of such Scottish themes than she's been given credit for.

My remaining volumes fall into three groups: romantic-historical fiction, thrillers and reprints. I will deal with them very briefly, referring only to titles unless it is necessary to mention the author's name which can otherwise be found in the list of novels appended. Of the romantic-historical group, *The Last Enchantment* sees Mary Stewart triumphantly conclude her trilogy on the life of Merlin; *The Deep Well at Noon* begins another Stirling trilogy, this time set in Lambeth and Pimlico, and tracing the fortunes of the Beckman family, Russian Jews, and especially the gritty daughter Holly; *The Mermaid Queen* tackles the dualisms in the life of Mary Queen of Scots, contrasting her pleasant French background with nasty, puritanical Scotland; *Crows in a Winter Landscape* (is this very adult children's fiction or childish adult fiction?) follows a Scottish medical student through bloody Bohemia and Croatia; *Daughter of Midnight* follows the married life of Laura Permon, who married Napoleon's lieutenant Junot, her high life in Spain and Portugal, and her ruin; *Horns of the Moon*, although stereotyped in its love melodrama, tries hard and with some success to recreate the miseries and futility of Montrose's last efforts on the Continent and Scotland; of the five, none tackles a genuinely Scottish theme or belongs in any

real sense to Scottish fiction. They are workmanlike and readable novels, in their own way authentic, which is more than can be said for the four which seem to me to be so derivative from them that they lose contact with reality altogether. *The Major's Lady* makes the slightest of attempts to evoke Moore's agony at Corunna, but is otherwise disposable; *Castle in the Rock* is Woman's Own Gothic set in Wales; *Highland Destiny* has an English girl set in Woman's Own Gothic Scottish Highlands. The odd man out altogether is Irishman Shuan Heron and *Aladale*. Since it's about the Highland Clearances and part dedicated to David Daiches it seemed ungracious to ignore it, although the Clearances come a poor third in importance behind the love affairs of bold Davy Bourdon and the saga of illicit production of Aladale malt whisky. But it doesn't take itself too seriously, and is enjoyable as good blood-and-thunder, with firm-busted, long-legged Highland aristocrats who have a deep and earthy friendship with the ordinary people (*sic!*) and who all fight together against related aristocrats who aren't friends of the people.

Thrillers amount to six--though I must admit that these are a type of fiction desperately hard to keep track of, since an astonishing number of Scottish thriller writers abound with the cheap press, and I admit to missing several over the years. *Whisky Sour* shows real promise, being an up-dated *Master of Ballantrae*, with two brothers at odds till death because of the arrangements of their father's will. There's some real satire of landed Scots here too, and much educated wit. It would be a pity if George Pottinger didn't try his hand at something more genuinely a Scottish satire, since he has the inside knowledge and the sensitivity to do it well. *The Price of Diamonds* is a really nasty international thriller, with an authentic-seeming picture of police corruption and diamond smuggling on the Continent. *The Gifts of Artemis* is an action tale of Greece in the last war, a plot to kill Churchill in Athens, and account of the Greek guerilla movement. It shows Scott improving, and moving towards the style and market, say, of Catherine Gavin. *The Day of the Lollipop* and *Macaterick's Revenge* were potboiling thrillers that bored, while *Winter and the White Witch* is a tale of smuggling in Fife with an English hero who is a cross between Biggles and Hornblower, as is its plot.

Finally, two important new editions of Cunninghame-Grahame's short stories and South American sketches have appeared. I thought of discussing the first, *Beattock for Moffat and The Best of R. B. Cunninghame-Grahame* with Gillespie at the start of this article. But this selection--and whose is it?--doesn't come anywhere near the single impact of that novel, but rather wanders amongst some classics like the title story and some of the sketches from Scotland and South America. It has a preface

by Alanna Knight which is sketchy, and doesn't attempt to explain the *raison d'être* of the collection. Better by far is John Walker's much more sensibly organised and excellently edited and annotated *The South American Sketches of R. B. Cunninghame-Grahame*. I feel that the work in these two collections moves so restlessly between Scotland and the Argentine, between factual impressionism and creative fiction, that it must be seen in context--the proper context of course calling for simultaneous review of the 1979 *Cunninghame-Grahame, A Critical Biography* by Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies, and--hopefully soon--John Walker's projected *The Scottish Sketches of Cunninghame-Grahame*. Grahame's work is at once too massive for and peripheral to my limited aims here.

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NOTES

Below I list the fiction read for the preceding article. I cannot claim that the list is complete; it should be checked against the relevant annual bibliographies of Scottish Literature produced by James Kidd and Robert Carnie for *The Bibliotheck*.

1979

- ADAM, Helen. *Ghosts and Grinning Shadows* (New York, Hanging Loose Press).
- BRUCE-WATT, Jeremy. *The Captive Summer* (London, Chambers).
- COOPER, Dominic. *Men at Axlir* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- CRAMPSEY, Robert. *The Edinburgh Pirate* (Edinburgh, Canongate).
- CUNNINGHAME-GRAHAME, R. B. *Beattock for Moffat and the Best of R. B. Cunninghame-Grahame* (Edinburgh, Harris).
- . *The South American Sketches* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press).
- DOUGLAS, Colin. *Bleeders Come First* (Edinburgh, Canongate).
- FELLOWES-GORDON, Ian. *The Night of the Lollipop* (London, Hale).

- GASTON, Bill. *Winter and the White Witch* (London, Hale).
- GRANT, James Shaw. *Their Children Will See* (London, Hale).
- HAY, John MacDougal. *Gillespie* (Edinburgh, Canongate). (First published 1914)
- HERDMAN, John. *Stories Short and Tall* (Thurso, Caithness Books).
- HERON, Shuan. *Aladale* (London, Cape).
- HILL, Pamela. *Daughter of Midnight* (London, Hale).
- HUTCHISON, Stewart. *Scully's Lugs* (London, Chambers).
- JACKSON, Eileen. *Castle in the Rock* (London, Hale).
- JENKINS, Robin. *Fergus Lamont* (Edinburgh, Canongate).
- KELLY, George. *The Price of Diamonds* (Edinburgh, Paul Harris).
- KYLE, Elizabeth. *A Summer Scandal* (London, Peter Davies).
- LAMONT, Marion. *Horns of the Moon* (London, Constable).
- LINGARD, Joan. *The Second Flowering of Emily Mountjoy* (Edinburgh, Paul Harris).
- MacCOLLA, Fionn. *The Ministers* (London, Souvenir).
- MACDONALD, Colin. *All The Young Dudes* (Wick, Poultenay Press).
- MacINTYRE, Lorn. *Cruel in the Shadow* (London, Collins).
- McLAREN, Colin. *Crows in a Winter Landscape* (London, Rex Collings).
- McLEOD, Charles. *Devil in the Wind* (Edinburgh, Gordon Wright).
- MacNICOL, Eona. *A Carver of Coal* (Edinburgh, Ramsay Head).
- MILNE, Roseleen. *The Major's Lady* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- MUIR, Marie. *The Mermaid Queen* (London, Constable).
- OLIVER, Marina. *Highland Destiny* (London, Hale).

- POTTINGER, George. *Whisky Sour* (Edinburgh, Paul Harris).
- SCOTT, Douglas. *The Gifts of Artemis* (London, Secker).
- Scottish Short Stories 1979* (London, Collins).
- SMITH, Iain Crichton. *On the Island* (London, Gollancz).
- STEWART, Mary. *The Last Enchantment* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- STIRLING, Jessica. *The Deep Well at Noon* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- TRANTER, Nigel. *Margaret the Queen* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- URQUHART, Fred. *Palace of Green Days* (London, Quartet).
- VENTERS, Archie. *Macaterick's Revenge* (London, Hale).
- WATSON, William. *Beltran in Exile* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- WEBSTER, Jan. *Beggarman's Country* (London, Collins).