George Douglas Brown's Kailyard Novel

Ian Campbell

University of Edinburgh

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/vol12/iss1/6

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 dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
IAN CAMPBELL

George Douglas Brown’s Kailyard Novel

*The House with the Green Shutters* has become famous as the most notable counterblast to the “kailyard” school of sentimental Scottish fiction, enormously widely-read and commercially successful at the end of the nineteenth century. James Barrie, “Ian Maclaren,” and Samuel Crockett found in the kailyard a formula which suited exactly the needs of the times and the expectations of their audience. Their Scotland was a country of small villages, honest peasants, native worth and industry, of piety, self-education and self-improvement—the tartan idyll which T. H. Crosland satirised mercilessly (and frequently with real insight) in *The Unspeakable Scot*.¹ Perhaps the kailyard rose, as George Blake has argued ² from a national consciousness aware of the erosion of “old” Scottish values, and their replacement in a new industrial, urban world by fewer, less certain values in a world containing industrial squalor as well as rural paradise. By this argument, the kailyard was an escapist literature, retreating to a good past when the unpleasant realities of the future had not intruded. Perhaps, on the other hand, the kailyard can be traced much earlier in the weaker fiction of John Galt and John Wilson, in Elizabeth Hamilton’s *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, perhaps even in Henry Mackenzie. The intellectual history of the kailyard is not the concern of this paper. What does concern it is the phenomenon of a novel like *The House with the Green Shutters* which, in the words of Walter Raleigh, “sticks the Kailyarders like pigs.”³

“No one pictures the real Scottish life,” said Brown once to his friends in conversation. “I will write a novel and tell you all what Scottish village life is like.”⁴ Reality, truth to rural life, these were

³ Blake, *Barrie and the Kailyard School*, 100.
the themes he pursued both in his novel and in the critical theorising which has been preserved. His "reality," like Lewis Grassic Gibbon's, was not one which made concessions to national pride, nor to the reader's sentimentality nor fine feeling. Brown himself admitted of *The House with the Green Shutters* that it was "a brutal and a bloody work," with "too much black for the white in it," yet he considered it "more complimentary to Scotland... than the sentimental slop of Barrie, and Crockett, and Maclaren. It was antagonism to their method that made me embitter the blackness." A publisher invited from him "Scottish idylls of a more robust character than was the fashion at that moment," and the result was *The House with the Green Shutters*. It was new, it was an outstanding success. Andrew Lang summed up what was for many the novel's appeal: "At all events, though the scene was in Scotland, the novel had nothing of the Kailyard." Surprisingly, the reader who approaches Brown's novel with this information and these pre-suppositions will find his expectations disappointed, or at least surprised. For years scholars have accepted too uncritically the idea of *The House with the Green Shutters* as counterblast to kailyard. Such it undoubtedly is, but its method surprises and repays study. A counterblast, after all, may reasonably be supposed to involve the statement of the contrary to what it attacks, the description of scenes as different as possible from those of which the author disapproves. George Orwell, in attacking middle-class ignorance and prejudice in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, attempted remorselessly to depict the sordid and uncomfortable realities of working-class life in a coal-mining community. What Orwell was attacking was a frame of mind based on complete ignorance of the physical discomfort, and the mental constriction, of an unpleasant way of life. Filth, disease, smell, poor food, poor financial prospects, and hard working conditions dominate his picture. The counterblast to an idealised picture of working-class life is to show how the life really is—by stressing the details alien to the reader's experience.

Orwell's method is used, too, in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, to show the readers what life really is like below stairs and in the kitchens of fashionable hotels and restaurants.

To apply this method to a counterblast to kailyard, would be to produce a picture of Scottish rural life which somehow avoided the pastoral clichés; alternatively the author could concentrate on the urban life which impinges hardly at all on the kailyard idyll, and show that for enormous numbers of the Scottish population life was poorer, colder, less theology certain than for the fortunate natives of Thrums or Drumtocht. Lewis Grassic Gibbon's triumph is, in *A Scots Quair*, to have compassed both methods, to have exposed the kailyard cliché in *Sunset Song* and to have made the scene industrial Aberdeen in *Grey Granite*. Yet in the country-based narrative, his method was quite different from Brown's. It approached much more closely to a straightforward counterblast to kailyard, stressing the sham of kailyard rural life. Chris's life in *Sunset Song* is much more in contact with the hard realities of rural life, and the reason is an acute consciousness on the author's part of these realities, as he himself had experienced them.

As I listen to that sleet-drive I can see the wilting hay-ricks under the fall of the sleet and think of the wind ablow on ungarmented floors, ploughmen in sodden bothies on the farms outbye, old, bent and wrinkled people who have midlaid so much of fun and hope and high endeavour in grey servitude to those rigs curling away, only half-inanimate, into the night.  

Chesterton and his advocacy of a return to the land simply amused Gibbon; Chesterton had never "... grubbed a livelihood from hungry acres of red clay, or regarding the land and its inhabitants with any other vision than an obese Victorian astigmatism."  

Gibbon, from bitter autobiographical experience, seeks to concentrate on the realities of working-class life, both at rural level and at the level of industrial city-experience in years of depression, where people

... live on food of the quality of offal, ill-cooked, ill-eaten with speedily-diseased teeth for the tending of which they can afford no fees; they work

---

—if they have work—in factories or foundries on the roaring deck of the Docks toilsome and dreary and unimaginative hours—hour on hour, day on day, frittering away the tissues of their bodies and the spirit-stuff of their souls... their voices are the voices of men and women robbed of manhood and womanhood.10

Enough has been said to describe the method Brown might have been expected to take in The House with the Green Shutters to show his audience the “real” Scotland.

In fact, this is not his method. Although he promises the “Scot malignant,”11 although he admits that Barbie has too much black for the white in it, his novel is set in the kailyard. This simple fact is as easy to demonstrate as it is to overlook. The counterblast to the kailyard takes place from within; the plot is set in a kailyard village, populated by kailyard characters. Brown does not choose to create a village-counterblast, nor to set his characters down in a big industrial city—although the chapters describing John’s visit to University in Edinburgh show that Brown was fully capable of writing of the city. Brown does not choose, either, to abandon many of the conventions of the kailyard, instead of the solitary village atheist to have the solitary village Christian, perhaps, or to strip away the pervasive interest in education. His fictional boys are not snatched from school at the age of ten to work in factories and coal-mines. Brown might have omitted any discussion of the Church, obsessively interesting to kailyard characters. All these things might have been considered attacks on the kailyard world, and all would have had the support of at least a measure of historical authenticity—the “real” Scotland.

Brown’s is another method entirely, and for good reason. In the first place there was then, as there is still, a considerable market for escapist literature, a breeding-ground for kailyard authors. It would have been wilful for Brown, an unknown author, to ignore this fact and cut himself off from a very considerable market. In the second place, Brown saw clearly that there was more than just slop in the kailyard. Total condemnation of the kailyard writers is always prevented, or hindered, by the realisation that there is a proportion of

11 G. D. Brown to Andrew Melrose, n.d. [1901], quoted from Veitch, George Douglas Brown, 149.
truth in their descriptions; sentimental, self-indulgent they were, but their "sketches from life" had a core of reality which helped account for their popularity, then as now. If Brown's world had been a self-consciously contrived antithesis in every point, it would have been as false as Barrie's world, or Crockett's, or McLaren's.

Brown sought after a full artistic experience, a full response to the environment. "To get something down," he noted, "I fall back on my morbid gift of seeing and remembering and visualizing physical things, and I stick them down, blocking up my page with unessentials." Inessential they may be, but rarely do they detract from his "sympathetic fluency, the mind following on from point to point easily." Thus a total impression or argument is conveyed, and the reader carried along easily and willingly. Brown wrote,

The Carlylean mind, as we know, did come down on a subject like labouring muck, and from its gigantic throes sent lurid flashes to illuminate a monstrous world. Valuable intuitions. But the snarling tempest of the Carlylean mind is to be deprecated. Lucid ease, an atmosphere of sweet persuasion—these are the qualities we want in writing.

Carlyle was no hero to Brown, who scandalised orthodox opinion by laughing aloud while he toured the Sage's Chelsea home. Yet Brown did admire Carlyle's gift for vivid description, and he inserts a passage praising just this gift. Although Carlyle earned fame for his gift, it was Brown's opinion that the knack was "common to fifty per cent (at the very least) of his counymen." Galt, too, earns Brown's praise for wonderful powers of memory, allowing a fictional picture of the world in toto. "If a man gets all his world down he may bore you, but he will give a sense of totality: just by his marvellous reproduction of everything he is universal, he is big, he achieves the bigly-motived greatness." However much open to question this interpretation of Galt may be (and certainly it can be attacked, when one considers the marvellous selectivity which makes possible the contrasts in attitude and experience which form

14 Ibid.
15 Chapter 15 of *The House with the Green Shutters*, Memorial edition (London, 1923), 175.
the heart of *The Ayrshire Legatees* it gives a clue to Brown's own artistic method, seeking an all-inclusive description. His world includes the kailyard pleasures, and the harder realities of life and human failing; his approach is one which attempts the universality of Galt, and which seeks to combine the intuitions of Carlyle with a less spasmodic style.

The critic may question—and rightly—the universality of Brown's world. Critics have written widely of Brown's "universal" view of life drawn from his study of Greek tragedy, but it is incontestable that he, too, selected. Where, for instance, is there to be found an amiable woman character in *The House with the Green Shutters*? Yet the choice of a kailyard settling for the novel is one reason for the universality which it does achieve. The country town, the village carrier and his family, the bodies, the fluctuations of local trade and agricultural markets are drawn from the totality of Brown's memory, and are available to the great majority of his readership. No specialised knowledge of Scotland or the Scots is required to read this book, although Brown rather heavy-handedly comments on the Scottish character for the benefit of his readers who are not Scots. The social and economic situation is a universal one, and based on exact autobiographical recollection. Brown recollected with exactitude incidents of his youth, such as insults directed at his illegitimate birth, and recreated them in his novel [154–56]. He knew the real world, as he knew the world of the kailyard. The latter was the popular reading of his generation, and its style came easily to him when he wrote an early, apprentice novel published under the pseudonym "Kennedy King." Without apparent mockery, he reproduced the kailyard scene and style easily and fluently in writing the opening of *Love and a Sword*, describing the departure of young Roderick Gordon from the village station of Newhall, "a little old-fashioned town, or large village rather, close to the Scottish border." Young Gordon is off to the Indian wars, and is seen off by his aristocratic father, tall and erect, of military bearing even in old age. Father and son, in the best kailyard traditions, speak impeccable English, though both are Scots—their social position demands it.

19 Page references in parentheses are to the Memorial edition.
The minister and doctor of Newhall, kailyard-spokesmen for the village, comment in Scots. And the peasantry listen in awestruck silence to the parting words of father and son. The scene is conceived in local values, small, static, uncritical; the description confined to the "quiet little station, where, often enough, the Edinburgh mail to the South failed to lift a single passenger." The scene is Ayr, or Barbie; basically it is the scene of Brown's own childhood. Yet in this early novel it is depicted without universality, in purely kailyard terms. In his mature novel, the same scene is used mercilessly to highlight the weakness of character of young John Gourlay, off to the University. In The House with the Green Shutters the station is the threshold to an outer world of menace, the unknown; in Kennedy King it really was (Roderick was going to war, disaster, kidnapping, railway crashes, murder) but the novelist does not exploit this. In the later book the station is an opening to a wider world, itself a criticism of the narrow kailyard values of the village adjoining the station. In the kailyard village the station impinged little on everyday life; people came and went, perhaps to market, the minister might go to "Edinburry" for the General Assembly, a penitent son might occasionally alight from the night train, home to make his peace with a dying parent, but otherwise for most kailyard characters the rails stretched into mist, impenetrable both to themselves and their creator. The kailyard world is localised; Brown understood this and made his yokels in Kennedy King gape with wonder at the exotic names on young Gordon's trunk, Brindisi, India, Port Said. These belong to a world quite outside their comprehension. The novelist, at this early stage, enters easily into the minds of kailyard characters, and sees the outside world with their eyes. Later, when the scene has expanded to Europe and India, such self-imposed myopia is no longer possible; Newhall is not mentioned again.

Like its predecessor, The House with the Green Shutters is a novel which possesses the ability to project itself into the world of the kailyard with startling realism. The rustics of Barbie, seeing young Gourlay leaving for the University, are awestruck by the enormity of the step. Even Gourlay's father, whose business was transport, did not think of travelling himself on this scale. The only substantial journey mentioned in the book undertaken by him is the

21 Ibid.
expedition to Glasgow to buy a range for his kitchen [67]; otherwise he travels only to markets and to visit acquaintances. His rival in business, Wilson, likewise restricts himself to travel round the farms at night, looking for cut-price supplies. The scale is deliberately low and local, to emphasize the claustrophobic atmosphere of a closed-in world like Barbie. The values which fill the book, which oppress Gourlay, are local values, the values of Drumtochtly, Thrums, Barbie. The very description with which the novel opens [1–2] is idyllic: ignoring for the moment the imperfections of the human beings who inhabit this semi-paradise, it is the idyllic settling of a kailyard novel. This is Gourlay’s world, and he will not leave it.

By choosing not to leave the kailyard, to set his novel in this familiar scene, Brown has in no way weakened his case. If anything, he has strengthened it, for the kailyard world now subverts itself from within. Young Gourlay is terrified to leave the comfortable familiarity of Barbie, feeling it to be “a cutting of his heart-strings” [162]. This is not intellectual fear, rather the result of “a vast sensational experience,” which will eventually lead to his downfall. To leave Barbie is to cut himself off from this experience; “He seemed to be rushing through unseen space, with no companion but his own foreboding” [164]. The experiences of Edinburgh, dingy, dirty, harsh and mechanical, are no substitute; only drink, with its falsely gay companionship, offers any relief [233]. Hence he drinks himself to ruin, is expelled, quarrels with and murders his father, and commits suicide. The seed of his ruin is the weakness of his character, but the cause of his death is the expulsion from the kailyard world. Here, despite his father’s harsh character, he could be happy [63–65], and in the happy unchanging Kailyard world he says a happy future for himself. “When Ah’m in the business, Ah’ll have the times!” [147].

In this, Brown is parodying viciously the kailyard convention that well-brought-up children who leave their native Glen are in danger of moral corruption in the big dangerous world outside; in their parents’ care they are safe and their characters too, but many kailyard writers include sketches of the penitent son who has been debauched in London, and comes home for a healing retirement in the more refreshing moral pastures of the Glen. John Gourlay will not sustain this description; he is too stupid. A weakling he has (as his school-
master saw) "a sensory perceptiveness in gross excess of his intellectuality" [159], and his quivering sensitivity to physical stimulus makes city life a misery for him—and also life in the kailyard when his conscience tortures him for murdering his father. His author [198, 232] repeats again and again what a weakling he has created. Had he stayed in Barbie, what future would have faced him? A decaying business, a domineering father, an over-protective mother, and the hate and contempt of the village. Barbie, for John, was as bad as Edinburgh, in prospect. Some, like Logan and Tarmillan, made the transition to city life successfully; some, like young Wilson, never shook the hayseed from their hair. Wilson thought Allan would ruin himself by spending money on revelry, but "Wilson had no need to be afraid, the meagre fool, for his host could have bought him and sold him" [170]. Provincial attitudes inhibit most of the characters, attitudes which must have been familiar to the author who himself made the painful transition from village notoriety as "Smeddum's bastard" to Balliol college, and literary London. But the over-simplified kailyard equation of country worth versus city corruption is effectively destroyed. Both, for John as for most of the other characters, corrupt. Edinburgh is hell for John, especially the morning after his revelry [239-40], and as for Barbie "There was a pretty hell-broth brewing in the little town" [102].

Barbie is no rustic paradise; Barbie is rotten to the core. Yet it is rotten under a thin but initially convincing surface of kailyard attractiveness. It looks pretty, and by moonlight its natural surroundings are breathtaking [193-94]. In true kailyard tradition, it has both minister and dominie. Closer inspection, however, shatters this idyll. Look at the moonlit scene, the sky "a shadowed glory," and your breath is caught. Look down, and you see "the mean grey streets of Barbie" [194]. The schoolmaster, although too intelligent and perceptive to spend much time gossiping at the Cross, is not the dedicated selfless teacher of the kailyard, scorning worldly advantage to further the careers of his bright pupils. He is "a brooding and taciturn man," who "rarely left the studies in political economy which he found a solace for his thwarted powers." Superior to most in intellect, he is too embittered to help—he hides his advice in oracular humour, and retires to his study [159]. The minister, too, falls sadly short of his kailyard prototype. The Free Kirk minister
is an amateur botanist, and nothing more [33–34], and the Established Kirk minister a fat, gross, repulsive fool, pompous in manner and hardly concealing a poor education. Ten years were required to struggle through his university course, and “the influence of a wealthy patron” to put him in Barbie’s pulpit. He is full of “pompous blether,” and nothing else [204–8]. That Gourlay should destine his son for the Church is, in these circumstances, doubly insulting. Ministers and dominie, caricatured but still credible, form the antitheses of their kailyard prototypes.

The most brilliant use of the technique of including kailyard features, but making them self-destructive, is the much-discussed “bodies.” Derived from Greek tragedy they may be, as many have suggested, but much more important is the fact that they are directly representative of what would be in an orthodox kailyard novel “the Glen,” the corporate voice of the community, the voice of decency, normality, upright Christian virtue. The corporate voice sometimes is embodied in an elder-statesman figure, sometimes takes the form of kirkyard discussion or market gossip. Yet always it represents the view of the community as a whole, and usually it speaks for solid worth, and against dangerous innovation or corruption.

The bodies are a wicked parody of this voice. Yet their role is the same. If The House with the Green Shutters were a kailyard novel, the bodies would still be there. What they said would be recognisably different. Again Brown is preserving the outside form of a kailyard novel, while reversing its spirit. The bodies are mean, corrupt, contemptible, spiteful. They fight among themselves, they criticise everyone, in a way they even contribute to the tragedy by forcing Gourlay’s hand into sending his son to college in order to keep face before the community [157].

Only rarely is the voice of common decency heard among the bodies. These are among the few points in the book recognisably “moral,” such as when the baker stands up for Gourlay in the Skeighan trap [155] and protects young Gourlay during the thunderstorm [142–44]. The baker, too, correctly characterises the Deacon as “an artist in spite” [220], and has the only warm human relationship in the whole novel, with his wife [221]. It is to him that the author gives the book’s “message”—“Tyuts, folk should be kind to folk” [221]. Tam Wylie, however, not otherwise a moral paragon, is left at the end to stab the Deacon dead.
Wylie looked at him for a while with a white scunner in his face. He wore the musing and disgusted look of a man whose wounded mind retires within itself, to brood over a sight of unnatural cruelty. The Deacon grew uncomfortable beneath his sideward, estimating eye.

"Deacon Allardyce, your heart's black-rotten", Wylie said at last.

The Deacon blinked and was silent. Tam had summed him up. There was no appeal.

The skull beneath the skin of Brown's kailyard world is always visible. But the important point is that it is a kailyard world, Barbie a kailyard village with kailyard views, the minister and dominie present, even if the village and its views are alike rotten. Barbie fulfils the kailyard prototype, and is revealed as mean, petty, disgusting, crumbling. And so the kailyard is destroyed from within, revealed as a corrupt shell.

One more feature of Brown's kailyard world remains to be considered. The kailyard writers made the tacit assumption, and invited the reader's acceptance of this, that the world of their novels stood still. Progress, transport improvements, industrial advance, social reconstruction (the factors which animate the enquiry of Annals of the Parish) pass by the Glen, barely impinge on it. They are included in Brown's critique. John Gourlay builds up his carrier's business in a pre-railway, essentially agrarian society in which such local horse transport is a necessity. There can be no question of Gourlay's success in that capacity, which is both visible and acknowledged. But he could not, and would not see that times were changing, and if he could not change with them, his business would be ruined. He was too stupid to accept change [148], and other people like Gibson [134] and Wilson [115] were much more alive to the challenge presented by the coming of the railway [109]. Brown, in one of his indigestible moralisings, attributes this to a "typically Scottish" over-cautiousness in Gourlay [91]. Annoying this generalisation may be, but it is no more so than the tedious praise of "the Scots" foisted on readers by kailyard authors—indeed it may to some extent be intended as a parody of this.

Gourlay's Barbie, like Balwhidder's Dalmaling, has to change. Yet as Dalmailing grows, adjusting itself and putting out new roots, it prospers; there is no sign that Barbie has done so, or possesses the talent or ability to try. The profit from the change goes into a few pockets only, the new houses are ramshackle, no new institutions are mentioned to replace the obviously rotten old ones.
The novel ends not with the downfall of the house with the green shutters, symbolically ending this static age, but with the evil gos-sipping of the bodies over the humiliation of the Gourlays. Nothing, in short, has changed.

This is the final conclusion, a pessimistic one. Things are as they were, since human nature has not changed. Mrs Gourlay, though consistently caricatured by her author, is given the great speech appealing for charity [317–18] at the climax of the book, and Janet emerges from her pallid obscurity to make one great, matching speech appealing for sympathy and consideration [315]. But their appeal is met with silence; both are already marked for death, by disease if not by suicide. Their pleas, and the occasional moral flashes already mentioned through the book, light up an otherwise dark and pessimistic world. The dawn may form a “radiant arch” [322] at the end, over the empty house, but this is a natural phenomenon, symbolic of no moral re-awakening.

The reader closes the book moved, perhaps alarmed. A full critical assessment, tracing the causes for this reaction, would have to take account of the interplay of character and brilliant style, features which have not concerned this paper. Instead this paper has tried to direct a critical attention on to the world of The House with the Green Shutters. If it “sticks the Kailyarders like pigs,” it does so by subverting them from inside. Aretino defined satire as “a malevolent insistence on fact,” and this is the method pursued by Brown in his attack on the Kailyard. He takes a kailyard village, populates it with kailyard figures speaking kailyard language and thinking kailyard thoughts—and it becomes obvious how little chance this fantasy world has of measuring up to the realities of human nature. In effect, the author is inviting the audience to transfer their kailyard fantasy-world to real life, and see how the result might look. Over-stated, clumsy, overdramatised as it is, it is also early work, from a writer of great promise. George Douglas Brown died before he could fulfil this promise, but The House with the Green Shutters remains to suggest his range of talent, his precise and devastating ability to analyse the weakness of his kailyard contemporaries, and by using their techniques to reduce their world to a patent self-delusion.

University of Edinburgh