Myth and Allegory in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's A Scots Quair

David Macaree

University of British Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol2/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you 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 digres@mailbox.sc.edu.
DAVID MACAREE

Myth and Allegory in
Lewis Grassic Gibbon's
A Scots Quair

The critic who would write about *A Scots Quair* is faced with a
difficulty not normally encountered by those who turn their attention
to the prose fiction of the twentieth century: the lack of clearly enun-
ciated statements by the author as to his literary intentions. The only
general remark that J. Leslie Mitchell (''Lewis Grassic Gibbon'') per-
mittted himself was to the effect that his novel was a symbolic representation
of "the Scots countryside itself, fathered between a kailyard and a
bonnie brier bush in the lee of a house with green shutters," (SS, p. 31)
where the allusion to two strains of modern Scottish fiction, the over-
sentimental and the over-brutal, suggests that he wished to combine
what was of value in each in a creation that would depict Scotland and
its people without exaggerated emphasis on either extreme.

Of Gibbon's sincerity there can be no doubt, since he engaged in a
race with death itself to complete the three parts of the *Quair: Sunset
Song* (1932), *Cloud Howe* (1933), and *Grey Granite* (1934); and the
race was close, for by the next year he was dead at the age of thirty-four
with his one full-length work as a memorial. Despite the speed with which
he wrote, however, his trilogy showed no signs of lack of premeditation;
in fact, considered at the personal level as a novel of the soil dealing with
the life of Christine Guthrie, daughter of a small farmer, in the years
between 1911 and 1934, it has been criticised for its excessive neatness
of construction with its tripartite division corresponding to youth, young
adulthood, and middle age; each with its appropriate husband, farmer,
minister, and poet-craftsman; in three settings: countryside, small town,
and industrial city. What is more, the parallels extend even to the struc-
ture of the individual books, each of which consists of four sections with

---

1 J. Leslie Mitchell (''Lewis Grassic Gibbon''), (London, 1946, reset and re-
printed 1950). The books that make up the trilogy, *Sunset Song, Cloud Howe,* and
*Grey Granite* are pagd as separate entities; their references will be given in the text
as SS, CH, and GG respectively, with pagination following that of the printing of
1950.
titles suggestive of the progression of the narrative. In Sunset Song there is the cycle of the farming year: Ploughing, Drilling, Seed-time, and Harvest; in Cloud Howe, the cloud formations in order of increasing gloom: Cirrus, Cumulus, Stratus, and Nimbus; in Grey Granite, minerals ranked by hardness and purity: Epidote, Sphene, Apatite, and Zircon. Such tidy schematization annoyed some of the novel's first critics for it suggested a preoccupation with issues wider than those they considered strictly relevant to what they saw as regional fiction dealing with lower class life on the Scottish countryside.2

But in fact Gibbon was concerned with a theme far greater than the personal history of Chris Guthrie as later commentators have suggested. Kurt Wittig has pointed out that "the story moves on three distinct levels: personal, social, and mythical,"3 and Goefrey Wagner in an article on the Quair as a social document has hinted at an allegorical strain lying behind.4 The carefully balanced structure indeed, hints strongly that Gibbon was aiming not at naturalism solely, or even at a social documentation, but a myth arrived at through allegory. Besides its structure, there are elements in the story; too, that lend themselves best to such a reading. To give but one instance, Robert Colquhoun, Chris's second husband, greets the news of her pregnancy with, "Oh Chris Caledonia, I've married a nation;" (CH, p. 104) words that are meaningful only if we see Chris as Scotland herself, which was presumably Gibbon's intention.

His choice of "Gibbon" as pseudonym suggests also that the author of A Scots Quair wished us to be conscious of the wider historical perspective that lay behind the subjective account of Chris Guthrie, for what we have is a kind of "Decline and Fall of the Scottish Nation," and in the end only the land is left. But this is history by indirection; parallels between events in the life of Chris and those of Scotland's past are to be found in the fiction, presented by way of extended metaphor. At the personal level the setting is within the microcosmic society of what, with apologies to Sir Walter Scott's claim for Ganderleigh in Tales of My Landlord, might well be considered Scotland's heartland, the eastward-facing Howe of the Mearns. Here fertile lowlands rise from the shores of the North Sea over which came Teutonic settlers, and these rich acres merge at last with windswept uplands to the west with their remnants.

of a Celtic people, themselves later comers than the builders of Standing Stones who have long vanished from the land, leaving only these relics to provide a sense of community with the past. For it was these incomers whose arrival signalled the end of the Golden Age, a thought that Robert Colquhoun puts into words as an expression of Chris's instinctive feelings:

Once Chris and Robert came to a place, out in the open, here the wind blew and the ground was thick with the droppings of sheep, where a line of ancient stones stood ringed, as they stood in Kinraddie far west and below, left by men of antique time, memorial these of a dream long lost, the hopes and fears of fantastic ed.

Robert said that they came from the East, those fears, long ago, ere Pytheas came sailing the sounding coasts to Thule. Before that the heathens had ringed the hills, naked and bright, in a Golden Age, without fear or hope or hate or love, living high in the race of the wind and the race of life, mating as simple as beasts or birds, dying with a like keen simplicity. . . . Chris sat on a fallen stone and heard him, about her the gleams of the wintry day, the sailing cloud shapes over the Howe; and she asked him how long ago that had been? And Robert said “Less than four thousand years,” and it sounded long enough to Chris — four thousand years of kings and of Gods, all the dark mad hopes that had haunted men since they left the caves and the hunting of deer, and the splendour of life like a song, like the wind. (CH, p. 106)

It is by the Standing Stones of Blaewearie, “in Kinraddie far west and below,” that the novel has its beginning; for it is from that vantage point that the young Chris can look over the land, with its agricultural settlements, its small market- and manufacturing towns, and its industrial cities. It is from there that she goes down to take up the burden of living, as schoolgirl, wife, and widow at Blaewearie Farm on Kinraddie Estate; as minister’s wife in Segget; as widow and mother in Duncarn. And it is on the summit of the Barmakin that the tale ends, with Chris moving from life to death as she watches the passing of daylight westwards over the face of the earth. And in those moments of lonely brooding she considers in retrospect the forces that have shaped her: her family heritage which merges in her schoolgirl’s mind into that from Scotland’s past; then, as woman, her feeling that all the ideas that men have followed over the ages are only “Clouds that swept through the Howe of the world;” and at the end of her life, the welcoming of death as deliverer from a world where all man-made values have been negated.

In examining the individual books of the trilogy, we find that Gibbon has supplied us with clues to the larger time scheme that operates in addition to the one which records the passage of twenty-odd years in the life of the central character. Thus, both Sunset Song and Cloud Howe open with preliminary chapters sketching the political and social history from the Middle Ages of Kinraddie and Segget respectively. In the case of Kinraddie, we are given its story from its beginning as a
political entity with the Norman adventurer of the twelfth century who subdued the native Picts and carved out a domain for himself by the edge of the sword, to its ending with the last survivor of the once-great family locked in a madhouse, a hopeless degenerate, and the property held by absentee lawyer-trustees. Next comes a survey of the individual holdings into which the mortgaged estate has been divided, with richly evocative sketches of the tenants and their families in which Gibbon employs subtly modulated speech rhythms to create personalities as different as Chae Strachan, Mistress Gordon, and Rob of the Mill. On this land, as tenant of Blaewearie, and among these folk John Guthrie is coming to settle at the Winter Term of the year 1911, bringing with him his family from over the hills.

And balancing this is an epilogue, set in the year 1918 insofar as it has to do with the life of Chris Guthrie, who by this time is Chris Tavendale, mother of a son, a widow, and betrothed to Robert Colquhoun, the minister of the parish. She is present at the dedication of the local War Memorial which he is conducting and as the plaque is unveiled she tells over among the names of the dead, all the men who have in one way or another played a part in her development to maturity. Thus the sense of finality is strong as the service ends with the playing of the lament, The Flowers of the Forest, suggesting that it is more than the end of a war that is being commemorated, it is the end of a whole way of life.

But besides the personal story of Chris as a member of a social organization which, after eight centuries of existence, has collapsed through its own debility in the face of changes in the world outside, — besides this, there is yet another time scheme in operation, for the Guthries who come to settle in the Howe of the Mearns in the year 1911 are, in a special sense, representatives of all those who, over the ages, have battled natural difficulties to make their homes in Scotland and become part of the land they have created. So their journey across the hills in the blast of a Scottish winter, described in epic terms, becomes a migration of peoples moving with their possessions through darkness to an unknown destiny; and on the way Chris has her strange vision that links her people with the first voyagers to these islands:

She fell into a drowse through the cold and a strange dream came to her as they plodded up through the hills.

For out of the night ahead of them came running a man, father didn't see him or heed to him, though old Bob in the dream that was Chris's snored and shied. And as he came he wrung his hands, he was mad and singing, a foreign creature, black-bearded, half-naked he was; and he cried in the Greek "The ships of Pytheas! The ships of Pytheas!" and went by into the smoke of the sleet storm on the Grampian hills. (SS, pp. 41-42)
LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON'S A SCOTS QUAIR

For Pytheas, according to legend, was the Greek who sailed first out of the Inland Sea, rounded Britain, touched at Thule, and visited Scandinavia on his way to the Baltic which he penetrated as far as the Vistula, thereby quickening into life, as it were, the migratory instincts of peoples who were to settle in Scotland.

Chris the girl, then, whom we meet first by the Stones on a summer’s day dreaming over the countryside from her vantage point, carries it all within herself. But she is already a Chris whose personality is split between her love for the land and her own people, and her disdain for their crudeness that her schooling fosters through its emphasis on standard English speech and southern values. In her is summed up the ambivalence of the educated Scot of every age, torn between the values of his own country that he feels by instinct and his sense of its poverty and the coarseness of its people that he has become aware of from his reading. But in the event Chris does not have to make the choice between college and home; the suicide of her mother, desperate at the thought of an unwished-for pregnancy, forces her to return as housekeeper for her father who, having driven away her brother Will through cruelty, lives alone at Blawearie.

But just as she has epitomised the dilemma of the educated Scot, so her brother, settled as a rancher in the Argentine represents the pioneer overseas; as Sergeant-Major in the French Foreign Legion, too, he is type of the Scot who, driven from his own land, has formed the corps d’élite in European armies, French, German, Swedish, or Russian. In yet another way Will has a representative function: as the Scot who renounces his allegiance and tries to still his conscience with assertions of his independence of home ties, “Who’d want to come back to this country? It’s dead or it’s dying — and a damned good job!” (SS, p. 163)

In the years between 1911 and 1914 Chris herself has been growing from girlhood to womanhood, from the first awareness of her body and its sensual demands to readiness for marriage. Significantly, her first recognition of the prompting of sex comes through a brief but intense Lesbian attachment to a neighbour’s daughter, a forewarning that no man will ever possess her utterly, though her first husband, Ewan Tavendale, comes closest to complete union. She, indeed, chooses him, for he is a landless farmhand and it is she who, by her father’s death, is the landholder. In this Gibbon is historically accurate; Tavendale is Highlander as she is Lowlander, or rather he is Celt as she is Teuton, and it is this marriage that should produce the complete Scot from the fusion of the cultures that they represent. Under these circumstances, it is fitting that they plight troth among the ruins of Dunottar Castle.
with its mementoes of past battles between the two races. The marriage itself is consummated on a night of winter storm, appropriate symbol of the political and religious storms that have swept Scotland, and from that consummation is born young Ewan whose birth coincides almost exactly with the outbreak of a war that will engulf all that is best of the manhood of Kinraddie before it is done.

First to go is Chae Strachan whose romantic temperament makes him view war as an adventure that is preferable to the humdrum life of a farmer. Then, in due time, Ewan becomes involved in the senseless slaughter, not through any strong belief in the rightness of the cause for which he is to fight but from his inability to bear the taunts at his lack of courage that are levelled at him. And, surprisingly, Long Rob of the Mill, rationalist, atheist, and conscientious objector, after baffling all the efforts of the army authorities to impress him, enlists of his own free will because "he couldn't stay out of it longer, all the world had gone daft and well he might go with the rest." (SS, p. 176) And none of these is to return. Ewan himself is first to die, shot as a deserter when a spring breeze off the fields of Flanders awakened memories of home and made him conscious of the madness he was involved in. Then Chae throws his life away, and Rob, with a fine irony that he would have appreciated, is killed in the meaningless exchange of shots of the last few hours before the Armistice.

Once again, though he never forces the matter on the reader's attention, Gibbon has created characters who function as individuals and as typological representatives. All have been associated with Chris in one way or another: Chae is kindly neighbour who comforts her with the true story of Ewan's death; Ewan himself; and Long Rob, sharer with her in a momentary gust of passion just before his final departure. But Chae too is the romantic, amorous of the far; Ewan is the Celtic dreamer, too insecure in himself to resist public pressure and coming to self-knowledge only for reality to destroy him; and Rob is the type of philosophical rationalist whose heyday in Scotland had been the eighteenth century.

With Ewan and the others dead Sunset Song ends in a kind of Vale to the agricultural way of life for the estate as such is to be broken up and Chris herself, with young Ewan, is about to leave for Segget as wife of the minister who has been kind to her since his return from overseas. The title of the epilogue, "The Unfurrowed Field," itself suggests the reversion of the land to its original state before man set his mark on it and made it serve his purposes. Chris's departure from Kinraddie, then, becomes more than an event in the life of an individual, it serves
LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON'S A SCOTS QUAIR

to turn the page on one aspect of Scottish life and the characters it fostered. Now it is the turn of the small town to receive attention.

The setting of Cloud Howe, then, is Segget, closer to the lowlands than Kinraddie, though the Standing Stones are still visible from its fort-crowned hill, The Kaimes. Once again the prelude gives the wide sweep of political and social history of the place, spanning the centuries from its first settlement by the Lombard, Monte Alto, who brought his own land-hungry relatives to settle the fie for his services to Robert Bruce in the war against England. Then, with vivid streaks of colour, it is recorded how the Monte Altos become Mowats, how they and their retainers mingle with the local inhabitants, how they become involved in the religious wars and civil tumults of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, how, with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, they build spinning mills and provide money for a church, though their altruism does not run to a steeple, an indication of the emasculated faith they think proper for their employees and the tradesmen who rely on their favours. But if this is history, it is the oral history that passes into legend and we are aware of the rhythm of the narrative voice dwelling on incident after incident, as in the mysterious burning of the House of Kaimes, home of the Mowats.

a great bit fye had risen in the night and burned the old castle down to its roots, of the stones there stood hardly one above the other, the Segget folk swore they'd all slept so sound the thing was over afore they awoke. And that might be so, but for many a year... there were mickle great clocks in this house and that, great coverlets on beds that lay near the floor; and the bell that rung the weavers awake had once been a great handbell from the hall of the Mowats up on the Kaimes high hill. (CH, p. 8)

Unlike the Kinraddie family the Mowats still have a measure of control over their holdings, but the degenerate Alec Mowat, their last representative keeps the mills going in the difficult years that follow the First World War only because he needs the money they bring him for his London whores and his other sensual pleasures. Alec typifies Carlyle's Master-Idler; he comes at the end of a process that began when the ties between titular owner and his employees were severed, leaving only disdain on the one hand and hatred on the other.

Segget, therefore, is depressed physically, morally, and spiritually when Robert, Cris, and young Ewan move into the manse in 1919. And if anything the depression has deepened by 1927 when Robert Colquhoun dies, completely worn out by a succession of defeats that culminates in the failure of the General Strike from which he had hoped for improvements in the workers' conditions. But before his death the indifference of those he had tried to help coupled with the hostility of
the middle class has caused a visionary streak in him to become obsessive. As he withdraws from the world of men he shuts out Chris also so that she rejects his faith:

And a dreadful loneliness came over Chris, and a shivering hate for that cloud he followed, that suffaced Figure out of the past, who had led such legions of men to such ends up and down the haughs and hills of the earth. Christ?
So maybe indeed He had lived and died, a follower of clouds Himself. (CH, p. 133)

This spiritual crisis in the life of Chris has as its social accompaniment a thickening of the moral atmosphere of Segget so that what is cruelty passes for fun, and what is smut for humour. At its worst, Gibbon depicts brutality that is sub-human or so we would like to think until we realise that he has drawn his examples from the Fascism of the twenties. It is the debasement of the human spirit that defeats Robert Colquhoun for his gospel of love is powerless against it and in seeking comfort in visions of a reincarnated Christ he loses Chris. She, in any case, has been moving away from him since the death of their infant child, and when she cannot share his visions — delusions, she thinks them — their alienation is complete. In the end he renounces her when she pleads with him to cancel his Sunday service on account of an illness caused by war-time gassing: "It's you or the kirk, Chris, and I'm the kirk's man." (CH, p. 152) Here the full force of his renunciation lies in the word "man" with its Scots meaning of "husband". By his choice of the kirk as his bride Robert is casting off Chris. But his last sermon casts off traditional Christianity too, in favour of a new faith which the Figure of his visions has disclosed to him: "a stark, sure creed that will cut like a knife through the doubt and disease — men with unclouded eyes may yet find it." (CH, p. 156) This, however, is his final effort and it is left to Chris to announce his death to the congregation in the words, "It is finished."

Read simply as an account of life in a small Scottish mill-and market town in the grim years of the twenties, Cloud Howe is fully satisfying. The personal tensions between Robert Colquhoun and Chris are mirrored in social tensions for which there seems to be no alleviation in any of the religious and political faiths that Gibbon, through various characters, explores. Colquhoun's own Christian socialism is dismissed as an unsubstantial dream; socialism as a faith for workers, independent of religion, fails also because its leaders are too easily seduced by a taste of power and because its rank and file relax as soon as they themselves are comfortable. Even fascism is examined and rejected with scorn as Chris turns on Alec Mowat, its apologist:

[ 52 ]
Lewis Grassic Gibbon's A Scots Quair

And what's going to happen when you and your kind rule us again as of old, Mr. Mowat? Was there ever the kind of Scotland you preach? — Happy, at ease, the folk on the land well-fed, the folk in the pulpits well-fed, the gentry doing great deeds? . . . I've been to Dunottar Castle and seen there the ways that the gentry once liked to keep order. (CH, p. 81)

But just as in Sunset Song Chris as Scotland serves to show us the men of Kinraddie as representative Scotsmen, so in Cloud Howe Chris as Scotland is seen in relation to the Presbyterian Church whose close links with the nation sustained it in the troubled centuries that followed the Calvinist Reformation until the advance of science in the last hundred years or so caused a retreat into hair-splitting disputes on points of dogma on the one hand and increasing indifference on the other. In the novel the beginning of the rupture is signalled by the death, stillborn, of Chris's child by Robert Colquhoun, an event that we might take as recognition that the union of Kirk and Nation is incapable of bearing lasting fruit. Chris's last words to the congregation, "It is finished," then, have a striking ambiguity about them. Besides their echo of the death of Christ on the Cross, they may suggest the end of the Kirk as a force in Scottish life and make possible the replacement of Christianity by the stark, sure creed that Colquhoun prophesied in his last sermon.

But meanwhile Chris has one child, Ewan, who is growing to adolescence in the years at Segget. He, the Scot of the future, has already grown away from the Christianity of his step-father and has come to consider God as a meaningless abstraction so that he can say to his mother, "I don't think He's worth bothering about. He can't make any difference to the world — or I think He'd have made it by now." (CH, p. 101) This cool self-possession that seems to subordinate feeling to thought is the face he puts up for the world, and even his own mother is taken in and tells him that he is hard and cool as grey granite, forgetting that granite is created by subterranean heat and pressure and the greater these are, the purer is the resulting rock. But this is looking ahead to Grey Granite and in the meantime Ewan is engaged in growing up, enthusiastic only about the past of his country, searching out his roots in the roots of the old hill peoples, and conscious, as is Chris, of a sense of identity with the land and its inhabitants. With the death of Robert, however, mother and son have to move away from Segget where signs of that past are numerous to the industrial slum that was the nineteenth century's contribution to Scottish civilisation; there, fittingly enough, our first sight of Chris is a fleeting glimpse caught through a dense fog that stifles and restricts visibility.

[53]
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Before going on to Grey Granite, however, it may be pointed out that, unlike Sunset Song, Cloud Howe has no afterpiece, perhaps an indication that Gibbon felt he had brought his records up to the present, and that Grey Granite was to be prophecy rather than history. This feeling is reinforced by the lack of both prelude and epilogue to the last book of the trilogy, so that in a sense, A Scots Quair is left open-ended. The lack of a prelude can easily be explained as his recognition that an industrial city like Duncairn lacks any continuity with the past which it is burying under masonry and pavement or destroying by pollution. In it, too, the sense of national consciousness atrophies as it becomes the meeting place of many different peoples and creeds.

Engrossed in looking after the creature wants of the boarders in the rooming house that she has taken over, Chris plays a less active part in Grey Granite which is largely Ewan’s story as he seeks a faith to live by. Faced with the brutal facts of industrial life in the troubled thirties he finds some kind of answer in Communism, which inspires him as a political creed with a mystique attached. Through participation in strikes and labour troubles, mutilation at the hands of the police, and loss of jobs, he moves steadily to dedicated membership in the Party, in the process stripping himself of all personal will. In the end, totally engaged, he has given himself into the hands of a committee and is about to leave his homeland so that any remaining vestiges of national feeling may be eradicated.

The difficulty that Gibbon faced in the last volume of his novel was the necessity of removing attention from Chris so that he might focus on Ewan. Her actions, therefore, are pushed aside by the main current of the narrative: her third marriage to Ake Ogilvie, for instance, is treated in an off-hand manner and he is shuffled out of the way as soon as possible. At the last, however, with Ewan gone the full spotlight turns again on Chris: we have a division of interest therefore, that has not been present in the first two members of the trilogy. In fact Grey Granite falls below these, partly for the reason just outlined, but more basically because it deals with the future and the referents which have been present hitherto are now lacking and there is no body of myth or history to which the allegory may point. Granted that Gibbon was presenting Communism as the stark, sure creed that Robert Colquhoun preached in his last sermon as a replacement for an outworn Christianity — and this appears to have been his intention — he denies in advance its efficacy by having Chris reject it as just another of the idle delusive dreams of men; “Of Robert and this faith of yours,” she tells Ewan in their last conversation, “The world’s sought faith for thousands of years
and found only death or unease in them. Yours is just another dark cloud to me — or a great rock you’re trying to push up hill.” (GG, p. 143) Under the circumstances he can only let Ewan vanish from the scene for if his vision is a false one then all the hopes of men for a better world are idle dreams and all that one can do is to await with Chris that “Change whose right hand was Death and whose left hand was life, who might be stayed by none of the dreams of men, love, hate, compassion, anger or pity, gods or devils, or wild crying to the sky.” (GG, p. 144)

The suggestion that Grey Granite suffers by comparison with its predecessors in its lack of suitable correlatives for allegory shows wherein lay their power. In them the narrative flows smoothly at the personal, social, and mythological level with the one bound to the other by extended metaphor so that the surface realism achieved by a prose style that catches the varied accents of the speaking voice or the passing of ideas through the mind easily leads on to deeper levels of meaning, and the cadences of individual utterance become representative voices of movements or types of men. And for much of the novel the effect that Gibbon achieves by this narrative method is a richness of texture that sets it far above the common run of fiction and gives it a strong claim to be the exemplar of a genre, mythic realism, which other Scottish novelists have favoured but few have employed so well.

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA